CARP CITY

ZHEN AI

甄 艾

34 chapters · 2 interludes
56,078 words

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CHAPTER 1

One

The requisition arrived on the Thursday after the museum opened, which was how she knew it had been waiting in a drawer for the museum.

She was the third editor to see it. She knew because there were two sets of initials on the cover sheet and a ring of someone else's tea where the top page had been turned back, and because the paper had that particular softness that paper acquires in an office where nobody has been asked to decide anything.

It was in Chinese, as everything in the building was, and she read it in Chinese, and none of the Chinese reached the page.

EIGHT HUNDRED CHARACTERS. Commemorative entry, Li Zhi. Quincentenary commemoration year, 2026–2027. Tone: port openness, positive energy. The approved corpus is attached; research outside the corpus is to be cleared through this office. The subject is to be described as a progressive thinker, not as a dangerous thinker.

She read the last line twice. Then she took the pencil from beside the blotter and wrote, across the top of the cover, *Received 14 May. Third editor*. That was not on the form. It was on her.

Her desk faced the wall of the building next door, which was the best desk in the room, because nobody coming up behind her could see what her face did.

The pencil had come off a table in a café on West Street, one of the short blunt ones they handed out for filling in your own order. It would not take a point. She had chosen it for that. You cannot draw a fine line with it. It makes you choose between a small cut and a large one, and then it makes you live with the size of what you chose.

In the house the responsible editors worked in red. Red was for hard errors — a wrong date, a wrong character, a fact that could be checked and was wrong — and the standard was one error in ten thousand characters, and a book with two errors in a sampled ten thousand was unqualified and went back to the editor in person. Pencil was for opinions. A pencil mark could be argued with, and erased, and had to be confirmed in red or struck out.

She had been issued a red pen in her first year and had lost it, or said she had, and had worked in pencil ever since. Thirteen years in, nobody had ever asked her to work in red, and she had never once offered.

She judged a draft by what it had left out. It was the first thing she had ever been good at and the only thing she had never been taught. In her first week in the building she had marked up a reader on the education of fisher girls, and on the fourth reading she found that she had not marked a single sentence for being wrong — only for being absent. Every mark she had made was in the margin beside nothing at all.

After that she had started the notebook.

It was an exercise book, the kind with a printed cover and a margin ruled down the left. No system, no index. Date, source, killed sentence. The drafts folder was a morgue and the morgue had no way of telling you what the bodies had weighed.

The first page was blank. It carried a date, the twelfth of April 2013, in a hand that had been trying to look older than it was, and it carried nothing else, and it had carried nothing else for thirteen years.

She had been somebody else in public once, for three years. The blog was called *Widows and Orphans*, which was the trade's name for two kinds of stranded thing — a line left alone at the top of a column, a word left alone at the end of a paragraph — and she had chosen it because it sounded like a lament and meant a mechanical error. At its height it had sixty thousand readers. It ended in April

2013 at post two hundred and thirteen, in the middle of a sentence about the price of oysters, and it was deleted, and the deleting had been done in a private room, with tea, by two men who were both kind to her afterwards.

She had never written the deletion down.

She put the requisition in the in-tray, where it would sit under the newspaper until Thursday, and she began.

She wrote the honest version first. She always wrote the honest version first, and the cutting of it was the job.

It came off the pencil in forty minutes, in her own careful hand, and it went like this:

Lin Zaizhi was born in Jinjiang, in the prefecture of Quanzhou, in the twenty-first year of the Jiajing reign, into a family whose genealogy would later claim an Arab merchant among its ancestors and whose house had stood for a hundred years on the street the Indian Ocean had called Zayton. He resigned his prefecture in 1580, shaved his head, and kept his beard. In the second month of the thirtieth year of Wanli, a censor at court memorialised that his books were deluding the age and deceiving the people; the emperor ordered them burned, printed and unprinted; he was taken at Tongzhou, carried in a cart because he could not walk, and sentenced to be escorted back to his native place. On the road he asked the barber for a shave.

She read it back at the speed she read strangers' work, and then she took it apart.

It took two hours. Most of it she left alone — the birth, the port, the beard, the part a committee could not object to without announ ‑ cing what it objected to. The beard she kept. The beard was her own joke and she was fond of it.

The last four clauses she struck with one continuous line and the pencil's blunt tail, and in the margin, in the small upright characters of the trade, she wrote: delete sixty-two characters.

What survived of the end was: *He died in 1602, on the road back to Fujian.*

Every word of it was true. That was the trouble. It had been built so that nothing false could be found in it.

She set the pencil down and turned the page over and read the front again, from the top, the way she would have read anyone's.

The first sentence had not been there before.

She read it again. *He was born here, and the city has been apologizing for him, in smaller and smaller characters, ever since.*

She had no memory of writing it. It was the best sentence in the draft — long, dry, exact, with the joke turned inward before anyone else could turn it. It had the cadence of something she had read somewhere and forgotten where.

She sat with it for a while. The radiator ticked. Somewhere down the corridor a printer woke itself, fed one sheet, and stopped.

Then she deleted it.

Not because it was wrong. She had no way of knowing that. She deleted it because she could not find the hand that had written it.

She opened the notebook and turned past the blank first page to the first page with anything on it, which was a long way in, thirteen years of small notations in half a dozen inks, and she wrote:

14 May. Own draft, Li Zhi entry, first pass. Killed: the charge, the cart, the shave. Sixty-two characters.

And then, underneath, because the notebook was for everything:

14 May. Same. Killed: one sentence, unlocated. Cadence recognized, source not.

She closed it. She did not look at the first page.

※

The office was four people and a corridor. There was herself. Danran had the desk by the window, which was the worst desk, be - cause the window had no wall opposite it and the light came in all morning and nobody could see anything. Old Zheng sat in the corner

and had been in the building since before the reorganisation and knew where every permission was buried, and would tell you, if you brought him tea. Guo Xia did production and did not speak to anybody before ten and was the fastest proofreader in the house, which was a fact nobody mentioned because mentioning it made her angry.

She was twenty-four and worked fast and had not yet learned the difference between what she could prove and what she had read twice. She had ninety thousand people who watched her be right, and none of them had ever seen her be wrong. This was the first time she had tried it on paper. Above her monitor, taped to the plaster with four small squares of tape, were several strips of printed paper, curled at the edges in the way of paper that has been in the sun. Lin Li's eye went across them and off them, the way an eye goes across a price list in a shop you are not buying from.

"You got the Li Zhi one," Danran said, without turning round.

"The whole office got the Li Zhi one."

"I mean you got *it* it. There's only one." Danran turned. She had the phone in her hand, an editing timeline open, a frame of her grandmother's ear frozen on the screen. "Are you going to use the beard?"

"Everybody uses the beard."

"I'd use the beard." She put the phone face down. "Are you going to use the razor?"

"No."

"Nobody's going to put the razor in eight hundred characters."

"No," Lin Li said. "Nobody's going to put the razor in eight hundred characters."

Danran looked at her with the particular frankness of someone who has not yet been corrected by anything larger than a comment thread, and went back to her screen.

Director Geng came in at ten with two cups.

He poured. It was his function, as the tea was his, and he had been pouring for her since her first month in the building. He set the cup

down at her elbow without asking whether she wanted it, and she had not said no, and this was how they had done it for thirteen years. He took the other one back to his own desk and stood behind it a mo ‑ ment with both hands around the cup, which was a thing he did now — a man of sixty-one waiting to be spoken to by his own staff.

"You read the requisition," he said.

"Twice."

"I read it twice as well." He looked into the cup. "Write the one you would have written."

"I don't know which one that is any more."

He nodded, as though she had said something that confirmed him, and carried the cup back to his chair.

She took the pencil and turned the entry face down on the blotter, and she did not open it again that morning.

The drafts folder sat on the second shelf and did not close. It had not closed since 2017. The dead drafts pushed out of the top of it in the order she had killed them, and she had never once thrown one away, and near the bottom, under four years of later corpses, was the reader on the education of fisher girls with her own dead sentences still in it, marked in pencil, in the margin beside nothing at all.

Out in the corridor the printer woke itself and fed a sheet that no one had sent it, and then thought better of it, and stopped.

She put the notebook in the drawer, and the pencil beside it, and went to find the approved corpus, which was four folders in a box in the store, and would take her the rest of the morning.

CHAPTER 2

Two

The one thing about a corpus — the thing they did not tell you at the start, and the thing she had learned in her first year and had never once argued with — was that it was not a library. A library was a place with the shelves still holding. A corpus was a place where somebody had already decided, and had written the decision down, and had filed it under *approved*.

She came out of the store into the corridor with the four folders under her arm and stood for a moment in the better light, and the ordinary Friday business of the building went on around her: a printer, a telephone, Old Zheng complaining to somebody about a puncture, the lift going up and coming down. She held the box against her ribs. She had been an editor for years and had never once thought of herself as the custodian of an omission.

Then she opened the first folder.

The store was a room the size of a van, wedged between the stair-well and the lavatories, with a steel door that did not shut and a window onto a light well that got the sun for eleven minutes in the afternoon. It held the office's paper record going back to 1983: the rejected readers, the superseded panels, the committee minutes in box files, the photographs of plaques before and after cleaning, and the smell — which was the smell of the whole of her working life — of dust, and sizing glue, and the dry heat of a bulb left on.

She went in there every few years and stood in it and came out. It was the archive of everything she had made that had not survived, and she had never once thrown any of it away, and she had never once let anybody else throw it away.

> *Folder 1 — provincial listing, 1985. Two pages and a photocopy of a stele rubbing. Folder 2 — county gazetteer entry. Three pages, mimeographed, someone's pencil corrections in a hand that was not hers. Folder 3 — press cuttings, 1987. Two. Folder 4 — selected quotations. Nineteen items, none dated after 1974.*

She read all four folders standing up, because there was nowhere to sit, and then she took them out to the corridor where the light was better, and gave the cross-check to Danran, because Danran was the fact-checker.

The 1985 listing was the oldest thing in the box, and the thinnest: two pages of typescript and a rubbing taken off a stele in a year when the province was listing monuments faster than it could inspect them. The rub had been taken with a cloth and a wet pad by somebody who had pressed too hard on the right-hand side, and the seal was a smudge, and the two pages had been typed on a machine with a worn *e*, so that every *e* in the document sat a hair low. The gazetteer entry had been mimeographed in 1983 from a draft corrected in 1985, and the corrections were in a hand that was not hers and not anybody's who was still in the building. The two cuttings were from 1987 and both of them were about the house, because in 1987 the house had been restored and a statue put up in front of it and a research society founded, and that was what a local paper sent a reporter to see.

Folder 4 was a card index of the quotations the committee was permitted to use. She had counted them in her first year and had thought, then: nineteen, out of a life.

She turned the cards over now, one by one, standing in the corridor. Each was a single quotation in a serif face, with no attribution and no date, on a card the size of a playing card, and they had been typed once and photocopied many times, and the photocopies had

yellowed at the edges. Nineteen. She had used maybe eight of them. She had used them without knowing whose they were.

A corpus was not a library. A corpus was a permission. Everything in it could be quoted and nothing in it had to be explained, and the job of the cross-check was to find the places where the permission and the record came apart, and the house method for closing those things was to put them to a fact-checker two years out of school and let the fact-checker be right in a file nobody would open.

She did not think that last part in those terms. She thought it in the terms she had been taught: *scope*.

"Sources only," she said. "Anything outside the folders comes to me."

Danran took the box with both hands, the way young people carried things they had decided were heavy.

The memo was on her desk the next morning, two pages, in an upright round hand that had not yet learned to be quick.

> *CORPUS CROSS-CHECK — LI ZHI. Danran. Findings. (1) Folders 1 and 3 both state that his works "circulated widely." Neither mentions the destruction order of 1602 or the second search-and-burn of 1625. (2) Folder 2 gives the year of death as 1602, and no month, day, or place. (3) Folder 4 contains no item dated after 1974. The corpus is not incomplete. It is shaped. Recommend a note.*

At the head of it, the distribution line. *To: Committee secretariat. cc: Director Geng; Lin Li.* At the foot of it, Danran's name.

Lin Li read the memo three times. The first time for what it said. The second time for what it would do. The third time for the cc, which was her own name, on a memo that had not been written by her, going out under a letterhead whose responsible editor was her,

and the responsible editor was the one the secretariat would come and ask.

She took up the pencil.

It took eleven minutes. She ran one continuous line through the finding, with the tail-hook at the end of it that the standard required, and put the count in the margin, because a cut that size was always counted. Then she kept the shape of the memo and moved the finding to the end of it, where it could not be acted on by anyone in a hurry. She kept the word *recommend*. She took out the word *shaped* and put in *strengthened*, and she took out the two dates and put in *the printing and circulation history*, and she took Danran's name off the foot of it and put her own, because a memo without a name at the bottom is not a memo, it is a rumour.

What came out was:

> *CORPUS CROSS-CHECK — LI ZHI. Lin Li. The corpus would be strengthened by a short note on the printing and circulation history of the works. Source material is available in the office on request. Recommend review at the next meeting.*

She set it beside the original, and the two of them together were the whole of her craft.

Danran came back at eleven, before Lin Li had decided how to hand it over, and read the new version standing up, and read the old one after it, and put them both down on the desk very flat, side by side, like two specimens.

"You changed the finding into a recommendation."

"The finding is in it."

"The finding was the middle sentence. You made it a note at the end, in a sentence with no dates in it." Danran looked at her. "It's true, though. That's not a reason to stop it being true."

"It's true," Lin Li said. "I'm not arguing with true."

"Then why—"

"Because of the distribution line." Lin Li turned the old memo around so it faced Danran. "Committee secretariat. Not me. The secretariat, from a fact-checker two years out of school, in a year when the city has put a museum on the man. They won't answer a memo like that. They'll remember it. And in three years, when you want to move, someone will pull this file and say, ah — the girl who wanted to argue about the burning."

"That's not how it works."

"It's exactly how it works. I have the years on you."

Danran's jaw did something. She was twenty-four and had never once been wrong in public and had not yet discovered that this was a thing that could be taken away.

"There's another reason," Lin Li said, and did not say it.

She heard herself say it warmly, and she heard, under the warmth, the fluency of a sentence she had said so often that it had stopped belonging to her.

"The wind is changing," she said. "Fold it yourself before it's folded for you."

Danran took the new memo. She folded it once, down the middle, and put it in her bag, and the fold was hers and the writing was not, and she stood there a moment longer than she needed to.

"I folded it," she said.

"I know."

"I mean I did it myself."

"I know," Lin Li said. "That's the part I meant."

※

She wrote it in the notebook that afternoon, in the store, standing up, with the box open at her feet.

15 May. Source: Danran, corpus cross-check. Killed: "The corpus is not incomplete; it is shaped." Kept: "available on request."

And then, because the notebook was for everything she cut and she had cut this one twice:

15 May. The wind line. Delivered.

She put Danran's original in the drafts folder, where everything she killed went to be kept, and closed the drawer on it.

The store bulb had no shade. She reached up and turned it off, and the four folders went on being four folders in the dark.

CHAPTER 3

Three

The committee met at the museum, which had opened in April and was still new enough that the staff came down and unlocked doors for people.

The Li Zhi memorial museum occupied a red-brick mansion on Hengjie, forty doors along from the corner, facing the back of Tian‑hou Palace, with the Deji Gate ruins on one side and the ward-god temple of the lane on the other. Six halls, a lecture program named after the childlike-heart essay, and a shop that sold postcards printed with lines from *A Book to Burn*.

The shop was doing the best trade of its week. A school party stood at the counter with their money held out in their hands, and the postcards were four to a packet, each with a line on it and the au‑thor's name at the bottom in characters smaller than the quotation. A girl of about eleven held two of them up to the light and chose the one with the shorter line, and did not read either of them, and paid, and went out into the lane with the packet held in front of her like a small flag.

They walked it before opening, four of them and Miss Guo from the museum's education office, who carried the keys and did not talk.

"Eight hundred characters," Chen Yiping said, in the hall of ori‑gins. "The panel is cut. Eight hundred characters, no more, and no less, because the panel does not stretch."

He put his hand flat against the panel, the way a man measures a wall for a shelf. Eight hundred characters was about the length of a paragraph and the width of the panel they were cutting in June, and the width had been settled in a meeting in a building with better chairs.

There were six halls and a lobby, and they walked all of them, because the committee wanted the tone set in the room.

The lobby held a late-life statue, seated, in the posture of a man who has just said something he does not intend to take back. The first hall was the city: the estuary, the Song hulls, the genealogy with its Persian ancestor reproduced from a rubbing, the address on Wan - shou Road given in three languages. The second was the boy — the essays, the examination, the father who taught him. The third was the career, the driest room in the building, full of replica documents under glass, which was the only honest way to display a working life. The fourth was the writing years: the shaved head and the beard, the convent at Longtan, the letters, the students. The fifth was the thought, and the fifth was where they stopped.

The sixth they went through quickly. It was the global afterlife, and it was a wall of Japanese and Korean book covers and a timeline running into the twentieth century, and nobody on the committee had a use for it.

He was seventy-one, a retired teacher of local history, and he carried a pencil stub behind his ear. In the hall of the writing years he stopped at a panel on the early printing, took the pencil from behind his ear, and made a small correction to a date.

"They've had that wrong since the spring," Miss Guo said.

"I taught that year," Chen Yiping said. "Some of those boys are grandfathers now."

He put the pencil back behind his ear. The correction he had made was in pencil, on a museum panel, in a building full of interactive screens.

"In the hall of influence," Yang Shufen said, "we start with the port. Always the port. The port is the spine of the whole story and everything else hangs off it."

She was from the tourism bureau, forty-five, and she had the folder open on her forearm the whole way round.

"People come for the port," she said. "They come for the mosque and the mani stone and the ship. Nobody crosses a sea for a man who was right about women."

She said it without heat, as a person says a weather forecast.

"My father carried shoe samples," she said. "Jinjiang, into the wholesale market, 1987, before any of it was legal. He had a case with a leather handle and the orders rubber-banded inside it, and it still smells of rubber. He is eighty-one. He still has the case." She turned a page. "That case is worth a panel. A heretic is worth a sentence."

Chen Yiping made a noise that was not agreement and was not disagreement.

In the hall of thought there were facsimiles.

Two of them, flat in a case, lit from below: *A Book to Burn* and *A Book to Keep (Hidden)*, in editions Lin Li had only ever seen cited. The paper had been made to look like bamboo paper. The print had been made to look like woodblock. Someone had done good work.

She put her face close to the glass, which was what she put her face close to everything, and looked at the fibre, and could tell that the fibre had been made to look like bamboo fibre and was in fact a very good modern paper, and that the ink sat on the surface of it, and that the impression had been taken by something that had never in its life been held under a brush.

The margins were clean.

She found herself looking for the margins. A book that had been kept for two hundred years would have handwriting in it — a title copied out, a line underlined, a correction, a complaint, a note about the weather. She had spent her working life inside other people's margins. These had none, because a facsimile is a thing made to look like a book without having been one.

She put her hands in her pockets and looked at the case for longer than she needed to.

"Good, aren't they," Miss Guo said.

"They're very good."

"We're getting the real one in the autumn. On loan. Six weeks."

Lin Li looked at her.

"From where?"

"A private lender. Through the province." Miss Guo was pleased with it. "It'll be the centrepiece of the quincentenary."

Chen Yiping had moved on. Yang Shufen was writing something in the folder.

The panel in the hall of the late years was the last one they read together. It was new, and it had been through the committee, and it said:

In 1602 he was arrested and died while being escorted back to his native place.

Lin Li read it twice, the way she read her own drafts, and recognised the sentence. It was the sentence she had kept. She had kept it out of her own entry two days before, in her own hand, with her own pencil, and here it was on a wall in the museum, lit from below, approved.

She did not know what to do with the recognition. She wrote it in the notebook later, in the corridor, standing up: *Museum panel, hall of late years. My kept sentence. Approved.*

Geng had come with her and stood at the back, because he was the publisher's man and this was not his room, and the committee had long since stopped expecting him to sit down.

Then Geng, who had said nothing through four halls, said: "Research stays inside the corpus. If she goes outside the corpus, we get a note back, and the note takes three weeks."

"It isn't censorship," Chen Yiping said. "It's a reading list."

"There's no such thing as a reading list in May," Yang Shufen said. "There's a reading list in the year the panel is cut." She closed the folder. "Eight hundred characters. Port openness, positive energy. Progressive thinker. Never dangerous thinker."

"Never dangerous," Chen Yiping said. "The word doesn't appear in the brief and it isn't going to appear in the entry."

Miss Guo locked up behind them. In the lane outside, the ward-god temple had its doors open and an old woman was wiping the threshold with a cloth, and the smell of the incense came out into the street with the smell of the drains.

※

She dreamed of a razor being stropped.

Leather first, then the steel through it, the long even draw of a man doing a thing he has done ten thousand times and is not think - ing about. It went on for a long time. In the dream she was in a room she did not recognise, sitting still, waiting for it to stop, and it did not stop, and she did not want it to.

She woke at four in the morning with the sound still in her ears and the room dark and the building quiet.

There had been a film in the hall of the writing years, playing on a loop, and she had stood through it twice because the room was the only cool one in the building. Nanyin under the whole thing, the way the city put Nanyin under everything. Somewhere in the sound bed, under the Nanyin, a leather strop.

That was all it was. She lay awake until five and did not get up, and the street below took on its first scooter, and then its second.

CHAPTER 4

Four

The entry was to say something about the port's openness, in eight hundred characters, and so on the second Saturday in June she went and looked at the port.

She took the notebook. She wrote nothing in it. This was the first time in thirteen years that she had gone out with the notebook and come back with it empty, and she noticed herself noticing, and did not examine that either.

※

West Street first, because it was on the way and because it was the part of the regeneration that paid.

The old city was being repaired the way you repair a scroll. The district called it micro-renovation and the phrase in the papers was *embroidery*: no demolition, no clearance, the original residents left where they were, the hospitals and schools and ward-god temples left alone. Money went into roofs and timber and drains; use-rights were taken for a term; and when the building was sound, a business was put into it — a café, a showroom, a studio. There were six hundred traditional craftsmen on the payroll and a corps of apprentices learning under them, and during the works the pedestrian counters had held at twenty-eight thousand trips a day, which was the number the whole method was designed to protect.

She walked it in the morning, before the coaches. Banyan shade. A man grilling oysters on a step with the smoke going up into a lane that had been a drain in 2013. Two hundred creative shops in a street that had been a hardware street. A café in a restored house with a hole in the wall where the old plaster had been, and the hole had been kept, and labelled, and lit.

The label said: *original fabric*. She stood in front of it for a while. It was the best-written thing she had read in a month.

※

Kaiyuan Temple was founded in 686 on a mulberry garden, and the mulberry was still there, thirteen hundred years old, growing at an angle out of a court of flagstones, held up by a brick pier. The main halls had burned in the Yuan and been rebuilt since, and the whole thing covered the area of a small town, and it was full at nine in the morning with people burning incense in front of a Buddha the size of a house.

She went for the pagodas.

There were two, stone, behind the main hall, put up a hundred years apart: Renshou between 1228 and 1237, at forty-five metres, and Zhen'guo between 1238 and 1250, at forty-eight. Together they were the tallest and oldest pair of stone pagodas in China. They had stood through the 1604 earthquake, magnitude eight, which had levelled half of Quanzhou and left them standing, and they had stood through four centuries of everything since, and the reason was in the stone.

She went up into the shade of the eastern tower and put her hand on the plinth.

Carved into the granite, at the height of a man's chest, was a figure. Not a Chinese figure. It was Hindu — a deity out of a ruined Indian temple that had stood somewhere in this city in the Yuan, when the South Indian trading community had built a Shiva temple here and put up three hundred carvings and then gone away and left them. The temple was gone. The carvings had been lifted, and built into the fabric of a Buddhist pagoda, and were still there, at the height of a man's chest, where eight hundred years of hands had worn the face smooth.

She put her palm flat on it. It was warm from the sun.

There was a male Guanyin on the same face of the tower, and higher up, on a bracket, a monkey with a staff, holding a spell. She looked at all three of them for a long time and then took her hand away and went down the steps.

※

Tumen Street was a ten-minute walk, and it held, within sight of one another, the Confucian temple, the Qingjing Mosque, and the Tonghuai Guan-Yue Temple.

The mosque had been built in 1009 and was the oldest surviving Arab-style mosque in China. There was a stele in the courtyard with an imperial edict of 1407 on it, protecting the Muslims. There was no incense burning in it, because Islam burns no incense; but in the corner, in a stone burner excavated from the old prayer hall and shaped like a lotus flower coming out of the water, there was a grey drift of sandalwood powder, and the worshippers pinched a little of it between two fingers as they went in, to settle the air and the mind.

She stood at the gate and watched them do it. The same smell that came off the Kaiyuan incense tables, forty metres away, in a building that had nothing to do with it.

Two streets beyond, the Guan-Yue temple was running its oracle sticks at the rate of eighty or ninety thousand a month, a hundred verses edited by a Ming grand-secretary, dispensed by a woman with a bamboo tube and a wooden block, and the queue was twenty deep and mostly young.

Every lane in the old city answers to a god. The Ming grid ran thirty-six wards over ninety-four sacrificial communities, each with its own house for its own deity, its own jurisdiction, its own proces ‑ sion that began and ended at its own door. Administration and cult were the same map, and the boundaries were never written down anywhere, and are known.

She walked back through it in the heat with the notebook shut in her bag, past four of those houses in a mile, each one the size of a

garage, each one with a banyan in front of it and an old woman wiping the threshold.

※

The Maritime Museum stands where the old harbour was, and its centrepiece is a hull.

The Quanzhou Bay wreck was raised in 1974 out of the silt: a Song merchant ship that had been lying on its side for eight hundred years with the cargo still in the hold. There was porcelain in it, for the export markets. And there were, packed among the other freight, four thousand seven hundred catties of aromatics. Aloeswood, sandal - wood, frankincense, ambergris, pepper. The scent cargo of a ship that had come up from the southern seas and was filling for the voyage home.

She stood over the hold reconstruction for a long time, with her hands in her pockets.

The ships left Quanzhou full of silk and porcelain and went out into the Indian Ocean, and the things they came back with were scent and shells. The scent went into the temples and the mosques and the stone burner shaped like a lotus flower coming out of the water, and it goes up in this city every morning still. The shells went into the walls at Xunpu. Both were ballast in the sense that mattered: both were things that filled an empty hold and then turned out to be the reason the hold was worth filling.

※

She took a bus out on the Sunday, twenty-two kilometres, to the hill at Huabiao, to a hermitage called the Grass Hermitage, which had been founded as a thatched hut sometime between 1131 and 1162 and had been remote ever since, on purpose, by people who knew what they were hiding.

The old man who unlocked the gate was called Wu Zhiyuan and he was seventy-eight and he had been unlocking it for thirty years. He

unlocked it for her because she had come alone on a Sunday and be‑cause she had said she was an editor, which was, he told her, the best reason anybody had given him in a month.

Inside: one room, one cliff, one statue.

Carved into the living rock in 1339, a seated figure, cross-legged, a metre and a half of it, ringed by eighteen rays of light. The face was green. The hands were pink. The robe was grey-white. All three col‑ours were natural to the single stone the whole figure had been cut from, and the carver had used the stone's own grain as the palette, so that the different parts of the body were different parts of the moun‑tain.

The donor inscriptions named a Chen Zhenze for the statue and a Yao Xingzu for the chamber. Nobody had read them for six hundred years.

It was the only surviving stone statue of Mani in the world. Manichaeism — the religion that had come out of Persia, spread along the trade roads, been a world faith for a while, and then been stamped out everywhere it was a world faith, and had vanished, and left this.

"Villagers called it the Buddha of the hill," Wu Zhiyuan said, locking the gate behind them. "In the thirties a man from Xiamen read the stone at the back and it turned out to be a Mani." He shrugged. "Same face. They still call it the Buddha."

He asked her where she was from and she said the city, and he said, "Then you should have come before," and she said she had not known, and he said, "Nobody knows. That's the whole thing," and gave her the key back and went to have his lunch.

※

She did not go home directly. She went on to the Luoyang River, which was twenty minutes further, because there was a thing there she had edited four times and never seen.

Luoyang Bridge. Built between 1053 and 1059 by Cai Xiang, who was then the prefect, across a tidal river that had swallowed every attempt to span it. Seven hundred metres of stone, and the problem was the piers: the current runs hard at the Luoyang mouth, and a stone pier set in that water is undermined and goes.

What Cai Xiang's crews did was grow the foundations.

They laid the stones, and then they seeded the water around them with oyster spat, and they farmed it. The oysters settled on the faces of the stone, and they secreted, and the byssus threads locked stone to stone, and the living colony became the mortar. It is the first recorded use in the world of a living organism to consolidate a structure, and the bridge is still standing, and the oysters are still in it, nine hundred and seventy years on, and you can see them at low water if you know where to look.

She went down the bank at the ebb and found them: a grey mass at the foot of the third pier, crusted, wet, the shells small and the mass enormous, holding a bridge over a river.

She sat on the bank for a while. The tide was going out. The shells were doing their work with no interest whatever in being a symbol.

Then she went home on the bus, and she did not open the notebook once.

CHAPTER 5

Five

The bus from the old city left her at the pier, and the lane to her grandmother's house ran between walls that the low sun had gone silver on.

Oyster shell, courses of it, laid convex face up and shingled so the wall read as fish scales over a core of rubble and earth. The old men said the shells had come home in the hulls of Song ships — shovelled aboard as ballast under silk and porcelain, dumped on the beach at Xunpu by crews with empty holds. The province's papers said the same thing in a different register: tested and verified, all of them imports, homelands on the Somali coast or the Vietnamese, large oysters not growing in Quanzhou water. Lin Li had edited both versions and knew which one sold.

a brick lasts a thousand years, an oyster shell ten thousand

At the gate of the lane the district had put up a plaque in the year of the listing, the size of a shop sign, in three languages, none of them the one the women spoke in the market.

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

Across the lane, Shunji Palace kept its own counsel. Rebuilt in 1661 on land given by a naval commander, carrying the admiral's plaque from 1685, its swallowtail ridges cut to turn a typhoon, its roof dragons assembled out of broken crockery by men who had salvaged the pieces from the sea. Fish and shrimp and crab in cut porcelain,

salt-proof, a fleet of sea creatures parading along a ridge that no inland temple would have allowed.

And not one oyster shell on it. The temple belonged to the official system — red brick, white stone, tile. Shells were for houses.

※

The ritual at the pier had begun as ethnography.

In her mid-twenties, with the returnee's cold eye, she had come back to the village with a notebook and the idea of writing something true about a place that was being photographed, and she had read the day's price off the board by the ice house aloud to her grandmother, because her grandmother could not read and had never been able to, and had written it down as folklore.

She had written the whole village that way, over two years, in the mornings she did not have to be at the office. She had written the walls as armor. She had written the crown as a wall of flowers. She had written her grandmother's illiteracy as a kind of wisdom — as the thing the sea teaches people who have no use for letters — and in April 2012 her grandmother had posed at the threshold with the flowers in her hair and her hands doing something, knowing exactly what was being taken and exactly what it would say, and had let it be.

Lin Li had believed, at the time, that she was being kind.

It had been read forty thousand times in a week. It had been copied into a forum in May. A man with a good lens had photographed the lane again in 2016. None of it had been a lie. All of it had been a frame.

Eleven years on, she still read the board aloud. The boats came in on the dusk tide, the price went up on the slate, and she read it out.

"Two-eight for the small ones," she said. "Four-five for the—"

"Too cheap," Ah-ma said. "Tell them I said so."

She said it without looking at the board, with her head on one side, the way a person listens to a joke she has heard before.

Lin Li watched her grandmother go up to the fish and start on the price. She watched her win. She had watched it eleven years ago and written it down as a thing old women said, and she watched it now, and it was still a thing old women did.

"Ah-ma," she said, coming back. "How do you know the price before it's on the board?"

"Fish don't read either," Ah-ma said. "They still know when to swim."

※

The flats were out at the lowest water, and the women were on them with their stools and their knives, and the tide was going down the way it did in the ninth moon, and everybody in the lane had an opinion about the hour of it.

The auntie with the red waist pouch said the ebb would be at its lowest before five.

"Half five," Ah-ma said. "Maybe later. The moon's new on Sat‑urday and she always runs a day and a half behind."

"That's not how the old men say it."

"The old men say it because they learned it from somebody's mother."

The auntie's face did something and put itself back. Two of the others laughed, in the way people laugh when the laugh is the smaller part of what is happening. Ah-ma took the concession slowly, the way a woman takes a chair that has been offered, and sat in it, and stayed in it, and went on explaining the moon to people who had known the moon longer than she had.

She had been waiting for an audience since lunch. Lin Li could see that now — the way a person can see a held breath in a photograph.

Lin Li wrote it down.

She wrote it down standing at the rail with the notebook open, and she watched her grandmother enjoy being watched, and the notebook

was the reason her grandmother was enjoying it, and the notebook had been the reason for eleven years.

※

The women worked the flats and the men worked the boats, and that had been the division for as long as the lane had stood, and it was the reason the women here had never bound their feet. The coast had a name for it — rough-ankled, barefoot-ankled — said of Xunpu women the way other places said something else. A woman with working feet can stand in mud for six hours.

They sat on low stools at their doors in a long row, a basin between the knees and an oyster braced in the left hand, and worked a short flat blade into the hinge with a twist of the wrist that had been learned at the age of six. No gloves. Eighty catties of shells made seven or eight of meat, and ten hours of it in a day was normal and was not called a day's work, it was called shucking. The shells thrown to the side of each stool were the same shells as the wall, only small, and the same animal, and the pile at every threshold was the beginning of a house.

Lin Li walked the row with her hands in her pockets, the way she had walked it at twenty-six, and the aunties did not stop for her, and one of them said, without looking up, "You've got taller," and another said, "She's got older," and the first one said, "Same thing, from the wrong end."

Ah-ma was in the row with them. She had her sleeve rolled to the elbow against the heat, and on the inside of her left wrist, in the sun, there was a pale comma half an inch long — a burn, healed years ago into something whiter than the skin around it. Lin Li had seen it ten thousand times. It had never once occurred to her to ask about it, and she did not ask about it now, and Ah-ma shucked on, and the comma went in and out of the light with the blade.

Then Ah-ma picked up the second stool and set it down beside her own, and put a third basin on the ground between them.

"Sit," she said.

"I'm all right standing."

"Sit."

So Lin Li sat, sixty-two, in the row of the shucking women, with a basin between her knees.

"Left hand," Ah-ma said. "Shell flat, hinge to you. Blade in the hinge — not the back of the hinge, that's where you break it. Twist. Don't saw." She took a shell herself and the knife went in and the twist happened and the meat was in the basin in under two seconds, and the shell went onto the pile without her looking at it. "Watch the pile. The pile is the job. The meat is only what's left over."

Lin Li tried. The blade skittered off the shell and took a sliver off her thumb, and the meat came away in two pieces, and the second piece stayed in the shell, and the shell went onto the pile anyway, and Ah-ma did not comment on it.

"You're pressing too hard," Ah-ma said. "You press like a person who has to be right. The shell opens for the person who doesn't."

She worked for two hours. The pile grew at her knees. Her thumb bled twice and she wiped it on her trousers and went on, and the aunties around her did not stop and did not help and did not, in the end, comment, because she was Huang Ama's granddaughter and this was what the row was for.

Ah-ma, without stopping: "Your hand's too high."

"Ah-ma."

"Your hand's too high because you're trying to see what you're doing. You'll never see it. Feel it."

By six Lin Li could do perhaps forty an hour. Ah-ma could do three hundred. The gap between them was not a difference of skill; it was eighty years of the same movement made at the same minute of the same tide, and no amount of attention was going to close it, and it was the first thing in Lin Li's life that she had ever been bad at and was never going to be good at.

She looked at her hands: cracked at the knuckles, burnt at one edge, the meat-salt in the skin.

“Don’t wash them yet,” Ah-ma said. “Let the salt lie on them. It closes them.”

And that was the whole of it. No book, no reading, no committee, no entry. An old woman at eighty-six teaching a middle-aged woman to shuck an oyster badly, on a stool, in a row, in a lane, with the tide going out.

※

The hairdresser’s shop was two doors down, and the hairdresser’s name was Shi Lihua, and she was forty and had been doing heads since she was nine.

She was working on a girl from the city who had come for the photographs. The hair went back with no fringe and was tied with red string, twisted into a rope, and coiled at the back of the head round upon round into a spiral that read like the growth rings of a tree. Shi Lihua pushed a bone pin in horizontally through the centre of it, where a chopstick would have gone in the old days, and the whole thing held.

Then the flowers. Threaded one by one onto hemp cord, each ring a single species, the rings worn one inside the other, each bigger than the last, three to five of them, jasmine and yulan and chrysanthemum bud depending on the month and on what Yunlu’s farms had cut that morning. Between the outer rings she set a few silk ones, in colours that would not wilt. Two gold-plated half-moon combs went in above.

> *The crown the hairdresser was building had a name the tourists never learned — 簪花围 — zanhua wei, a wall of flowers.*

"The wire ones they do in the city, with the glue," Shi Lihua said. "That's not this. This is cord and a pin. If it isn't cord and a pin it's just flowers."

She kept a ledger of which flowers each family had asked for at which funeral — the quantities, the order of the rings, the colour for a daughter and the colour for a grandson. The village's other archive. She showed Lin Li the page for the current month the way other women showed a photograph.

"Your girl was in again on Sunday with the camera," she said, combing. "The channel."

"Danran's channel," Lin Li said, because Danran had mentioned it once, in the way of a thing that had not yet needed mentioning.

"She films your grandmother for an hour. Your grandmother does the whole thing." Shi Lihua held thecomb up to the light. "She's very good at it. Better than me."

※

The house was at the end of the lane, two storeys, shell on three sides and brick on the fourth, with the corridor running through to a courtyard where the oyster piles sat in the sun.

There was a bucket under the landing ceiling that had been there since the 2019 typhoon, and Ah-ma had moved it twice as the drip moved, and had not mentioned it again.

The front door had been painted over more than once. Under the top coat there was a shape that might have been a figure, and under that, somebody's slogan in a red that had gone pink.

Up the back stairs the door of Ah-ma's room stood open, because it always stood open. The bed stood where it had always stood, its head against the wall that divided her room from the courtyard. It was the same wall, running through from the gable. Lin Li had slept in that room as a child and had not thought about which wall the head of the bed was against in twenty years.

The renovation had started on Monday.

A van, a skip, a roll of blue plastic, and a man on a ladder taking the front elevation apart board by board to see what was under it. Guo Peiling, the designer, had pinned her boards to the good wall in the front room: before, after, and a mood. She loved patina the way other people loved a religion and had the receipts to prove it.

Lin Li put her bag on the table in the front room, which was the room that would become the reception, and took out the file.

Four pages, a company letterhead, a lease of twenty years, a plan of the front rooms. The company would gut and fit out, keep the shell elevations, put in four guest rooms and a kitchen, and re-roof the whole house at its own cost. Ah-ma would keep her room at the back and the courtyard and the use of the kitchen. The deck had a photograph on the cover.

She knew the photograph. She had taken it herself, on a phone, in April 2012, from the lane: her grandmother at the threshold with the flowers in her hair and the shells behind her, doing something with her hands.

The deck's language was hers too. Not her sentences — she had been careful, for years, never to write a sentence she would not be able to deny — but her framing: the sea recycled into armor, the armor worn long enough to look like decoration, the village that keeps the ocean by covering itself in it.

She read it twice. Her mouth did something the second time.

She had spent years being the most reliable editor in the building, and in all that time not one person had come to her and asked her to make a thing sound like something. Here was a deck that wanted exactly the thing she was good at, wanted it badly, wanted it enough to pay for a roof. The form had a declaration on the back page.

Relationship to the property: she wrote *granddaughter*. *Familial / commercial / published:* she marked *familial*.

She did not mark *published*. The form was in a file in an office in a city where she had never once been that person, and the marking of it

would have taken four seconds, and it would have taken the roof another three weeks, and the roof had waited since 2019.

She signed it at the table, in the front room, with the plastic sheeting over the good wall behind her.

She did not look up at the ceiling over the landing, where the bucket was.

※

The mason was called Weng Jinhe. He was fifty-something and had been repairing shell walls for thirty years and could date a course by the way it weathered, and he talked to the wall while he worked.

He had taken the boards off the gable end and was opening the seam where the shell skin met the brick, to see what the core was doing, when he stopped.

He put his chisel down and picked it up again and went at the seam from the other side, more carefully, and then he sat back on his heels and looked at it for a long time.

"Miss Lin," he said. "Come and look at this."

The seam had been pointed. Not with lime mortar — with some‑thing darker and oilier, troweled into the joint and tooled smooth the way you tool a seam on a hull, and the shells either side of it had been lifted and reset in the old pattern by somebody who had known what the old pattern was for.

He put his thumbnail against it. It did not crumble.

"Boat putty," he said. "Tung oil and lime and hemp. Whoever did this used boat putty on a house." He sat back further and looked up at the gable. "Someone treated this like a boat."

Lin Li looked at it. It was a neat job, sixty years old, done by a person who had wanted it to hold.

"Probably the shell man," Weng Jinhe said. "Somebody's grandfather. They all knew boats."

He picked up his chisel. Behind him the blue plastic hung in the doorway and moved, and the oyster piles in the courtyard went on drying in the sun.

CHAPTER 6

Six

Ah-ma was out. She had gone to the temple, or to a death in the next village; Lin Li had not asked which, and the not asking was a thing she did not examine.

The mason had got further into the gable than he had got on Tuesday.

He had chased the crack along the line of the boat-putty seam, and the seam had come away in his hands the way old wax comes away, and the cavity behind it was not a cavity — it was a space, the size of a large loaf, with a flat bottom and a straight back, made by a person on purpose.

Weng Jinhe had found what was in it, and stopped, and left it, and gone to eat.

She knew he had gone to eat because his flask was still on the plastic and his sandwich was half out of its paper, and she knew he had left it on purpose because Weng Jinhe left things alone when they had been put somewhere carefully, and he had been repairing walls for thirty years.

A crock.

Squat, thick-walled, glazed inside with a brown-red that had gone the colour of weak tea. A salted-fish crock, the size a family keeps under the bench. The mouth had been closed with oiled paper tied down, and the binding waxed over, and the whole of it wrapped in oilcloth that had gone stiff and dark with sixty years of being a wall.

She put her thumbnail under the wax and lifted. It came away in a sheet, the way old wax does, and the smell that came out with it was not brine.

It was paper. Old paper, and the camphor that had been put in with it, and under that, faintly, the tung oil from the man's seam.

She took the oilcloth off. She untied the string, which had been knotted the way people knot things they intend to untie, and she lifted the oiled paper.

Inside, a bundle in grey cloth, tied with the same string.

She put it on the plastic beside the hole in the wall and sat back on her heels and looked at it for a while before she touched it again. The dust was coming down through the light from the doorway in long slow columns. From somewhere out in the lane a scooter went past with a delivery of ice.

Then she untied the cloth.

A photograph, first. She turned it over, because she turned everything over, and there was writing on the back, and the key of the front door turned in the lock, and she put it down without reading it and took the next thing out.

A pen. She registered that there was a pen, and went on.

A book. Thread-bound.

She turned it over in her hands, and the first thing she noticed was the weight, which was less than a book that size should have been, because the paper was bamboo and bamboo paper is mostly air and it has been made for a thousand years by a process that leaves the fibre alone. The second thing was the boards, which were soft at the corners in the way that only happens to a thing that has been opened and closed ten thousand times by hands. The third was the thread: linen, waxed, holding gatherings that had been sewn by somebody sitting at a table with a needle and no hurry, and the stitch was the same on every signature, and the same stitch ran through the whole book without a single slip.

She opened it and the smell came up.

Not the brine of the crock. The camphor she had already smelled, and under it the acid of bamboo paper going tan, and under that, faint, the tung oil from the man's seam, which had got into everything in that hole.

Somebody's hands had been all over it, and not lately.

She turned it over. On the cover, a slip of paper, and the ink on it newer than everything else in the bundle.

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

She lifted it with her thumbnail.

Underneath, on the board itself, older, in another ink:

> *焚書 — Fenshu, a book to burn.*

She sat with it in her hands. The false title lay on the plastic at her feet.

A book to keep hidden, on the outside. A book to burn, underneath, and the underneath was the older ink, and whoever had wrapped it sixty years ago had known what they were doing, and had wanted the outside to be the thing that was safest to be caught with.

She opened it, because opening things was the whole of her, and found that it was not a printed book.

It was copied. Page after page in a hand that was small and dry and very even, the hand of somebody who had sat down to do a job of work and finished it. The columns were straight without a ruling line. The characters were the same height throughout, at the beginning and at the end, which is the thing that fails first. There was no impression anywhere — no plate mark, no bite into the paper, no place where a block had sat uneven — because no block had ever sat on it at all.

Somebody had copied this. By hand. All of it.

And at intervals — after every gathering, it seemed — there were blank leaves, sewn in at the binding, four or five pages at a time, empty, and sewn in on purpose, before anybody had written anything in them.

She turned to one of them. Nothing. She turned to another. Nothing. She counted the gatherings by thumbing the spine: nine‑teen, and four blank leaves in the first, and five in the fourth, and three in the ninth, and the thread of the binding passed through every one of them. Somebody had sat down to copy a book and had built the room for later hands into the structure, before there were any later hands to build it for, and had not mentioned it anywhere.

She sat back on her heels.

The mason's flask was still on the plastic. The sandwich was still half out of its paper.

The footsteps in the lane were slow, and then the door, and Ah-ma stood in it with her basket on her arm and did not put it down.

She looked at the crock in the wall, and at the wax on the plastic, and at the book in her granddaughter's hands, and nothing about it was a surprise to her, and she did not say so.

"Well," she said. "There it is."

She put the basket down on the bench by the door. She came the three steps into the room and stood in front of the open wall and looked into it, and her face did nothing at all.

"Take the flowers out of it," she said. "There was paper in there. I put paper in there."

"It's all here," Lin Li said.

"Take the flowers out of it," Ah-ma said again, and Lin Li under‑stood, after a moment, that she meant the camphor.

Ah-ma looked at the book for a long moment. Then she put out her hand and took it, and held it the way you hold a thing you have carried a long way, and looked at the cover where the slip had been, and put it back into Lin Li's hands.

"You keep it," she said. "I'm done carrying."

She turned and went out to the courtyard, and they could hear her at the tap, and the tap running, and her not coming back.

Lin Li sat on the floor of her grandmother's bedroom with the book on her knees and the photograph beside it and the pen at the

edge of the plastic. The hole in the wall stood open. The dust went on coming down through the light.

Ah-ma came back in with her hands wet and did not dry them.

"Old paper draws new trouble," she said. "Burn it."

Lin Li put the book in her bag. She put the photograph in the bag. She put the pen in the bag, and she did not say anything at all.

Weng Jinhe came back from his lunch and looked at the hole in the wall and at the empty crock and at the young mistress from the city with her bag over her shoulder, and he did not ask.

He picked up his sandwich, and ate it, and went on with the work.

CHAPTER 7

Seven

Her flat was two rooms over a shop on a street where the buses turned, and the table she worked at was under the window, and the light was bad, and she had never moved the table.

She read the book standing up, at first, and then sitting, and then lying down with it on her chest, and she did not put it down until the street went quiet.

The contents leaf came first, and it was the only part of the book that was not a text. It was a note to whoever came next:

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

She read it four times. It was an editor's note. Somebody had gone through a life and decided what to keep and what to leave to other people's shelves, and had written the decision down in seven lines, and had left room for the decision to be argued with.

At the foot of the same page, in a smaller and dryer hand, a second note:

> *They are burning books again. This one was born for it.*

She did not know, then, which burning. There were three she could have chosen from, and she would not learn to count them for another year.

Then the letters, and then the essays, and it was forty minutes before she knew whose book she had.

It was a letter to a man about nothing at all — about drought, and the price of rice, and a cousin's marriage — and in the middle of it,

without any change of tone, a sentence she had read three days earlier in a store off a stairwell.

> *Clothing and food are the moral order.*

Folder 4. Selected quotations. Nineteen items, none dated after 1974, and item nine was this, printed on a card, with no attribution and no date, because the committee had used it for thirty years and nobody had ever needed to know where it came from.

She sat with the card in her memory and the sentence in front of her and did not move for a while.

It was his book.

She had spent a week on his corpus and had cut sixty-two characters out of his entry, and here he was, in a hand-copy, out of a wall, in a language he had not chosen, saying the thing the committee had been saying for thirty years without saying it was his.

※

She read the rest of it through and then went back.

The letter on women she read twice and then a third time, standing at the window with the book open, and she did not write anything down about it. In the margin beside the argument about vision, in the small dry hand of the copyist, somebody had been there before her:

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

She read that four times, which was more times than she had read the essay.

His wife. The living children. She had not thought about the wife at all in three weeks of the corpus, and the corpus had not thought

about her either, and she stood at the window and understood that she was looking at a woman with no book, and that the whole of what she had been sent to find was a sentence about a man.

The essay on the child's heart she read once, and understood immediately what it was about, because it was about her.

The genuine mind is the mind at the first thought. It is lost the moment something from outside is taken for it — a thing heard, a thing seen, a doctrine, a reputation. The classics are the mouthpiece of that loss. A man who writes out of what he has been told is not writing; he is a man reporting the shape of a room he has been shut in.

She read the passage twice more and then put her hand flat on the page, because it was Monday morning, every Monday morning, for as long as she had held the post, described in a hand two hundred and forty years older than her job.

She had never once written a sentence a committee could not live with. That was the job, and she was the best in the building at it, and she had stopped being able to say at what point in thirteen years the job she had and the job she had wanted at twenty-six had come apart.

The Geng correspondence was the longest thing in the book and the least polite. Letter after letter, each one longer than the last, all of them addressed to the same man, and the receipts going in and out like a settlement:

> *Heaven gives each person his own use, complete at birth. He does not need to get the balance of it from Confucius. If he must wait for Confucius before he has enough, then in the thousand ages before Confucius, was nobody a person at all?*

And, later, lower down on the page:

> *Outwardly the learning of the Way; inwardly wealth and rank. Dressed as a gentleman; behaving like a dog or a pig.*

She marked the page with a slip of paper. She had not marked anything since the fisher-girls reader.

The last thing she read, because it was near the back, was a short piece about reading. It had been copied out in a different ink from the rest, as though the widow had come back to it years later:

> *There are people in these books. I look at them, and I find my own heart. My weeping is not without cause: this is an empty pool with no one in it — I have not yet seen that man, and the not seeing wears out my heart. The world is how narrow. The chapters are how wide.*

She put the book down on the table at that point and went and made tea she did not drink.

Then she turned to the death material, which was near the very back, after the famine letters, and which was not a letter at all. It was a copied account, in the same dry hand as the rest, with a note in the margin in a different one: *as the account has it.*

> *He was taken at Tongzhou and carried in on a door, being too sick to walk. The sentence was escort back to his native place. He asked the barber for a shave, and took the razor from him, and cut his own throat. He did not die at once. Asked why, he indicated that a man of seventy-six has nothing left to seek. His books were burned by decree that same year, and were not.*

She read it four times.

She had dreamed a razor being stropped. There had been a film in the hall of the writing years with Nanyin under it and a leather strop in the sound bed, and she had stood through it twice because the room was the only cool one in the building. That had been all it was, and it had been all it was, and now there was a razor in her hands anyway, from the inside of a wall, in a folder of a corpus that did not contain it.

※

She took the four folders out of the bag and read them again, on the floor, with the book open beside them.

Folder 1, the 1985 listing: *his works circulated widely*. No dates. No order. No burning. Folder 2, the gazetteer: *died 1602*. No month, no day, no place. Folder 3, the two 1987 cuttings: both about the house. Folder 4, the nineteen quotations: item nine, the clothing-and-food line, no attribution, no date. Nothing about a razor. Nothing about a throat. Nothing about a decree.

The corpus had the shape of the truth and none of its substance, and she had spent a week being careful inside it, and had cut the only honest sentence in her draft because the honest sentence was the one the corpus could not corroborate.

She went to the table and took a sheet of paper to write out what she had, because she was an editor and this was what editors did, and before she wrote anything she turned to the inside of the rear board, where a copyist puts the thing she wants found last, and found it.

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

Lin Li sat with the book open at that page for a long time, in the bad light, with the street quietening down below her.

Then she wrote:

The corpus knows his books spread and does not know why, and the museum panel does not know how he died, and I cut the barber out of my own draft with my own pencil.

She looked at it. It was a sentence she would never have written, and she did not delete it.

Outside, the buses had stopped. She turned the lamp around so it fell on the book and not on her, and went on reading, and the street did not need her until morning.

※

Interlude I

A letter in reply to one who said that women's vision is too short for the Way. A leaf from the volume, copied out by an unnamed hand in the Qianlong reign, in an ink older than the note on the contents leaf.

> *You write that women's vision is short and cannot bear the study of the Way. I have turned this over for some days and I cannot agree with it, and since I cannot agree I will say so, and you may do with it what you please.*
>
> *You may say that people are men and women. That much is plain and nobody disputes it. But how can you say that vision is men and women? Vision is what a person sees with. If a woman is shut in a courtyard for forty years and shown nothing but the inside of a house, and you then report that her sight does not reach far — whose failing is that, yours or hers?*
>
> *You may say that vision is long or short. That also is plain. But how can you say that men's vision is all long and women's all short? I have known men whose sight did not reach the end of their own nose, and I have been one of them. I have known women who saw to the bottom of a thing in the time it took me to look at the top of it.*
>
> *Give a woman a man's range and see what happens. Let her hear what is right and know that vulgar talk is not worth hearing. Let her learn to leave the world and know that the floating world is not worth clinging to.*

Then I am afraid the men of today, looking at her, would sweat with shame and not dare to make a sound. And as for the Way: the Way is not a thing that one man can hand to another. If it were, then in the ages before Confucius was born, ten thousand years would have had nobody in them who was a person at all.

Do not suppose I say this because I hold that women are the same as men. I do not hold that men are the same as men. I hold that people are put in different places and given different amounts of room, and then the amount of room is reported back as the size of the person. That is the whole trick, and everyone is in on it, including most of the people it damages.

My teacher's side says the sages are high and the multitude is low. I say the sages are not high and the multitude is not low, and I will say it in a book, and the book is called a book to burn because that is what it is for.

I am told this will get me killed. I expect it will. I am sixty-four years old. A man who has not made his peace with that by sixty-four has not been paying attention.

If one of my essays speaks to the heart of another, then perhaps I may find somebody who understands me. There. That is all I want. It is not a small thing, and I do not expect to get it.

CHAPTER 8

Eight

She wrote it on the third night, at the table she had never moved, with the book shut beside the lamp.

She had not intended to. She had intended to write a memo. What she had instead was a thing that could not go into a memo, because a memo had a distribution line, and a distribution line was a way of deciding in advance who was allowed to be affected.

The new blog took an hour to make and no time at all to name.

She called it *A Book to Burn*, because the book on her table was called that underneath, and because she had been careful for a long time and the care had got her a corpus with a hole in it.

She did not put her name on it. There was a field for a name and she left it empty, and the emptiness was the first honest thing she had published since 2012.

The numbering she carried across. The old blog had ended at #213, in April 2013, in the middle of a post about the price of oysters; the new one began at #214. Anyone who had known the old one would see the gap sitting there in the middle of the arithmetic, doing the work of an explanation without being one.

> ***#214 — Some housekeeping***
> *This is the same blog. The numbering continues from where it stopped, which was thirteen years ago, and I am not going to explain the gap, and if you are the kind of person who needs things explained before you can read them, this is not the kind of blog that will.*
> *The name has changed. The name has changed for a reason.*

> *I used to write here about a village on this estuary and the way it keeps the sea. I am going to keep doing that. There will be more of it than there was, and less of everything else.*

She read it four times and posted it at half past one in the morning, and then sat for a while with the tab still open, and then closed it and did not look at it again for two days.

When she looked, it had been read eleven hundred times, and somebody had left a comment asking where the village was.

※

#215 took longer.

It was an essay about a wall, and it took her most of a week, because she had gone back to the lane three times to look at it, and because she had read the provincial listing from 2022 and the technical paper on the shells' provenance and the old men's version, and had written all three down and then cut two of them out, and because she kept finding that the honest version was the one that sold worst.

The object she wrote it around was a single shell from the pile in the courtyard, kept because it was the size of her hand and had come from somewhere else.

> ***#215 — The village that wears the sea***
> *There is a wall at the end of the lane that is made of oysters.*
> *Not the small sweet ones the women shuck at their doors all day. Those are the size of a bean and are for the omelette. The wall is built of giants — shells the size of a hand, palm-sized, with a grey outside and a mother-of-pearet inside the colour of a wet moon. The province has tested them. Large oysters do not grow in Quanzhou water. Their homelands are the Somali coast or the*

> *Vietnamese, and they arrived here as ballast: shovelled aboard under the silk and the porcelain to hold a ship steady on the way home, and shovelled out again onto a beach at the mouth of this river by crews who had nothing else to carry and nowhere better to put it.*
> *The old men in the lane tell it differently and better. They say the shells came in the hulls of Song ships. They say the sea delivered them. Both stories are true and only one of them is checkable, and the plaque at the gate tells the checkable one in three languages, none of them the one the women speak in the market.*
> *A brick lasts a thousand years, an oyster shell ten thousand. The wall does not care which story you believe. It sheds the rain, it keeps the cool in, it is proof against the salt and the termites and the typhoon, and it is silver in the late afternoon in a way that people now travel a long way to photograph.*
> *The technique went on the provincial list in 2022. Before that it was on nothing, and the walls were coming down under new villas, and nobody had a reason to keep them.*
> *I have a shell on my table that came off the end of that wall — not taken, exactly; given, by a mason, from a piece that had already come off. It is the size of my hand. It crossed an ocean as cargo and came back as a wall, and now it holds down a page of paper in a room three streets from the water.*
> *That is the whole of it. That is the entire history of this coast, if you want it in one object.*

She posted it and did not check it for a day.

※

On the second day she went looking for the technical paper again, because she wanted the wording of the provenance claim, and the search brought back something else first.

A forum page. May 2012. Somebody had copied out, in full and without comment, a post she had written in April of that year — the village post, the oysters, the armor. It had 340 replies.

She read the top twenty.

Somebody asking where it was. Somebody asking again in 2015. Somebody in 2019 asking whether the place was still like that. Somebody in 2024 saying they had been, and posting a photograph of her grandmother at a threshold with a ring light behind her, and the reply underneath it: *second lane past the temple, ask for the flower Ah-Ma, everyone knows her*.

There were three hundred and forty replies in fourteen years, and every one of them was somebody wanting to go there.

She read to the point where the picture was. Then she stopped, and did not read the rest of it, and closed the tab, and did not follow the chain.

She did not need to. She could see where it went without going: the man with the good lens, the magazines, the actress with the crown, the visitors at four hundred a day, the shops, the certification lists, the bus lines, the committee, the deck, the lease, the mason's chisel on the gable end of her grandmother's house. All of it ran back through a post she had written in eleven days in an office she still sat in, on a table she had never moved.

She shut the laptop and did not open it again that night, and lay awake listening to the buses turn at the bottom of her street, and did not sleep well, and did not write anything down.

She went looking for the rest of it anyway, over the next week, the way you press a tooth.

Her ballast sentence was on a homestay listing in the next village, under a photograph of a breakfast table with a shell pressed into service as an ashtray. Her armor sentence was on the inside cover of

a café menu on West Street, set in a serif face and attributed to nobody, between a paragraph on the roast duck and a paragraph on the ginger duck. Her grandmother's argument — *My grandmother cannot read, and she has never once lost an argument at the fish market* — was on three separate tour-booking pages, and on one of them it was set out as a local saying, in quotation marks, above a paragraph about authentic rural experience.

As a local saying.

And the last one, the one about seventy-two and the morning in her hair, was the caption on a short video.

She found it on the fourth day and watched it twice. It was forty seconds long. Her grandmother sat on a stool in the lane with the flowers in her hair and moved her hands at something in her lap, and the camera held on the hands and did not move, and at the end a line of white text came up over them: *she cannot read. she has never lost an argument*. Four hundred thousand views, and nine thousand comments, and every one of the comments was some version of the same sentence, and none of the sentences was hers.

She read all of it. She sat back from the table. She looked at the screen for a long time and did not close it, and then she closed it and did not correct anybody, and did not write to the café, and did not put her name on the tour pages, and did not tell the forum that the girl who wrote it in 2012 had burned it herself in 2013 and had never been asked.

Her words were doing fine.

They were selling breakfasts. They were getting people onto buses. They were four hundred thousand views of a pair of hands in a lane. They had outlived their own burning by a factor of thirteen years and had never needed her to hold them, and the not being needed was the part she sat with.

She put the shell back on the page it had been holding down and went to bed.

CHAPTER 9

Nine

The first committee round was held in the room the museum gave them on Tuesdays, which had a table the size of a door and a screen nobody used.

Chen Yiping circulated the entry in hard copy, three pages, because he did not trust tracked changes on a screen and did not trust the screen to keep what he had struck. He had said so once, at length, and nobody had argued with him, because everybody in the room had once lost something to a machine.

> ***THE ENTRY — ROUND ONE***
> *Lin Li's standing text in roman. Committee marks in brackets.*
> *Lin Zaizhi was born in Jinjiang, in the prefecture of Quanzhou, in the twenty-first year of the Jiajing reign, into a family whose genealogy would later claim an Arab merchant among its ancestors* ***[committee: strike — not load-bearing for the panel]*** *and whose house had stood for a century on the street the Indian Ocean had called Zayton. He passed the provincial examination at twenty-six and abandoned the metropolitan track for want of money. He held instructional and judicial posts in Henan and Nanjing, and finally the prefecture of Yao'an in Yunnan, where he built a bridge and resigned it mid-term. He shaved his head, kept his beard, and settled at the Hall of Flourishing Buddhism at Macheng, where he lectured to men and women* ***[committee: hold — see note]*** *and wrote the works for which he is remembered. He held*

> *that dressing and eating are the moral order; that self-interest is the human heart; that a man does not need Confucius in order to be a person. He died in 1602, on the road back to Fujian* ***[committee: the circumstances of the death are not to be specified at this stage]****.*
> ***[committee insert, at end: His thought contained progressive elements, and his limitations were those of his class and age.]***
> *Chen Yiping, in pencil, in the margin: I have taught this panel twice. The hold stands until the secretariat answers.*

They went through it in forty minutes. Yang Shufen wanted the port earlier and got the port earlier. Chen Yiping wanted the bridge in and got the bridge in. The Arab merchant went out on the first pass without discussion, the way a thing goes out when nobody in the room has a use for it.

Then Geng read it aloud.

He always read the approved draft aloud; it was his ritual, and Lin Li had never once seen him get through one without doing this. He read it in the voice he used for anything he had agreed to, which was a good voice, a voice that had spent years reading things out at meetings where the outcome was already settled.

His voice went flat on exactly four places.

On *men and women*, where the hold was. On *the works for which he is remembered*, because he knew what the works were. On *He died in 1602*, because he had been in the building in 1974 and had read the file. And on the inserted sentence — *His thought contained progressive elements, and his limitations were those of his class and age* — which he read perfectly, in the voice of a man reading an inscription, and which came out of him flatter than anything else on the page.

Nobody else in the room noticed. Yang Shufen was writing. Chen Yiping was looking at the pencil.

Lin Li noticed. She had been noticing for thirteen years, and she had never once said anything about it, and the not-saying had its own drawer in her, next to the other one.

"Good," Chen Yiping said, when Geng had finished. "That's the tone."

"Yes," Geng said. "That's the tone."

※

Geng was the second review. The third was above him, and the third was not an opinion but a duty written into the regulation: to judge whether the work faced the right way. Everything she had ever made had gone through three reviews, and no two of the three had ever been the same person, and above all of them sat a list of twelve subjects — the leadership, party history, the Cultural Revolution, military history, ethnic and religious questions, maps and frontiers, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, the Soviet bloc, foreign relations — anything touching which had to be filed with the province before it could be set, and the filing took weeks, and nobody filed the same thing twice.

The Cultural Revolution was item three.

In thirteen years she had filed nothing. The not-filing was the whole of her record, and the whole of her record was the reason she was in this room, and she understood it now, sitting there, with a clarity that had no feeling in it at all: she was the safest editor in the building, and the safest editor in the building was the one nobody had to check.

※

The uncle came the following Thursday.

He was seventy-four and he came to the office, which he had never done, with a soft folder under his arm and a paper twist of Anxi tea in

his coat pocket, and he stood in the doorway of her room until she looked up, and then came in and shut the door behind him, which is not something a visitor does.

"Niece," he said. "You've got tall."

"Sit down, Uncle."

He sat. He put the folder on the desk and did not open it, and he put the tea down beside the folder, and then he took the tea back and held it in his hand, because he had not yet decided at what point in the conversation it became a gift.

"The hall is mounting something for the quincentenary," he said. "Not a big thing. A cabinet. Two panels, a case, a printed sheet for the school groups." He turned the twist of tea over. "We'd like you in it."

"In it how?"

"Your name in the display. Your title. The committee's editor on the commemorative entry, of the Lin family of Jinjiang." He said it as a man recites a shipping address. "There's a panel on the lineage. You'd be the living end of it."

"Uncle," Lin Li said. "You can't prove I'm in it."

"I can get to 1711," he said. "Past 1711 I can't. Past 1711 nobody can." He was entirely unembarrassed. "That's not the same as not."

"It's what the panel would say."

"It's what every panel says." He put the tea down at last, squarely, where it could be seen. "Niece. They kept the name by knowing when to be silent. Now the heretic sells tickets. My grandfather would not approve." He turned the twist a quarter turn. "My grandfather also did not approve of the shoe factory, and he wore the shoes. They lasted a year. He wore them."

She looked at him. He was cheerful. That was the thing about him that she had never been able to hold: he had done the arithmetic forty years ago and made his peace with it, and he was not going to pre‑tend, for her benefit, that it was anything other than what it was.

"There's a cabinet in the hall," he said. "Been there since the repair. Your father could tell you about the repair, except he won't." He stood up. "Come and look at it some Sunday. Bring the girl."

"I don't have a girl."

"You will," Uncle Lin said, and went out, and left the tea.

※

She saw Geng at the lift, at the end of the day, with his coat over his arm.

He got in with her and pressed for the ground floor and did not say anything until the doors had shut.

"That was the uncle," he said.

"That was the uncle."

"He's asked you before."

"He asks every few years. The exhibit's better this time."

Geng looked at the doors. "The wind is changing," he said, and stopped.

She knew the shape of what came next. She had said it herself, to Danran, in this building, three weeks ago, warmly, with a fluency she had been mildly ashamed of at the time.

She had never told anyone where she got it. She had never once had to account for it. It had simply been in her mouth one day, the way things are in people's mouths, and she had passed it on, and now it had come back to her from the man she had got it from, or from the man who had got it from the man she had got it from, and neither of them said the rest of it.

"Fold it yourself," Geng said, "before it's folded for you."

The lift arrived. He let her out first, which he always did, and went up to his own floor to write a memo she would never see.

CHAPTER 10

Ten

The blog had been read eleven hundred times and had one comment.

She looked at it on the fourth day, and then on the fifth, and on the sixth she answered it, which she had not intended to do.

Where is this village?

She wrote back three lines: the bus, the pier, the lane, the temple on the left. She did not say *my grandmother's house*. She did not say *I used to write here*. She pressed send and closed the tab and stood in the middle of her room with her hands empty.

Then she went back to the table and opened the book, because the book was where she went now, and found the place where the widow had copied out the piece about reading, in the newer ink, the one she had come back to years later:

> *There are people in these books. I look at them, and I find my own heart. My weeping is not without cause: this is an empty pool with no one in it — I have not yet seen that man, and the not seeing wears out my heart.*

And under it, in the margin, in the dry even hand of the original copyist, a line she had not noticed:

> *If one of my essays speaks to the heart of another, then perhaps I may find somebody who understands me.*

Sixty-four years old. A book that was going to get him killed. One reader, hoped for, not expected.

She looked at the tab with the comment in it for a while.

Then she opened a new draft and called it #216.

※

It took two hours and she wrote it badly at first, in the voice of the entry, which was the voice of a man reading out at a meeting. She got as far as *Lin Zaizhi was born in Jinjiang* and stopped and read it back and deleted it and started again.

The first version was four hundred words and every one of them was somebody else's. It opened with the reign year. It gave the offices. It used the phrase *progressive thinker* in the second sentence and without quotation marks, because that was how she had been taught to write a man. She read it back and heard in it the exact voice in which she had folded Danran's memo, and the exact voice in which she had cut the barber out of her own draft with her own hand. It was a good voice. It was the voice of a person who has never once been caught.

She deleted all four hundred words.

She sat for a while with the empty page. Below, in the street, a scooter went past with a barrow of oysters, and the light came off the wet scales, and somebody in the next flat was running a tap.

She had written sixty thousand followers' worth of prose in three years and had not once, in any of it, said the thing that was actually true about the lane, which was that it was being eaten by the exact affection she had helped to sell. She had written the armor sentence and the illiteracy sentence and the seventy-two sentence, and they had all been true, and they had all been frames, and a frame is not a lie but it is not the whole of a thing either.

She had never written the sentence that was true about the lane, which was: *I helped to do this.*

The second time she wrote it in her own voice, which she had not used on paper since 2013, and which came out stiffer than she remembered and then loosened, the way a hand does when it has been holding something for a long time and puts it down.

#216 — The five hundredth birthday

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

He was born in Jinjiang in 1527, in a house on the street the Indian Ocean called Zayton. His family's genealogy claims an Arab merchant among its ancestors. The committee marking up this year's official entry struck that clause out on the first pass, on the grounds that it was not load-bearing. He shaved his head and kept the beard. He lectured to men and also to women, and the entry holds on that second word for a ruling from the secretariat. His books were ordered burned in 1602, printed and unprinted, and again in 1625, and they were not.

I have spent three weeks inside the approved corpus, which is four folders in a box in a store off a stairwell. The corpus says his works circulated widely. It gives the year of his death as 1602, and no month, day, or place. It contains nineteen selected quotations, none dated after 1974, and not one of them carries a date or an attribution. It is not incomplete. It is shaped.

The museum opens its quincentenary in April. In the autumn it will display a genuine copy of the book, on loan, for six weeks, as the centrepiece. The entry that goes on the panel beside it will say that he died in 1602, on the road back to his native place, and the circumstances of the death are not to be specified at this stage. Its closing sentence, inserted by the committee, is that his thought contained progressive elements, and his limitations were those of his class and age.

I drafted that entry myself. I cut sixty-two characters out of it before anybody asked me to, and the characters I cut were the charge, the cart, and the shave. I cut them

> *with a pencil that will not take a point, which is the kind of pencil that makes you choose between a small cut and a large one. I chose the small one. It was still a choice, and it was mine, and I have been reliably making it for thirteen years.*
> *There is a shell on my table the size of my hand. It crossed an ocean as cargo and came back as a wall and now it holds down a page of paper. Somebody built a wall out of ballast because ballast was what the sea left at the door. That is not a metaphor. That is a building method, and the building is still standing, and the proverb about it is that a brick lasts a thousand years and an oyster shell ten thousand.*

She read it four times and cut a paragraph out of the middle and posted it at a quarter past eleven at night, with no name in the field, and then sat and watched the counter.

Ten. Forty. A hundred and ninety by midnight, which was more than #214 had done in a week.

Somebody shared it. Somebody else shared the share. In the morning there were two hundred replies and a comment that said only: *I always knew.*

She read that one twice.

She had been read by sixty thousand people once, at her peak, and had known every one of their names in the administrative sense — the followers, the reposts, the little map of the country the analytics drew — and had never been read by one of them in a way that coun‑ted. She had been an audience. Now there was one reply that said *I always knew*, and she did not know who it was, and it mattered more than the sixty thousand.

That was the thing she had never understood about readers, sitting in a room with a distribution line: that the number was not the point, and that one person who knew was a different animal entirely.

By the second day it had eight hundred replies and a mirror, and by the third it had been copied onto a page that stripped out her header and left only the text, and by the fourth there was a translation into English on a site with a name like a weather station.

She read the English one twice. Somebody who had never been to this city had read a sentence she had written about a wall at the end of a lane, and had translated it, and had put it where other people could read it.

She had not written a public sentence since April 2013.

※

She did not sleep that night, and in the morning she went in early and found Danran at her desk with her feet up on the drawer and the phone in her hand, watching something with the sound off.

"You've seen it," Danran said.

"Seen what?"

"That post. The birthday one." Danran turned the phone round without getting up. "It's everywhere. It's on a mirror that's got four hundred comments and it's been translated." She was looking at Lin Li in a way that was new. "Whoever wrote that has read the corpus."

"It's a good corpus," Lin Li said.

"They've read the panel copy too. They know about the hold." Danran put the phone down. "Whoever it is, they're in the building."

"They could be anywhere."

"They said *the office*." Danran's eyes stayed on her. "In the post. They said *an office in a store off a stairwell*. Somebody in this building wrote that, or somebody who has been in this building."

"I've been in this building," Lin Li said. "So have you."

Danran held her look for a moment longer than was comfortable, and then let it go, and picked the phone back up.

"Tell them I said the oyster-shell thing is good," she said. "Whoever they are."

※

Geng came in at ten with two cups and did not mention it.

He set one down at her elbow and stood behind his own desk with both hands around the other, which was the thing he did now, and looked at her for a moment longer than the ritual required.

"The hold's come back on *men and women*," he said. "The sec - retariat wants it held."

"Held how?"

"Held." He drank. "It stays in and it isn't translated into the panel copy." He put the cup down. "Write the panel copy."

"I thought Chen Yiping was writing the panel copy."

"Chen Yiping taught that year," Geng said. "He's got the date wrong in pencil and he's not going to notice your omission. You will."

He went back to his desk. She sat with the entry open and the post still climbing behind it in another tab, and understood, without his having said it, that the omission was now the whole job: that everything in that entry which was true would have to pass through her hands to get out, and that he knew it, and that he had just told her to do it properly.

She put the pencil down and picked up the red pen.

It was heavier than she remembered and the nib was the wrong width for her hand, and it made a line she could not erase and could not argue with. It had been issued to her in her first year and she had said she lost it, and it had been in the drawer the whole time, under a rubber, in a box with the paper clips.

She took a clean sheet and wrote, at the top of it, in red:

PANEL COPY

Then she began.

※

Part One ends here.

PART TWO — CANGSHU

※

CHAPTER 11

Eleven

She woke at four to the generators.

The house had gone quiet at midnight the way a village does, and then, some time before light, the pier had started up: a engine turning over, then another, then a bank of them, the whole string of them taking up their note one after the other until the sound was not a sound any more but a condition of the air. The old name for it was the fourth watch. At the fourth watch the tide turns — rise and go.

She got up and went down to the water.

The flats were at their widest in the ninth moon and the boats had gone out on the ebb an hour before, and the women were already at the doorsteps with their stools and their basins, and the light coming up over the Zhegu hill was the colour of the inside of a shell. The market smell was brine and ice and diesel. Somebody's radio was playing a report about the sea-ban lifting. A man went past with a barrow of squid and did not look at her.

She stood at the rail for twenty minutes with her hands in her pockets and did not write anything in the notebook, because there was nothing here she had not already decided about.

On the way back up the lane the renovation was already awake. Guo Peiling had a contractor in the courtyard at half past five, and the skip was full, and there was a new smell in the corridor: wet plaster, and the sharp alkaline bite of fresh shell-lime, and under it the nutty reek of tung oil where somebody had opened a tin of the old putty to match a colour.

The dust was already settling on everything. It lay on the banister like a first snow.

※

The front door had been painted over more than once, and Guo Peiling had put her hand on it within a minute of meeting it.

“Don’t touch it,” she said, to the contractor, who had not been going to. “This is the good stuff. Look.” She wiped a patch with her thumb and held it up. “Door gods. Qing. Under that, somebody’s slogan, and the red’s still readable if you get the angle — and under that, more door gods. Three layers. You could read this door like a book.”

She said it the way other people talked about their children.

She was thirty-four and from Xiamen and she had been in love with patina since she was nineteen and had the receipts to prove it: she had restored a Qing ancestral hall in Anxi for nothing, for a lineage that had never paid her, and she still had the unpaid invoice framed on the wall of her office, and she showed it to people, and she was not embarrassed about it.

“It’s period texture,” she said. “It’s what people come for now. Nobody flies four hundred kilometres for a new wall.”

“The company wants the shell elevations kept,” Lin Li said. “That’s in the deck.”

“The shell is the shell.” Guo Peiling was still looking at the door. “The slogan is the story. Sixteen sixty-six to seventy-six, ten years, and the door’s the only thing in this lane that’s got all three. I want to conserve it. Consolidate the top coat, retouch the red, and it reads as texture. It’s honest. It’s what actually happened.”

“Whose door is it?”

“It’s your grandmother’s.”

※

Ah-ma came out to the courtyard at six with her hair done and her basket on her arm and stood in front of the door and looked at it, and the contractor and the designer both stopped talking, which was a thing that happened to rooms when she came into them.

“Geng is coming at seven,” Lin Li said.

"Let him come."

"He's got the papers."

"I know what papers he's got," Ah-ma said. She was looking at the door. "Who has been touching my door?"

"Nobody's touched it, Ah-ma. She was showing—"

"Nobody touches my door." Ah-ma put her basket down. She turned to Guo Peiling. "You said a book. You said you could read it like a book."

"I said you could. I didn't say I was going to take it apart."

"Then you and I understand each other." Ah-ma picked the basket up. "One thing. In the contract." She said it in Mandarin, because the contract was in Mandarin, and because she wanted it written down in Mandarin and not in a joke. "No slogans on my door."

Guo Peiling opened her mouth.

"It's a listed fabric—"

"It's a listed fabric," Ah-ma agreed. "List it somewhere else. Not on my door."

"It's the one documented example in the—"

"Miss Guo," Geng said, coming in behind them with a folder and a thermos and the particular greyness of a man who has not been home. "It's her door."

"It's a municipal—"

"It's her door," Geng said again, and wrote something in the margin of the folder, and did not ask why, and Lin Li, who had spent years watching Geng not ask things, recognised the not-asking and put it down to the hour.

※

They sat in the front room, the four of them, at the table, with the dust coming down through the light from the doorway.

Geng put the folder down and said what he had come to say, which was that the office had approved the works, that the consent form required the household head's signature and his own, and that

he would rather do it in the room than by post, because by post took three weeks and the company wanted a date.

Four pages. Household head: Huang Ama. Consent to works. Term. Compensation. Clause nine: for the avoidance of disturbance to residents, amplified sound in guest areas to cease at ten o'clock at night, and works to the structure not to commence before seven. Termination.

"Read it to me," Ah-ma said.

So Lin Li read it aloud, the way she read things aloud.

She read the household head and the term and the compensation, and she read the termination clause twice because it was the one that mattered, and she got to the bottom of page three, where the small print sat, and said, "It's the standard terms," and went on to the signature blocks.

Geng was not looking at the paper. He was looking at Ah-ma's face. Lin Li saw him doing it and thought nothing of it, because everyone watched her grandmother's face when her grandmother was talking.

"Read it," Ah-ma said.

"I just—"

"The small print. Read it."

Lin Li turned back to page three and read the standard terms, which were four lines long and were about insurance and about the right of entry for inspection and about the keeping of the common parts.

"Hm," Ah-ma said. "The visitors' noise. After what time?"

"I didn't read that one."

"Read it."

Lin Li read clause nine.

"I want eleven," Ah-ma said.

"Eleven isn't a quiet hour," Geng said. "Eleven is a bedtime."

"I want eleven."

"Ten is standard. Ten is what the template says."

"I am not the template," Ah-ma said. "Eleven."

Geng looked at her for a moment and then took out a pen and wrote, in the margin, in red, *quiet hours: eleven*, and Lin Li watched him write it in red and thought about the red pen in her own drawer, and did not examine that either.

"And the roof," Ah-ma said. "Put the date in."

"The roof is in the schedule—"

"The year is in the schedule. Put the date in."

"Ah-ma—"

"Not the year. The date." Ah-ma put both hands flat on the table, which was a thing she did when she had finished negotiating and was now only waiting. "It has been leaking since the typhoon. There is a bucket. I have moved it twice. Put the date in, or I don't sign, and you can explain to your committee why the old woman would not have a new roof."

Geng wrote the date in. In red. It was the third of November, which was nine weeks away, and it was, Lin Li noticed, a date that came before the tourist season and not after it.

Ah-ma signed. She signed in the careful upright hand of a woman who had learned to write at the age of seven and had been hiding it ever since, and she turned the page over and pressed the signature with the side of her hand, and then she read the whole of page four back to herself, silently, with her lips moving, before she pushed it away.

Nobody remarked on it. Geng was putting the thermos away.

※

At the door, with the contractor loading the skip, Geng stopped.

"She doesn't miss much," he said.

"She's eighty-six," Lin Li said.

"Hm," Geng said.

He went down the lane with the folder under his arm, and stopped once at the corner to look back at the door with the three layers on it,

and then went on, and did not ask why, and did not say anything, and got into the car and sat in it for a while before he started it.

CHAPTER 12

Twelve

She catalogued the hands on the Tuesday, at the table, with a sheet of paper and the pencil, because cataloguing hands is what editors do and because she had started, on Sunday night, to be afraid of the book and wanted a procedure.

There were three.

Hand one was the copier. Small, dry, very even, the columns straight without a ruling line, the same height throughout, the whole book in it without a slip that she could find. She put it in the Qianlong reign, and she was right, and she would be right for the wrong reas - ons: she had dated it from the paper and the stitch, and not from the hand, which was the hand of a woman doing a job of work.

Hand two was in pencil, in the margins, in a rounder and later hand, and it appeared eleven times. It wrote short. It dated itself. It signed itself with a word that was not a Chinese word, in the Latin alphabet, followed by a year: 1946, 1947, 1947, 1955. It made notes on fish prices. It corrected a character on the courtyard wall and recor - ded the correction. It asked a question in 1947 that Lin Li would read four times in a row and then put the book down and walk around the room about.

Hand three was ink, on the flyleaf, and it was her grandmother's.

She knew that hand. She had known it since she was six, from the top of exercise books and the side of calendars, from the careful upright way Ah-ma wrote a name on a form at the bank, holding the pen low. She had seen it ten thousand times. She had never once wondered about it.

She looked at the line for a long time.

> *I am not brave. I am only tidy.*

Big ebb, ninth moon. No year. The ninth moon opened on Sat - urday.

She sat with it, and her mind, doing what minds do, offered her the ordinary explanation at once and she took it: grandmothers wrote things down. Shopping lists. Names on forms. The date of a funeral. That was not the same as reading a book, and it had never been the same, and she put the sheet of paper down and went and made tea she did not drink.

※

The Question was beside the essay on women, in the pencil of the second hand, and it had been written in 1947 and it had been waiting sixty-nine years for somebody to read it as a question and not as a note.

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

Lin Li read it four times. Then she read the essay again, which she had read six times in three weeks, and this time she read it as a thing that had been read by somebody.

She took the sheet of paper and wrote, at the top of it, in her own hand:

A teacher in a courtyard in 1947, with a class of girls, asking of nobody which she was meant to want. Harder to marry. Harder to fool. The two go together. You cannot have one without the other.

She looked at it. Then she crossed out *a teacher* and wrote *a hand, mid-century*, because she had started, without deciding to, to protect her.

※

She posted it on the Wednesday night, unsigned, on the blog called A Book to Burn.

She had meant to post it on the Tuesday and had not, because Danran had come into her room on the Tuesday afternoon with a folder of captions and had sat down on the edge of the desk, which nobody did.

"How old were you when you stopped reading?" Danran said.

"I've never stopped reading."

"I mean the blog. You were eleven when I found it. I'm asking when you were *my* age — did you ever do a thing just because somebody said girls don't."

Lin Li put the pencil down.

"Yes," she said.

"When?"

"All the time," Lin Li said. "It was the entire content of it. That is what a blog is when you are twenty-five and nobody has asked you a question yet."

Danran nodded, and looked at the folder, and did not push it, and picked up a caption and read it out, and Lin Li heard her read the first clause flat and the second clause with the turn in it, and did not say anything about it, and Danran went out and shut the door.

That was the whole of the conversation. Lin Li sat behind it for an hour with the Question in front of her and understood that she had been in that room in 1947, or that somebody had, and that the somebody was in this building, at a desk by a window, with a channel and a strike coming.

Then she posted it.

> ***#217 — A hand, mid-century***
> *In the summer of 1947, somebody read a book in a temple courtyard on this estuary and wrote a question in the margin of it in pencil. I have read a copy of the page. I am not going to say more about the courtyard than that, because the person who wrote the question is the reason I am being careful, and I have spent enough*

of my life being careful on other people's behalf to know the shape of it.

The essay the question sits beside is four hundred years old and it argues, in the voice of a man clearing his throat, that insight is not sexed. You may say that people are men and women; how can you say that insight is men and women? You may say that insight is long or short; how can you say that men's is all long and women's is all short? Suppose a woman had a man's range — if she delighted in hearing what was right and knew that vulgar talk was not worth hearing, delighted in learning to leave the world and knew the floating world was not worth clinging to — then the men of today, looking at her, would sweat with shame and not dare to make a sound.

Give a woman a man's range. The sentence has not finished.

And in the margin beside it, in a rounder hand, in pencil, seventy-six years after the ink:

> Reading makes the girls harder to marry and harder to fool. Which am I meant to want?

I do not know who wrote it. I know the year, and I know the hand, and I know that the hand signed itself with a first name and nothing else, the way a person signs a thing when they are not sure they are allowed to.

The question is not rhetorical. Somebody sat in a courtyard in the summer of 1947 with a book open on her knees and asked, of nobody in particular: which am I meant to want? Every teacher who has ever taught a girl to read has stood in front of that question and answered it with her whole life, and the answering has almost never been written down. It gets written down,

> *when it gets written down at all, in a margin, in pencil, by somebody who expects the page to be thrown away. This year this city is celebrating the five hundredth birthday of a man who argued that women could see as far as men. The city has no plaque for the hand in the margin. The hand is the harder thing. The hand is the one that had to be in the room.*

She read it four times and posted it at half past eleven, and then she sat for a while with the tab open, and then she closed it and lay down on the bed with her clothes on, and the book was on the table where she could see it.

※

She dreamed of a woman's voice.

It said, quite clearly, and without any particular feeling: *Grace*.

It was not her grandmother's voice. It was not her mother's. It was a voice from a generation above them, trained in the flat vowels of a school where English was the language of instruction, and it was saying a name — her own name, calmly, the way a teacher says a name to a class when she wants the person who owns it to answer.

Lin Li woke at four in the morning with the voice still in the room.

She lay in the dark and listened to the building, and the street below, and the generators at the pier four kilometres away. Her ears were ringing very slightly, the way they do after a long silence.

She did not get up. She did not turn the lamp on. She lay and looked at the shape of the book on the table and did not go near it, and the dawn came up the way it does over that part of the city, grey first and then the colour of the inside of a shell.

The voice was still there when she got up. It was not there by the time she had made the tea.

She had no explanation for it. She had read the name in the mar‑gin, in pencil, eleven times in two days, and she had read a great

many things a great many times, and none of them had ever come back to her with a voice.

CHAPTER 13

Thirteen

The ninth moon opened on the Saturday, and the equinox tide came with it, and by the Sunday the water had gone out further than it had gone all autumn.

The flats were bare. You could walk out onto ground that had been under four feet of water on the Thursday and find the oyster stones standing in the air with weed hanging off them, and the channels running where the deep water ran, and the women out on them at the lowest hour of the day, which was also the lowest hour of the month.

Lin Li came down on the Saturday afternoon with the book in her bag.

Ah-ma was at the pier when she got there, in the crowd, doing whatever she did at the pier, which was nothing that anyone could have named. She did not ask about the book. She looked at the bag.

"Tomorrow," she said. "Bring it tomorrow."

So Lin Li stayed.

She had not intended to. She had a bag with the book in it and a train at six, and the lane had its usual way of making intentions irrelevant: the auntie two doors down put a bowl of something into her hands at four, the mason was still working at the seam and would be until the light went, and by the time she had eaten the bowl and watched the light go off the shells on the gable the train had gone without her.

She slept in the chair again. The bed was needed.

In the morning she went down to the flats at the lowest hour and walked out onto ground that had been under four feet of water two days before, and the oyster stones stood in the air with the weed hanging off them and the channels ran where the deep water ran, and

nothing about it was remarkable to anybody in the lane except that it was Sunday.

She came back up at ten and the price board had gone up at the ice house, and Ah-ma was standing in front of it, and a man with a bar‑row was reading the numbers over her shoulder, and Lin Li read them out to her, the way she had read them out for eleven years.

"Two-eight," she said. "Four-five for the big ones."

"Too cheap," Ah-ma said. "Tell them I said so."

Lin Li told them so. The man with the barrow said something in Minnan that was not polite and not impolite, and went on with his barrow, and Ah-ma watched the numbers go up and did not look at the board, and Lin Li wrote it in the notebook, the way she had written it for eleven years, and did not think anything about it.

Then, at four, Ah-ma said: "Bring it in."

※

The lowest water was at half past four on the Sunday, and the sun went down at half past five, and between those two hours the estuary lay out flat and glittering and emptied, and the channels twisted in it like something written.

Lin Li brought the book into the front room and put it on the table.

Ah-ma washed her hands at the tap, and dried them on her apron, and took the apron off, and hung it on the hook by the door, and sat down. She took the book. She did not open it for a while. She turned it over and put her hand flat on the cover, the way she had put her hand flat on a fish at the pier to feel whether it was cold.

Then she opened it.

She turned past the famine letters, and past the death account, to one of the blank leaves the widow had sewn in for hands that had not yet arrived. She put her finger on it.

She took the pen out of the drawer.

And she wrote.

Lin Li watched her write.

The pen was not a modern pen and Ah-ma did not hold it the way people held modern pens. She held it low and far back, the way a woman holds a knife, and she had to press, and the nib had been worn on one side by another woman's hand sixty years ago and it went down on the page at an angle that was not Ah-ma's, and she had to turn the page to keep it in the grain.

It took a long time. Ah-ma was not fast with it. She stopped once and looked out of the window at the lane and did not see anything in particular, and then she went back to the page. She stopped again and flexed her right hand, and shook it out, and picked the pen up again.

What she wrote, Lin Li could see from where she sat, was one line and not more, and it went down the middle of the leaf and not to the edge, and it took up less of the page than a name on a bank form.

She watched the careful upright hand she had known since she was six — the hand off the tops of exercise books and the sides of calendars, the hand that wrote a name on a bank form with the pen held low — moving across the page. She watched it and thought: she is writing something down. She did not think anything else about it. Grandmothers wrote things down. Shopping lists. The date of a funeral. The order of the rings.

It took twenty minutes for one line.

She blotted it, with the side of her hand, the way she had seen her grandmother blot a signature.

"Keep it," she said. "Or don't."

※

Lin Li put the book in her bag and went out, and she walked, and the walking was the thing she had done all her life when a room had become difficult, and she had done it in the office and in her mother's house and once, at twenty-four, out of a private room on Zhongshan Road and into a car.

She walked down to the flats at the lowest hour because there was nowhere else to be and because the water going out was the only thing she had seen all year that did exactly what it said. She stood on the sea wall for an hour. Behind her the lane was doing its evening: somebody's radio, a child, the generators at the pier firing up for the dusk boats. In front of her the estuary lay out to the horizon with the channels twisting in it, and the light going off the wet sand, and no tide coming in for six hours.

The tide had turned at half past five. It had been at its lowest at half past four, and it had been coming in since, and it would come in for six hours and then stand, and then go out for six hours, and the flats would be bare again tomorrow at half past four, and the day after that, and the day after that.

She had known that her whole life. Everybody in the lane knew it. She had never once had to look at a tide table to know when the boats would go out.

She had had a book in her bag since May, and she had read it four times, and she had catalogued the hands and dated the paper and dated the stitch, and she had never once, in all of that, sat down and asked what her grandmother was doing writing in it at ten o'clock at night.

She came back at eleven.

The light was on in the front room.

She stopped in the doorway.

Ah-ma was sitting at the table with the book open in front of her.

She was reading.

Her eyes moved along the line. Not squinting. Not holding the page away, or up to the lamp, or turning it to catch the light. Her eyes moved along the line at the speed of a person reading, and her lips did not move, and one hand lay flat on the page and the other held the edge of it.

She got to the end of the page. She turned it. She read the next one, and the one after that, and then she stopped, and put a finger on the line she had stopped at to keep the place.

"You're back," she said.

"You're reading."

"I'm reading."

Lin Li came into the room and sat down on the other side of the table, in the chair nobody sat in.

"How long?"

"Since I was seven. Seventy-nine years."

"You could have told me."

"I'm telling you now."

"Seventy-nine years, Ah-ma. You let me read to you."

Ah-ma's hands were flat on the book, one on either side of the spine.

"Yes," she said.

It was the only thing she said about it. She did not explain, and she did not apologise, and she did not make any of the small moves a person makes when they have been found out. She sat with her hands on the book and waited, the way she had sat across a table from a man with a boat's putty on his hands, sixty years ago, and let him work out what he had worked out.

Lin Li put out her hand, and Ah-ma let her take the book.

She turned to the back, to the blank leaf the widow had sewn in.

> *Kept you sixty years. Who kept me?*

Big ebb, ninth moon.

She read it twice.

Then she turned to the front, to the flyleaf, and looked at the line in the careful upright hand that had been there for sixty years.

> *I am not brave. I am only tidy.*

Big ebb, ninth moon. No year. Lin Li had read it in a store off a stairwell in June and had filed it under ordinary grandmother writing, in the way she filed things.

She read it again now.

Then she turned the pages, slowly, the way she turned proofs, and looked at the margins, and the margins were full.

The dry even hand of the copier, and the seven lines on the con‑tents leaf. The rounder hand of the teacher: the fish prices, the wall, the question, the name that was not a Chinese name, signed with a first name and a year. The careful upright hand of her grandmother: one line on the flyleaf, and one line now at the back, and a pale comma of a burn on the inside of a left wrist that Lin Li had seen ten thousand times at the oyster tables and had never once asked about.

Four hundred years of hands, and three of them were in the room with her, and one of them was under the lamp at the table.

She looked up. Ah-ma was sitting where she had been sitting, with her hands in her lap, watching her read.

“Who kept me?” she said.

“Nobody,” Ah-ma said. “That’s what it means. That’s the answer.” She took the book back and closed it on her finger. “I have been careful for sixty years. Nobody has ever caught me at anything. Nobody has ever once asked me a question.” She looked at the cover. “I want it burned.”

“I’m not going to burn it.”

“I know.” Ah-ma put the book on the table between them. “That’s why I wrote it down.”

Lin Li looked at the line. She looked at the date under it, which was the big ebb, which was the lowest hour of the month, which was the same hour as the line on the flyleaf sixty years ago.

“Did you do it on purpose?” she said. “The same tide.”

Ah-ma’s face did nothing at all.

"The tide is the tide," she said. "It comes when it comes."

Which was not an answer, and Lin Li let it not be an answer, and the novel of it did not get worked out, and it never would.

※

They sat at the table. The lamp was turned down. Outside, the water had gone out as far as it would go and was lying flat and silver under the moon, further out than it had been all autumn, and the flats were bare and the channels were full of the last of the light.

Ah-ma turned another page of the book, found nothing, and closed it.

"Go to bed," she said. "You'll want to be up for the water."

Lin Li went up the back stairs with the book in her bag and did not sleep, and lay in her grandmother's room with the head of the bed against the wall that ran through from the gable, and listened to the tide turn.

It came in until midnight and then it stood, and then it began to go out, and it would be at its lowest again at half past four in the morning, and the boats would go out on it, and the flats would be bare, and the women would be out on them with their stools.

She had been read to at a fish price board for eleven years by a woman who had been reading for seventy-nine.

She lay in the dark and did the arithmetic, and the arithmetic was that her grandmother had been seven years old in a temple courtyard in 1947, and had learned to read from a woman who had signed her name Grace because she had not been sure she was allowed to sign it with anything longer, and had kept a book for sixty years, and had let her own daughter find her reading at two in the morning and had said nothing about it, and had taken the knife out of the hand of a man with a boat's putty and had sealed a wall.

And had stood at a price board for eleven years and let her granddaughter read the numbers out.

The tide turned. The room changed. Lin Li lay in it and did not sleep and did not stop working on it, and the arithmetic did not resolve, and it did not have to.

CHAPTER 14

Fourteen

She took the photograph out on the Monday morning, at the table, with the book beside her and the tide lying far out below.

She had turned it face down on the plastic six months ago and had not looked at the writing on the back. There had been a key in the lock. She had put it down.

She turned it over now.

Twenty-two names, in English pencil, down the back in a list, and beside each one a mark or a number, and beside the fourth along the front row a short note in a hand that was a teacher's hand, with grace in it, the kind of hand that has been correcting other hands for years:

> *Huang Ama, 7 — loses no arguments.*

Huang Ama. Seven. Front row, on the left.

She turned it back and looked at the front.

A courtyard, autumn, the light low. Twenty-two girls sitting on the ground in rows, every one of them in a flower crown — the spiral buns, the bone pins through the centre, the rings of blossoms one inside the other — and every one of them with a book open on her lap. And along the top, in the pencil with grace in it:

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

Lin Li sat with it in her hands.

The voice in the dream had said *Grace*, and the hand in the mar ‑ gin had signed itself *Grace, 1947*, and the caption was initialled

G.C.H., and she had read that name eleven times in two days, and that was all it had ever been — her own ear, reading.

She looked at the flowers.

In the autumn of 1947, a courtyard full of girls in flower crowns with books open on their laps was a thing the whole lane would have walked past every day and seen nothing in at all. The flowers were the safest thing in the picture. Nobody was going to stop a group of girls with flowers in their hair and ask what they were doing, and the books had lain open on their laps for two years, in a temple court‑yard, in a lane where half the people could not read and none of them asked.

She put the photograph down and opened the laptop and went and found the post.

She had the photograph in one hand and the screen in the other, and she read the two of them side by side.

> *Huang Ama, 7 — loses no arguments.*

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

Sixty-five years apart. The same observation. The same shape — the short clause first, and then the longer one that turns it over.

The teacher had got there first, in English pencil, on the back of a photograph, in a temple courtyard, about a girl of seven with a book on her lap.

Lin Li had written hers in a flat at the top of her mother's building, in the mornings before work, with the returnee's cold eye, believing she was the first person who had ever noticed it. It had been true. She had watched it happen at the pier, eleven times, and she had written it down as folklore, and she had been right.

And she had still not been first.

She sat back. The tide was lying out to the horizon. The flats were bare, and the channels were twisting in them, and somewhere out on them a woman was working a stone.

Sixty-five years of the same lane and the same market and the same woman, and the sentence had come out of Lin Li's mouth as a rhythm — arriving from a woman who had stood in that courtyard and watched a girl of seven win an argument, and who had written it down in the only language she had, on the back of the only thing she could safely write on, in a year when writing it anywhere else would have got somebody detained.

The most-read sentence she had ever written. The sentence that was on three tour-booking pages and inside the cover of a café menu and under four hundred thousand views of a pair of hands. It had not been hers in the first instance. It had been a relay, and the first runner had been dead for fifty-eight years, and her name was in a margin, in pencil, and she had signed it *Grace* because she had not been sure she was allowed to sign it with anything longer.

Lin Li put her hands flat on the table.

She had spent a working lifetime being the most reliable editor in the building, and the one sentence of hers that had ever gone out into the world and lived had been written, in the first place, by a mission-school teacher with a class of fisher girls in a temple courtyard, in a language that was not her own, in a year when she would have been detained for saying it in the street.

And Lin Li, who had never read a word of it, had said it again.

※

She took the photograph upstairs and put it in the drawer with the notebook, and she did not log it, and she went down to the pier for the dusk boats, and she stood at the rail for an hour and did not look at the water.

The flats were coming back under. The tide had turned. Some‑where out past the gun-fort the first of the boats was coming in, and

the price would go up on the slate by the ice house, and her grandmother would be standing there, and would tell her what it said before she had finished reading it, and would not once, in seventy-nine years, have lost the argument.

Lin Li stood and watched the water come in over the oyster stones, and did not go to meet it.

CHAPTER 15

Fifteen

The two of them sat on stools at the door of the house with a basin between them and a heap of shells growing up the left side of the step, and the blade going into the hinge and the twist and the meat gone into the basin, and the shells going onto the pile. Behind them the mason was working at the gale with the radio on. It was the kind of morning in which a person could say anything at all.

"Who taught you?" Lin Li said.

Ah-ma did not stop work.

"I was six," she said. "Maybe seven. She came in the spring."

※

Her name was Cai Xiuzhen. She was forty-seven, and she had been born in Hui'an and trained at a mission normal school up the coast and taught in Zhangzhou for twenty years before the war fin - ished and she came home, and she had nowhere to live, and the temple gave her two rooms at the back of the west range because there were two rooms, and because the abbot owed somebody a fa - vour.

She had been in the village three weeks before she asked the abbot for the use of the courtyard.

She asked for it on a Wednesday and she got it on the Thursday, and she put the word about herself, and forty-one girls came the first week and twenty-two of them stayed.

It ran twice a week, in the courtyard, from the spring of 1946 to the autumn of 1948. Ah-ma does not know why it stopped. She said so.

"It stopped," she said. "Nobody said."

The girls came in their working clothes and shod their feet. The class was at the hour when the flats were turning, and it was in a temple courtyard, and it was, to the whole lane, a thing that had always been there.

"And the flowers," Lin Li said.

"And the flowers." Ah-ma turned a shell over. "The flowers are not a costume in that courtyard. They are what a girl wears to a temple. You put them on to go in, same as you put on shoes." She worked the hinge. "Twenty-two girls in flower crowns going in and out of a temple courtyard twice a week for two years. Nobody in this lane has ever once asked a question about a girl in flowers. Not once. Not to this day."

And the books went in the baskets, under the fish.

"Under the fish," Ah-ma said. "A girl going to market at four in the morning with eight catties of oysters in the bottom of the basket has a book under the oysters and nobody is going to put a hand in there to find it. Not for a book. Not in this lane."

She said it without any pride in it, which was, Lin Li thought, the first sign that she was not going to be able to make this story come out any way she wanted.

The class itself was not a lesson in the way Lin Li had pictured a lesson. There were no slates. There was one copy of a primer, worn soft at the corners, that went from hand to hand, and the girls sat on the ground in the courtyard with the book open on their knees and the flowers in their hair and the smell of the incense from the hall coming out through the door, and Cai Xiuzhen walked among them and stopped and crouched and said a thing quietly to one girl and moved on.

They read out loud. They read the same page four or five times, because one copy among twenty-two girls meant that you read while it was your turn and listened when it was not, and listening was the half that counted.

"Did you learn to write?" Lin Li said.

"On a slate. With a slate pencil. The slate stayed with the teacher and the writing washed off." Ah-ma's hands went on. "I could write my own name by the summer. I could write the price column by the autumn. By the spring I could copy a page out and have it come out straight."

"That's fast."

"It was every day," Ah-ma said. "Twice a week, and the fish in between. It was not a school. It was a thing you did at the hour the flats were turning."

※

The book came first and the class second.

In 1946 a buyer of scrap paper came through the lane every few weeks with a shoulder pole and a scale, paying by the catty, and the women saved their old paper for her, and the price was the price. Cai Xiuzhen was at a house in the next lane one morning in the spring, buying a bundle by weight, and there was a hand-copied book in the bundle, thread-bound, tan, the size of a hymn book.

She paid for it by the catty. That was how it was bought. That was how it survived: it was in the garbage, and the garbage gets weighed.

"She knew what it was?" Lin Li said.

"She knew the hand was not printed. She said so. She said the rest of it she worked out in the first week." Ah-ma shrugged. "She was a teacher. They read."

And she kept it, and she read it, and in the autumn of 1947 she took it into the courtyard and opened it on her knees, and she did not say what it was, and she did not say where it had come from, and she let the girls who could read find out for themselves, which was, Lin Li thought, the second sign.

※

The first name Ah-ma ever wrote was her own.

She wrote it on a slate, and then she wrote it on the courtyard wall, in chalk, at the height of her own eye, and Cai Xiuzhen saw it and made her rub it out and write it again properly, and then she wrote it on the wall a second time in the proper way and left it, and the rain took it in the spring.

"She wrote it in the margin," Ah-ma said. "She wrote it in the margin of the book. Mei-yu wrote her own name. Then she wrote it on the wall too. Corrected the wall. Kept the name."

"Mei-yu."

"Mei-yu was nine. Mei-yu had a mouth." Ah-ma's face did the thing it did. "Mei-yu died in fifty-nine. Not of anything to do with this."

Lin Li's hands had stopped. She started them again.

※

The class ran to the autumn of 1948 and then it stopped and nobody said why, and Cai Xiuzhen went on teaching in the two rooms at the back of the west range, and there were eight girls by then instead of twenty-two, and the smallest of them was Huang Ama, who could read by then and had been reading for a year and a half.

She read, Ah-ma said, the way the tide comes in.

"You cannot stop it and you should not," Lin Li said.

"You've read it."

"I've read it."

Ah-ma put her knife down. She looked out at the lane for a while.

"It goes on the last leaf," she said. "Nineteen fifty-five. She put it on the last leaf so it would be the last thing."

※

In the spring of 1955 the temple asked Cai Xiuzhen to leave the two rooms, and she asked Ah-ma to come to the rooms, and Ah-ma went, and the book was on the table, and there was a pen beside it,

and Cai Xiuzhen put her hands flat on the cover and said what she had come to say.

She said: you are fifteen. You read better than any of them. I am going away and I am not coming back, and I am not going to tell you why, and you would not be allowed to repeat it if I did.

She said: keep this until reading is safe.

And she said: it is not safe now. It has not been safe for four hundred years. It was not safe when it was written and it was not safe when it was copied and it was not safe when I bought it out of a bundle by the catty, and it will not be safe after I have gone, and that is not a reason to stop.

And then she gave Ah-ma the pen, and the pen was black with a gold nib, and she had had it since she was a girl, and she said: when you write in it, write small.

"Write small," Ah-ma said. "She said that. Write small and write in the margins, because the margins are where they don't look."

※

She was taken in the morning, in 1958, from the rooms in the west range, and there was a lorry, and there were two men, and they did not touch her.

That is what Ah-ma said about it. That they did not touch her, and that there was a lorry.

"She had a label," Ah-ma said. "Old history. Counter-revolutionary. It went on the door."

"What did she do?"

"She taught. She had been at a mission school and a mission school had been paid for from outside the country. That was the history. That was the whole of the history."

"And after?"

"Sixty-one. Sixty-three." Ah-ma picked the knife up again. "She wrote me once. I got it in the tenth month. Somebody posted it from Zhangzhou."

She did not say what the letter said. Lin Li waited, and she did not say, and Lin Li understood, sitting there with the shell in her hand, that this was the first place in the whole telling where her grandmother had taken something out.

"One visit?" Lin Li said.

"One visit."

※

She came in the autumn after that, and she came to the door, and Ah-ma's mother was out, and they shelled oysters on the step for two hours, and the sun went down, and Cai Xiuzhen asked about Mei-yu, and asked about the girl who had written her name on the wall, and asked whether the eight were still reading, and about the temple, and about the price of fish.

She did not ask about the book.

Not once, in two hours, in four years, and Ah-ma said so, and said it flatly, and did not draw a conclusion from it, and put the last shell in the basin.

"Was she thin?" Lin Li said.

"Thin. She had always been thin." Ah-ma turned the last shell over in her hand. "She had a cough. She sat on the low stool and she did not stoop, because the stoop is what you get from ten hours of it, and she never did the ten hours, and her back was straight at sixty-four."

"She was sixty-four."

"Sixty-four," Ah-ma said. "She looked older. She looked like a woman who had been somewhere."

"Had she?"

"She had been in a place with a wall," Ah-ma said. "For three years. She did not say so and I did not ask, and that was the second of the things we did not say, and the first was the book, and there were more."

"What kinds of things?"

"Small things." Ah-ma put the shell in the basin. "Where she had been after 1948. Why the class stopped. What had happened to the two brothers she had taught in Zhangzhou before the war. She had a way of going quiet, and I learned to go quiet with her, and after a while the quiet was the relationship." She picked up the basin. "We shelled oysters for two hours and I never asked her one single question about her own life. Not one. And she noticed, and she let me."

"She knew," Lin Li said.

"She knew I had it."

"She knew you had it and she never asked."

"She asked about the girls," Ah-ma said. "That's asking."

※

It was full dark by then and the mason had turned his radio off, and the pile of shells at the side of the step was the size of a small wall, and Lin Li's hands ached in a place she had never used.

"Ah-ma," she said. "Why did she never ask?"

Ah-ma washed her knife in the basin and put it in her apron pocket and stood up.

"Because if she asked," she said, "and I said no, then she would know I had lied to her. And if she asked and I said yes, then she would know she had left it with somebody who was going to be caught with it." She picked up the basin. "She was a teacher. She knew what a question costs."

She went inside with the basin. The door was left open behind her, which it always was.

CHAPTER 16

Sixteen

On the second day they sat in the courtyard, with the oyster piles drying in the sun and the mason working in the front room behind them, and Ah-ma told the rest of it.

She told it the way she had told the rest: in order, without emphasis, and with the things taken out.

※

"The tip came from Huang Kun," she said. "My cousin. Nineteen. He had the armband on."

Lin Li's hands kept going. The blade went in, the twist, the meat into the basin.

"He came to the door on the first night. Ninth moon, first day, and the tide had just turned. He stood outside and he would not sit down and he would not take tea." Ah-ma turned a shell. "He told the lane at seven in the evening. By nine the whole street knew the Huangs had been warned."

"He told you and nobody else?"

"He told the Huangs," Ah-ma said. "That is what I said. One fam‑ily. The rest of the lane's Huang too, all of them, because he is a Huang and he is not going to let his own people burn. But not one person outside the Huang name." She worked the hinge. "And that is what I have never been able to decide about. Whether that was a man being careful, or a man being a Huang. He had nine years on me and the armband on and he was frightened, and he did the one thing a frightened man can do."

"And the squad?"

"He led them. Two nights later. Down this same street, house to house, with the list, in his good voice." Ah-ma's face did nothing at

all. “His voice went formal two doors down from here. I heard it. I was at the window. Two doors down he started saying *comrade*.”

※

Night one was the tip. Night two was the trunk.

“Every family that season became the editor of its own house,” Ah-ma said. “You have read about it. You have written readers about it. In one week every house in this lane was sitting in the middle of the floor with a box, deciding.”

She had been twenty-six. She had taken the trunk out to the courtyard, under the wall, where the light was, and she had gone through it item by item, and she had made three piles, and the pile that went into the fire was the biggest.

The letters were thirty-three of them.

“Reading lessons,” Ah-ma said. “Fish-market news with characters in it. The price of mackerel and how to write *mackerel*. Thirty-three of them, tied with string, on the shelf, in the order they came.”

“Did you—“

“I burned them,” Ah-ma said. “By my own hand. In the brazier, in the courtyard, one at a time, so that nothing went up in a heap that anybody could have questioned.”

“Had you read them?”

“No.”

Lin Li’s hands had stopped. She made them go.

“They were reading lessons—“

“They were fish-market news,” Ah-ma said. “I knew the hand. Thirty-three of them, and I knew the shelf, and I knew the string, and I never opened one past the first line.” She turned a shell over. “You want to know why.”

“Yes.”

“Because I would have had to learn it,” Ah-ma said. “And I had learned enough.”

A corner of the bundle went up as she was feeding it in, and it took her left wrist, and she put it out against the wall, and the mark it left was a pale comma, half an inch long, and it is still there, at the oyster tables, in the sun, where the women shuck. She rolled her sleeve up and showed Lin Li the comma on the inside of the left wrist, in the same place, sixty years on, and rolled it down again, and picked up the next shell.

※

Night three was the wall.

"She had said put it where you sleep," Ah-ma said. "So I put it where I sleep."

The photograph and the pen went into the squat salted-fish crock — the family crock, glazed inside with a brown-red, the size a family keeps under the bench. Oiled paper over the mouth, tied, waxed, and then oilcloth over that, and then the whole of it set into the wall behind the headboard, so that the book slept at her ear for sixty years.

The seam she pointed with shell-lime and with her husband's boat putty, and she reset the shells in the old pattern either side of it, and she worked until the tide was at its lowest, which was the third night, and the water was further out than it had been all year, and the flat was bare, and she stood in it and finished.

"At first light he came in and he touched the wall," Ah-ma said. "At the patch. With the flat of his hand, the way he touched a hull. He knew his own putty at four metres."

You took my putty, he said.

I'll buy more, she said.

"That was the whole of it. In sixty years of marriage, that was the entire conversation about heresy."

※

Then the sweep came, and before it came he went out himself with the tablets — both of them, the Lin and the Huang — and he carried them out himself, first, so that nobody else would have to touch them. He put them in the boat under the boards and took the boat out and sat in it until it was over, and he did not look at her once.

The Huang genealogy went on the pile in the lane. The door gods were whitewashed and a slogan was painted over them, and the slo‑gan is still under the paint, and Miss Guo wants to keep it.

And the flyleaf, that night, in her own hand, with the book open in front of her one last time before it went into the wall:

> *I am not brave. I am only tidy.*

Big ebb, ninth moon.

"She wore white buds in her hair," Ah-ma said, "all that autumn. Not the flowers. The white ones, the ones the mourners get, that nobody wears in the ninth moon. Every day, to the flats and back. Nobody in this lane ever asked her why."

"She was keeping a calendar."

"She was keeping a calendar," Ah-ma agreed. "She was also frightened out of her wits and the white was the only thing she could afford to be seen doing."

※

"She died in sixty-eight," Ah-ma said. "Third-hand. Somebody in Zhangzhou told somebody in Hui'an and it took a year to get into this lane, and by the time it did, nobody could remember which month."

She said it and put the last shell in the basin and did not say anything else about it.

"And my mother," Lin Li said.

"I took her out of school in seventy-two."

"Why?"

"Because she had found me." Ah-ma's hands were flat on the basin. "She was eight. She had found me at it at two in the morning and she had never said one word in four years, and I knew she never would."

"So why take her out?"

"Because two secrets cannot share one room," Ah-ma said. "She was carrying one already. I was not going to make her carry mine as well."

It was a good reason. It was the reason a woman would give. It was not the whole reason, and both of them knew it, and neither of them said so, and the mason's radio went on playing behind them.

※

One of the letters, Ah-ma said, she remembered. The first line of one of them, out of thirty-three, after sixty years. She said it in the flat voice she used for other people's words.

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

And then, after a while, she said the other half of it herself, in her own voice, in the courtyard, with the shells piled up the step.

> *I remember the mackerel. The characters are gone.*

※

The last of the class was called Hong Xiuying and she was ninety-three and she lived in two rooms over a shoe shop in the next lane, and Lin Li went to see her on the Thursday, alone.

She was almost entirely deaf and she wanted to know who Lin Li was, and then she wanted to know who Lin Li's mother was, and

when she heard the name she said, “Ah. The small one. The small one with the wall.”

She remembered one lesson.

“The price board,” she said. “At the pier. She had us read it out, three times each, and then do the sums, and I could never do the sums, not once, not in two years.” She was fierce about it, sixty years on. “And she said: the letters will stay with you, Hong Xiuying, and the arithmetic will come in its own time, and if it does not come you will marry a man who can count, and nobody in this courtyard is going to hold that against you.”

She remembered nothing else. Not the book, not the wall, not 1966, not the flowers. One lesson, the price board, and a teacher who had been practical about arithmetic.

Lin Li sat with her for an hour and wrote nothing down, and on the way back through the lane she passed the house with the gable end open, and the mason’s chisel going, and the blue plastic hanging in the doorway and moving.

CHAPTER 17

Seventeen

She went to his office on the Thursday and shut the door.

"You knew," she said.

Geng was at his desk with a stack of proofs and he did not look up. "Knew what?"

"That she could read."

He put the proof down. He looked at the desk for a while.

"I suspected."

"When?"

"The day I came about the lease. She asked me a question about a clause nobody had read to her." He turned the proof over. "I watched her eyes while your granddaughter read the paper. She was following the line."

"Thirteen years," Lin Li said.

"Thirteen years. And she has never once let it slip, and neither have you." He said it without accusation. "That is not a criticism. It is a fact about how well she does it."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Geng did not answer that. He sat back in his chair and looked out of the window at the wall of the building next door, and then he said:

"Do you remember the tea?"

And she did.

※

She remembered the room. A private room above a restaurant on Zhongshan Road, with a lazy susan on it and four dishes going round that nobody ate, and a television playing with the sound off. Four chairs at the table and only three of them used, which was a thing she

had noticed at the time and thought about for years afterwards without getting anywhere.

The room was on the first floor and the window looked onto the street, and the traffic came up through the glass, and the dishes were four and they went round on the susan and the fourth dish was un‑loaded when it came to her because she had learned at twenty-four to take the small portion and say it was good. There was a plastic pitcher of tea in the middle that nobody drank from and three small cups that were never refilled, and the whole of the meal took an hour and eleven minutes, and she knew that to the minute, because she had worked it out afterwards on the train, sitting with her hands in her lap.

She remembered that Zhang Wendao sat at the head of it. He was in his sixties then, in a good jacket with the sleeves turned back once, and he had a way of holding a teacup in both hands that made it look like an instrument. His hands were very clean. He had a ring on the little finger of the left hand that he turned when he was thinking, and he turned it eleven times that evening, and she had counted.

She remembered that Geng poured. He poured three times, and he said nothing at all for the whole of the meal, and she had sat there thinking: he is on their side, he has to be, and it was not that at all, and she had not worked out what it was until eleven days ago, in his car outside the lane. What she had thought at twenty-four was that he was ashamed of her. What she understood at thirty-seven was that he had been ashamed of himself, and that the pouring was the only thing he could do with his hands.

She remembered that Zhang paid. He paid in cash, out of a wallet, and he counted the notes onto the tray in front of him, and no bill was ever brought to that table, and she had not thought about that until much later either. What she had thought at twenty-four was that he was a man who did not trust cards.

She remembered that after the dishes were cleared he took a piece of paper out of his breast pocket.

It was not a printout. He had written it out by hand, in a small upright hand, and it was her sentence. Hers. From the blog, from the autumn of 2012, from a post about the price board at the pier.

> *I have been writing about this city for three years and I have not yet written one sentence that somebody in it could use against me.*

"He read it out," she said. "Aloud, in that room, in his voice. And then he said he had read it four times, and that he thought it was the best sentence anybody had written about Quanzhou in a decade."

Her hands were flat on the desk.

"What did you say?" Geng said.

"I said thank you."

"I know."

"I said thank you, and I asked him whether he wanted me to take it down, and he said no, and he said it was not his to give back." Her voice did not move. "I said thank you for telling me. That is what I said. Thirteen years and I have never said that out loud either, and it is the thing I have been avoiding all afternoon, and I am saying it now."

Lin Li sat with it. Zhang had not wanted to stop her writing. He had wanted it on the record that she had been told, kindly, by a man who admired the sentence, so that the stopping would be hers. She had walked into it willingly, and had been flattered to be inside it, and had been made the best in the building by it.

"And then he said the rest of it," she said. "He put the paper away and he folded his hands and he said: *the wind is changing. Fold it yourself before it's folded for you.* And then he looked at me and he said: *this isn't a warning; warnings come on letterhead.*" Her voice was level. "And I understood that he was telling me to do it myself. And that if I did it myself, nothing would happen to me. And that he was right."

She stopped.

"And then you drove me home," she said, "and you talked about your son's examination results the whole way, and I sat in the passenger seat and agreed with you about them, and I did not say one word about the blog, and neither did you."

Geng was looking at the desk.

"There," he said. "That's your half."

※

He had opened a drawer at some point while she was talking, and she had not seen him do it, which was itself a thing.

What he put on the desk was a folder. The spine of it was soft with handling, and the corners were furred, and there was no label on it. He put it down between them and did not open it, and took his hand away.

"There's a thing I have to tell you," he said, "and I have been not telling it to you for thirteen years, and I am going to tell it to you now, and you are not going to like it."

Lin Li looked at the folder. It was the colour of a thing that has been kept somewhere dark.

"Before you do," she said, "tell me one thing. The sentence. The wind line." She made herself keep her voice where it was. "Where did he get it?"

"From a man in Xiamen in 1987 who was quoting somebody he'd heard in a corridor in Canton in 1979," Geng said. "He told me that once, in 1994, when he was drunk, and he was the only person who ever told anybody. There is no author. There are only custodians."

He put one finger on the folder.

"And I am one," he said. "And now you are. And you gave it to that girl, and she will give it to somebody, and that is how it has always worked, and that is why it has never been able to be arrested."

He pushed the folder across the desk.

"Open it," he said.

CHAPTER 18

Eighteen

There were nine of them.

Typescripts, xeroxed, on paper that had gone yellow at the edges, held in a folder with a soft spine and no label. She took them out one at a time and laid them on the desk in a row, and Geng let her do it and did not help.

The first eight were undated. The ninth was dated June 1989 and was called *The Uselessness of Use*, and it was the longest, and it was the one that had stopped.

"It's not the drawer that stops in 1989," Geng said. "It's me. The drawer is just where I put it."

She picked up the ninth one and read the first paragraph.

> *The useful man is never asked what he is for. In the great accounting of the state he appears, rightly, as a sum already performed, and the arithmetic of him is not reopened. He is asked for. He is not asked about. Between those two lies the whole distance between a man and a hinge, and this distance is the only real measure of how free anybody is, and yet it is the one thing no survey has ever attempted, and no ministry has ever been established for.*

She read it three times.

Two of the sentences in it were better than anything she had read in a year. The image of the hinge was exact and it was going to stay with her for the rest of her life. And the last clause did not land — it reached for a second place to put the period and did not find one, and it pulled the whole paragraph down with it.

She put the page down.

"Well?" Geng said.

"I'd have to read the whole of it."

"That's what everybody says." He took the folder out of her hands and put the nine typescripts back into it in the order she had laid them out, which was not the order they had been in. "Twenty-one years I was the best essayist in this building, and in 1994 a man from Beijing told me I was the best he'd read since 1988, and I have never once been able to tell you whether he was right, and neither have you."

He put the folder on the desk.

"That's the whole of it. That's what's in the drawer. That's why the drawer is a drawer."

※

"My half of the tea," he said, "is short."

He had got to the room twenty minutes early, because he always did, and Zhang Wendao had already been there, and the piece of paper had already been on the table in front of him, written out in his hand, and Geng had seen it and had known exactly what was in the room.

"He'd written it out at home," Geng said. "He did that. He believed a thing spoken wasn't a thing delivered. He wrote it out in his small upright hand and he put it on the table where you'd see it and he waited for you to look at it."

"I did look at it."

"I know. I watched you look at it."

He poured three times. The first cup had gone cold while Zhang talked; the second he had poured because she had asked him to; the third he had poured because there was nothing else in the world he could do.

"And then you signed the bill," Lin Li said. "You signed—"

"I signed for the room. He paid in cash. He always paid in cash." Geng's hands were flat on the desk. "There were four chairs and he had put his coat on the fourth one, and he never took it off the coat, and nobody sat in that chair, and that was the whole of the message. He was very good."

She had not thought about the coat. She had thought about the fourth chair for thirteen years and had never once thought about the coat on it.

"And the car," Geng said.

"I know about the car."

"You don't." He looked at the window. "You went white at the door of the restaurant. By the Zhanqian bridge you had your face back and your voice back and you asked me about Mingming's mathematics." He paused. "I watched you do it in the mirror. I watched you decide. And I talked about the examination results because it was the only thing in that car."

※

"It was 1991," he said. "I sent three of them to a journal in Canton, under a name that wasn't mine. They came back in the second month with a note that said the tone was not suitable for the current climate. I did not send them anywhere again. That is the attempt that failed. There was only ever one."

He turned the folder over.

"You were twenty-four in 2013," he said. "I was twenty-four in 1989. That's the chain. A twenty-four-year-old with too many read‑ers, and a man with a drawer, and a room with four chairs and three of them used." He put one finger on the folder. "Zhang in 1989. Me in 2013. The same move, twenty-four years apart, with the same glass of tea in the middle of it. He was the senior and I poured, and he was the senior and I poured, and I have never once in my life been able to work out whether I was the senior's instrument or the senior's ex‑cuse."

"And it ends here," Lin Li said.

"It ends here," Geng said. "Not because I have got brave. Because you are thirty-seven and you found the book, and a thirty-seven-year-old with a book in a wall is not a twenty-four-year-old with a blog."

He sat back.

"I'm not brave either," he said. "I'm only tired. I have been tired since 1989 and I did not have a word for it until this morning."

※

The office had gone quiet. Down the corridor a door shut. Somewhere on another floor a proofreader was reading aloud to a partner, the way they always did: *left bracket, dash, one, two, three, full stop*.

Geng put both hands on the desk and looked at her, and she looked back, and neither of them said anything for a while, because there was a thing in the room that both of them had been walking around for twenty minutes.

"There's one more thing," he said.

"I know."

"Say it."

She put her hands flat where his had been.

"I thanked you," she said. "Both of you. At the door of the restaurant, and again in the car. I thanked him for the tea. I thanked you for the lift." Her voice did not move. "And I have never said that out loud until just now, and it is the reason I have never once been able to hate him, and it is the reason I could not let you hate yourself."

Geng had gone the colour of the desk.

"I drove you home," he said, "and you thanked me for the lift, and I have thought about that lift every week for thirteen years."

"I know," Lin Li said. "That's why I'm telling you."

※

She left the folder on his desk, because it was his, and she went out, and she did not go back to the office that afternoon.

She walked down Zhongshan Road under the arcade in the heat, past the clock tower with its four identical faces, and the smell of the incense from the Guan-Yue temple came out into the street and mixed with the smell of the frying, and the buses turned, and the whole city went on being half hearth-smoke and half immortal and entirely indifferent to her.

She got as far as thinking that she ought to write it down — the tea, the folder, the hinge, the lift — and then she understood that she had already written it down, that she had been walking around with it for thirteen years in a notebook with a blank first page, and that the blank page was no longer blank and had not been blank since Thursday.

She went home and opened the notebook and dated the page and wrote it out, all of it, in the tide-and-moon hand she had been drifting into for six months, and then she turned back to the first page and looked at the twelfth of April 2013 for a long time, and left it blank, and closed the book.

CHAPTER 19

Nineteen

The thread was still open in a tab. She had not read past the photo ‑ graph. She opened it at two in the morning and read the rest of it — all three hundred and forty replies, in order, from May 2012 to the week before — and it took two hours, and she read it the way she read everything, for what was missing.

> ***The Village Where the Houses Wear the Sea***
> *Opened 12 May 2012 by a user who is no longer active.*
> *(the whole of the post, copied out, no comment)*
> *——— 340 replies ———*

June 2012. *does anyone know where this is*

August 2012. *bump*

April 2013. *has anyone actually been?*

March 2016. *did this lane last week for a shoot. the light at five in the afternoon is not real. whoever is keeping those walls, keep them.*

August 2016. *photographer's portfolio here, same lane, second set.*

April 2017. *went. ask for the flower Ah-Ma at the second lane past the temple, everyone knows her. she'll do your flowers for nothing if you bring her a fish.*

November 2019. *there was a queue for the flowers. an actual queue.*

February 2023. *an actress did this in a magazine and now there are four hundred people a day in a lane with seventeen houses in it.*

September 2023. *unrecognisable. they've got a traffic plan.*

May 2024. *it was in the news again. the government's funding the shell repairs.*

August 2024. *second lane past the temple, ask for the flower Ah-Ma, everyone knows her.*

April 2025. *the old shell houses are being done up as guesthouses now. better late than never I suppose.*

September 2026. *anyone know if the one at the end of the lane is open yet*

She read the last one four times.

Then she went back to the beginning and read the thing that had started it, which was her, and which she had not looked at since the spring.

> ***The Village Where the Houses Wear the Sea*** *4*
> *April 2012*
> *The buses stop at the pier and after that you walk.*
> *The oysters arrived as ballast, the old men say, packed in the hulls of Song ships, and stayed on as walls. In Xunpu the sea is recycled into armor, and armor worn long enough starts to look like decoration. The walls shed the rain and keep the cool and laugh at the salt. A brick lasts a thousand years, an oyster shell ten thousand. The lane is silver in the late afternoon in a way that people now travel a long way to photograph, and nobody who lives in it thinks about it at all.*
> *The women work the flats and the men work the boats. The women shuck at their doors from before light, seated, ten hours of it, bare-handed, and the shells that come off the knife are the shells that are in the wall. They have never bound their feet. The coast has a name for that.*
> *My grandmother cannot read, and she has never once lost an argument at the fish market.*

> *I have stopped thinking of it as a lack.*
> *There is a temple across the lane with three mothers in it and a plaque from an admiral who asked them a question about a war and got an answer he liked. The roof dragons are assembled out of broken crockery that came out of the sea. There is not one oyster shell on the building. Shells are for houses.*
> *At seventy-two she still wears the morning in her hair. Come in the autumn. Bring nothing. Ask for the flower Ah-Ma at the second lane past the temple; everyone knows her.*

She read it to the end and then she sat with it, and the chain assembled itself in front of her without any help from her at all, because it had been assembling itself for fourteen years and she had simply not been in the room.

The post, in April. The copy, in May. The man with the good lens, in 2016, because the light at five in the afternoon was not real. The queue for the flowers. The actress, in 2023, and the four hundred people a day in a lane with seventeen houses in it. The traffic plan. The government funding for the shell repairs. The guesthouses, in 2025, better late than never. The investor's deck, with the photograph on the cover that she had taken herself from the lane, and the twenty-year lease, and the four guest rooms, and the whole house reroofed at the company's cost. Her own signature on the consent form in red, at the table, in the front room. Weng Jinhe's chisel on the gable end. The seam that came away in his hands. The wall behind the headboard.

There was no malice anywhere in it.

Every single link had been somebody acting out of love, or out of the ordinary pleasure of showing a stranger something good. The man who copied it out in May 2012 because he wanted other people to see it. The photographer because the light was unbelievable. The

girl in 2017 who told a stranger to ask for the flower Ah-Ma because she had been there and wanted to help, and because her grandmother would do your flowers for nothing if you brought her a fish. The investor because the village had no beds and he could see it and put one up, and the roof had waited since 2019.

Nobody had meant any of it. The chisel on the gable end of her grandmother's house was aimed, in the end, at a pale comma on the inside of a left wrist, and at a pair of hands that had shucked oysters for seventy-nine years, and at a wall that had held a book for sixty — and the thing that had aimed it was the best sentence she had ever written.

She put her hands flat on the table and did not move them for a long time.

※

She went looking for the textual history at half past three, because there was nothing else to do with her hands.

The Wanli edition of 1590, printed at Macheng. The destruction order of 1602. The second search-and-burn of 1625, the one that reached the *Cangshu*. And then the thing she had not known, which was the reason any of it had survived at all.

The book had left home.

A copy of the *Cangshu* reached Korea in 1614, and the Korean envoy who got hold of it wrote one character on its first page, meaning *marvellous*, and carried it home. A Japanese scholar in 1859 acquired the *Fenshu* and the sequel, hand-copied all four volumes of the *Cangshu*, and taught it to eighty students in a village school, and some of those students went into the remaking of the Japanese state. Twenty-one monographs in a hundred years. A country that had never once been Quanzhou had kept him better than Quanzhou had.

Lin Li sat with that.

The book had gone out of this city and across two seas and been copied out by hand by a man who had never been here, and had come

back in the twentieth century as a scholarly edition and a plaque and a research society and a museum with six halls and a shop selling postcards to schoolchildren. And it had never once been safe at home.

And the copy in the jar in the wall was the same move, made by a woman in a lane with no access to either sea.

Not Japan. A wall. Not across the water. Into the body of the house. The book had left the bedroom and gone into the bedroom's own substance, and gone to where the light was not and the chisel had not yet been, and had lain there at a woman's ear for sixty years, and had come up into the air in a courtyard in the ninth moon with the tide at its lowest.

And the irony of it, which she did not write down and did not need to, was that the same city that had built a museum to the man had put a chisel through the wall that had actually kept his book.

She shut the laptop at four. The buses had stopped. The street was doing the thing it did between the last bus and the first, which was nothing at all.

CHAPTER 20

Twenty

Her father met her at the Chen-Dai bus stop in a car he had driven for eleven years, and he had brought a hard hat for her, which she did not wear, and he took her not to an office but to a yard.

"They don't do the tours any more," he said. "They did the tours in 2004."

The yard was behind a factory gate on a road of factory gates, and behind the gate were stacks of corrugated boxes four high, and a machine loading them into a container, and beyond the container the estuary, grey and wide, with a ship at the anchor that was the colour of the ship that had been at the anchor in every photograph of this water since the Song.

"It's the same water," her father said. He had to shout it, over the machine. "Your man's ships went out of here with silk and porcelain under them and came home with scent in the hold and shells in the bilge. Same water. Same arithmetic."

He put his hand on a box.

"Twenty thousand pairs in that one. Forty foot. The plant does one pair every four seconds and this town does one pair every — " he paused, doing it, the way he had done it at her age at a kitchen table, "— one every second and a bit. Ten thousand million a year. Every fifth shoe in the world."

"How many boxes?"

"That's the arithmetic," he said, and was pleased, and did it, and came out with a number in the thousands of boxes a day, and then a number of ships a day, and then a number that was the same order of magnitude as the ships in the Song records, and Lin Li stood in the yard with her hair coming down and did the comparison the way she

did every comparison, which was to find the thing that had not changed.

The water had not changed. The arithmetic had not changed. A great deal had been shipped out of this estuary by a great many people who were not asked, and in 1557 two girls in Henan had died of a drought while the canal that would have watered them was carrying grain past their field to a place that could pay.

"You've been quiet," her father said. "You've been quiet since May."

"I'm writing."

"Writing." He said it the way he said the names of brands that had failed. *Three-day shoes. Over-the-street shoes.* "Words are for contracts, Lin Li. A word you can't invoice is a word you can't collect on."

She had heard it all her life. She had heard it from him and she had heard it from her mother in the other register, the household's two versions of the same bet, and she had never once, until that moment, in a yard with a machine loading a container, worked out what the bet had cost.

He had won the district essay competition at fourteen. She had the certificate somewhere — she had read it once, at fourteen herself, in a drawer, in her father's house, and understood without anybody telling her that in 1979, the year fourteen men in this town each put two thousand yuan into a stone house and started the first shoe factory in Jinjiang, her father had been the best writer in the family, and had never written anything again that was not an invoice.

He took a shoe off the end of the line and gave it to her. Size forty, white with a grey heel, still warm from the mould.

"Put it on your table," he said. "Remind you what the water's for."

※

She wrote #218 that night, in the flat, with the shoe on the table beside the laptop.

#218 — Clothing and food

There is a shoe on my table. Size forty, white with a grey heel, off the end of a line in a town fifteen minutes inland from the water it was shipped out of. The plant turns out one pair every four seconds and packs twenty thousand pairs into each box, and every fifth sports shoe in the world comes off this coast, and the boxes go down to the port on the road my grandfather drove me down on Thursday.

I got it from my father. He was born four miles from the birthplace of the man this city is celebrating this year, and he has never in his life written a sentence he was not paid for, and he won the district essay competition at fourteen, in 1979, and put the pen down.

In 1556 the man went alone to a county in Henan to teach at the county school, and left his wife and his three daughters on a few mu of land in a district that was going to have a drought. The drought came. The local officials were diverting the field irrigation into the grain-transport canal, to extort the county, and he went and begged on the county's behalf, and was refused, and he would not ask for water for his own few acres — because, as he wrote, how could he bear to watch ten thousand acres and see only his own watered?

He was three hundred miles away, burying his grandfather, when two of his daughters starved to death. The wife and the eldest girl lived on what friends brought them.

He was thirty. He never got over it. Everything he wrote afterwards about the family is shadowed by it, and the sentence of his that this city uses most — the one printed on cards in the drawers of half the editorial offices in

Fujian, with no name on it and no date on it — is this one: clothing and food are the moral order.
He did not mean it as an economics. He meant it as a wound. For him the question of dinner was the whole of ethics, and it had been settled the other way, by a canal, in a year when he was doing his duty and did not exceed it.
This city took his economics. It took the sentence about self-interest being the human heart and it built the factories on it, and the boxes go out full and the money comes home, and there is a hall in the museum in the old city that calls him a pioneer of legitimate self-interest, which is true, and is also the safest thing anybody has ever said about him.
It left the razor in the corridor.

She posted it at half past eleven and closed the laptop and did not look at it again, and the shoe sat on the table with the shell at the other end of it, warm from a mould in a town that made one pair every four seconds.

※

Geng came to the lane on the Friday, about the roof.

He had the schedule printed out, and the third of November was on it in his own hand, and he put it on the table in the front room where the plastic was, and sat down, and did not pour, because there was nobody to pour for him.

“Your grandmother is eighty-six,” he said. “The roof goes on on the third of November. The company’s schedule is real, the money is real, and the bucket is real.” He turned the schedule around so it faced her. “If you take a razor into that committee room before November, the schedule is off the table inside a week. You know it. I am not going to pretend to you that I don’t know it.”

"I'm not going to take a razor anywhere."

"You are," Geng said. "You are going to take it into a committee room in April, and I will be in it, and I will listen to you do it, and I will not stop you." He looked at her. "And I am saying the other thing plainly, one time, because Zhang is dead and I am allowed. The roof comes first. It should come first. A winter with a bucket is not a metaphor, and you of all people know what a metaphor costs."

"That isn't the argument."

"It's half the argument," Geng said. "It is the half nobody says out loud, because it isn't as interesting as the other half."

Lin Li sat with the schedule in front of her. The third of November was a real date. The bucket under the landing ceiling had been moved twice. Her grandmother had signed a lease and bargained the quiet hours from ten to eleven and got the roof date out of a year and into a day, and had not once mentioned that there was a book in the wall she was bargaining over.

Geng picked the schedule up and put it in his folder.

"I'm not going to hold it against you," he said. "Whichever way it goes. I held something against Zhang for thirty-seven years and it did not stop him doing anything."

He went out. At the corner he stopped and looked back at the door with the three layers on it, and the mason's chisel going behind it, and the blue plastic hanging in the doorway and moving, and he did not say anything, and got into the car, and sat in it for a while before he started it.

CHAPTER 21

Twenty-One

Three weeks after the telling, Ah-ma had taken the book back and put it in the wall herself.

She had done the seal with her husband's putty and the flat of a knife, the way she had done it in 1966, and Weng Jinhe had reset the shells over the seam in the old pattern, and the mason had stood back and looked at it for a long time and said nothing, because by then Weng Jinhe had worked out what kind of a wall this was.

She had not asked Lin Li. She had simply done it, and Lin Li had not argued, because she had spent years arguing with the world and had learned, in one autumn, what arguing with her grandmother cost.

※

Ama Says came on the Thursday, with a ring light and a girl from Yunlu who held a reflector, and Danran directed it from a stool with her phone on a tripod and the whole of her attention.

It was called *Ama Says*. It had ninety thousand followers and it had begun, Lin Li had gathered, when Danran was nineteen and had filmed her grandmother shucking at a doorstep for forty seconds and had put it up with the caption about the hands, and it had been going ever since.

The episode was about the flowers.

"Tell them the order," Danran said. "From the outside in."

"Jasmine is the biggest," Ah-ma said, to the lens, comfortably, from her stool at the doorstep with the shells at her feet and the afternoon going silver on the wall behind her. "Then the magnolia. Then the little white ones, the mosquito ones, that you only get in the ninth moon. The chrysanthemum is last and it is the one that lasts."

"And what do they mean?"

"They don't mean. They're flowers." Ah-ma did the thing with her hands. "You put them on because they're pretty, and when one dies you put another on, and that's the whole of the art. There's no writing. Nobody wrote anything down."

She said it beautifully. She had been saying it for sixty years, to a camera's worth of people — to markets, to committees, to a magis - trate, to a girl with a good lens, to a deck with a lease in it — and she had never once been less than perfect at it, and Lin Li stood in the doorway of the front room with the plastic over the good wall and listened to the craft of it.

"There's no writing," Ah-ma said again, amused at herself, and glanced, for a quarter of a second, at the wall behind her left shoulder.

The seam was there. The shells were reset in the old pattern and the putty was tooled smooth and the mortar was the glutinous-rice lime, and there was nothing, in that wall, that a mason of thirty years' standing could have found if he had not been the mason who had found it in the first place.

And the book was lying at her ear.

"Ask my granddaughter," Ah-ma said, to the lens, delighted with herself. "She knows all the characters."

Danran turned the camera on Lin Li, and Lin Li put her hand up, and Danran turned it back, and they shot the flowers for another twenty minutes, and then Yu the coiffeur came in from two doors down with a customer, and the light went off, and the afternoon went on.

※

In the office on the Friday, Danran was out at the village, and the printer on Lin Li's own desk had jammed, and she went across to Danran's machine and knelt down by it with the tray open.

The strips of paper were above her head.

She had crossed them with her eye a thousand times in four months, the way an eye crosses a price list. She looked at them now.

There were six or seven of them, taped to the plaster with four small squares of tape, curled at the edges in the way of paper that has been in the sun for a long time. They were printouts, in the dot-matrix grey of a printer that had not existed since the 2010s, of a blog that had been deleted in April 2013.

They were hers.

> *My grandmother cannot read, and she has never once lost an argument at the fish market.*
> *At seventy-two she still wears the morning in her hair.*
> *I have never been able to decide whether Quanzhou is a city that kept its religions or a city that ate them and kept the plates.*
> *A brick lasts a thousand years, an oyster shell ten thousand. Nobody in this lane has ever said it and everybody in this lane knows it.*
> *The city does not commemorate what it loved. It commemorates what it could not stop.*

She read them standing up, with her hand on the printer tray.

She knew the cadence. She had written it, in a flat at the top of her mother's building, in the mornings before work, at twenty-six, with the returnee's cold eye, and the cadence had come out of her in a particular shape — the short clause first, and then the longer one that turned it over — and she had not seen the shape in thirteen years, and here it was, six times over, taped to a plaster wall above a twenty-four-year-old's monitor, curled and sun-faded and nine years old.

Danran had been eleven when the blog was deleted. She would have been twelve when she started printing the forum copies. Thir -

teen years of keeping them. Nine years of carrying them, from desk to desk, and taping them up in every room she had ever worked in.

She fixed the printer. She put the tray back. She went to her own desk and did not take one of them down, and did not photograph them, and did not send an email to anybody, and did not put a note in the notebook.

She sat with the entry open in front of her and the red pen in her hand, and understood the arithmetic of what she had done without being able to say it to anyone: her own voice had been on that wall for nine years, kept by a child who had never met her, while she had spent the same nine years in the same room being the most reliable editor in the building. Sixty thousand readers once. Ninety thousand on Danran's channel now. And Lin Li was known to neither.

It was not only shame. The shame was there and it was large. Under it, smaller and colder, was the other thing: if she said *I wrote those*, then she was the person who had written them, and the person who had written them had been folded once already in a private room over a lazy susan, and had let herself be folded, and had deleted the whole archive herself at post two hundred and thirteen, and had never written another public sentence for thirteen years.

She was not going to hand that to anyone. Not to Danran. Not to Geng. Not to a committee.

She left the strips exactly where they were.

Danran came back at four with a card full of footage and a com‑plaint about the light, and sat down at her desk and put her feet up on the drawer, and the strips of paper were above her head.

"You look like you've read something," Danran said.

"I've been reading proofs."

Danran accepted it. She turned to her machine and began to scrub the timeline, and the light from the screen came up onto the plaster above her, and arrived, slowly, on the curled grey strips of Lin Li's own dead sentences, and Lin Li watched the light get to them and did not say anything at all.

INTERLUDE 2

Interlude II

A memorial to the Wanli throne, in the intercalary second month of the thirtieth year of the reign, from the remonstrating official of the Board of Rites, Zhang Wenda. Text as preserved in the Veritable Records. Copied by the same hand as the account of the death, at the back of the volume, among the blank leaves.

> *Li Zhi held office in his vigorous years and shaved his head in his later ones. Of late he has furthermore printed the Cangshu, the Fenshu, and certain other works, which circulate throughout the empire and delude the minds of men.*
> *He takes Lü Buwei and Li Yuan for men of resource; Li Si for a man of talent; Feng Dao for a recluse in office; Zhuo Wenjun for a woman who chose her mate well; the First Emperor of Qin for the emperor of ten thousand ages; and the rights and wrongs of Confucius for insufficient authority. Wild, absurd and contrary, his works cannot but be destroyed.*
> *What is most hateful is this. Lodging at Macheng, he conducts himself without restraint, associating with worthless men in convents, bringing singing girls, bathing with them at midday, drawing the wives and daughters of gentlemen into the convents to hear his doctrine, some of them bringing quilts and pillows and staying the night, so that the whole district is as if mad. He has also composed a work called Questions of Guanyin, and the Guanyins of whom he speaks are the wives and daughters of gentlemen.*

> *It is further reported that he is about to move to Tongzhou, forty li from the capital. Should he once enter the capital gates, those whom he draws in and deludes will be a second Macheng. I beg that Your Majesty command the Board of Rites to direct the local officers of Tongzhou to have Li Zhi escorted back to his native place for punishment; and command, throughout the two capitals and every provincial administration commission, that the books he has printed, together with any unprinted manuscripts found in his house, be searched out and entirely burned and not be suffered to remain, so that calamity is not transmitted to those who come after. The world would be fortunate indeed.*

The rescript is in the emperor's own hand, and it is the emperor, not the memorial, who coins the charge:

> ***Li Zhi dares to champion chaotic doctrines, deluding the age and deceiving the people.*** *Let the factory guards and the five wards arrest him strictly and punish him. As for his books, printed and unprinted, let the officers of every place search them out and burn them all, and permit none to be kept. If any follower or accomplice shelters or secretly conceals them, let the censorate and the several officers investigate, memorialise, and punish accordingly.*

※

CHAPTER 22

Twenty-Two

She wrote #219 on the Saturday, in the flat, with the shoe on the table and the shell at the other end of it, and it took her four hours and she got it right on the second attempt, and she posted it at nine in the evening and went to bed.

> ***#219 — The shave***
> *He was taken at Tongzhou in the intercalary second month of 1602, and he was carried in on a door, being too sick to walk. The sentence was escort back to his native place. Not prison. Not death. A journey. He was seventy-six years old.*
> *He asked the barber for a shave.*
> *He took the razor out of the barber's hand and cut his own throat. He did not die at once. He lingered, and asked what day it was, and wrote four lines in answer. Asked why he had done it, he indicated that a man of seventy-six has nothing left to seek.*
> *That is the received account. I have seen it in three sources and it is the same in all three. It is not in the approved corpus of this city, which is four folders in a box in a store off a stairwell, and which says that his works circulated widely, and gives the year of his death as 1602 with no month, day or place. The panel in the new museum says he was arrested and died while being escorted back to his native place. The entry the committee is cutting for the quincentenary says the same and specifies nothing, and its closing sentence is*

> *that his thought contained progressive elements and his limitations were those of his class and age.*
> *I am not going to tell you why he took the razor. I have read the letters and the essays and the famine material and I still do not know, and anybody who tells you they know is selling something.*
> *But I will tell you what the sentence does. A man prints a book called a book to burn, because it offends the ear and enters the heart. A censor memorialises. An emperor orders the books burned, printed and unprinted, and orders him escorted home. He goes. He asks for a shave. He takes the razor himself.*
> *He held the knife himself. He was not going to let them do it to him. That is the sentence this city has spent four hundred years editing out, and it is the reason he is still here.*

The charge, she had looked it up, and the four characters were the rescript's, and not the memorial's — the memorial asked for the escort and the burning, and the emperor supplied the four charac‑ ters. Every local account she had ever edited had it the other way round, and she had never corrected one of them, and she had not been asked to.

※

It was gone by eleven.

Two hours. She had written it in four hours over two attempts and it had stood for two hours.

She saw it at eleven, when she went to check the counter, and the counter was not there, and in its place, on a white page, in the platform's ordinary face:

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

She read it four times. It was the first time she had ever been the subject of one. It took, she thought, four seconds to deliver and no time at all to compose, and there was no author's name on it and no date and no article number, and no line saying who had decided, and no line saying when, and no line saying what to do next except the appeal.

She had spent thirteen years as the person who wrote those lines for other people. She had written them into readers and onto panels and into the caption of a video, and she had always written them the same way, in the same order, with the same words, because the words were not hers to choose. She had known for thirteen years what the notice was and how it worked and what happened after it.

She had never once been on the other side of it.

She appealed, because there was an appeal, and because she was an editor and the appeal was a form and she filled it in correctly, in her own careful hand, with the date and the account and the ground, and the ground was that everything in it was documented.

The reply came in eleven minutes, and it was not a reply.

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

Eleven minutes. It had been two hours from publication to removal and eleven minutes from appeal to acknowledgement, and both intervals had been chosen by a system that had been tuned, over fifteen years, to be exactly fast enough to stop a thing spreading and exactly courteous enough to look like a process.

She read that one twice, and then she shut the laptop, and sat in the dark with the street doing nothing, and did not sleep.

She thought about the emperor's rescript. It had taken, in 1602, from the intercalary second month to the sixteenth of the third month for the books to be burned and the man to be dead, and that had been the *fast* response, the one that historians wrote about as remarkable. Four hundred and twenty-five years later the same operation, on the same subject, took two hours.

She lay in the dark and was almost, for a moment — professionally, from a distance, the way an editor admires a well-set page — impressed.

※

By the morning there were forty of them.

Screenshots. Re-encoded images, the pixels altered so the picture would not match the picture. Cross-posts, and a page on a code repository that had the whole of it as plain text, and a capture on an archive, and a mirror in an overseas aggregator, and a forum thread that had renamed it. The original had been gone eleven hours and had been read more in those eleven hours than in the whole of the year.

"They can't keep up," Danran said, at her desk, at half past nine. She was furious, and it was not Lin Li's fury, and Lin Li watched her be furious with it and did not take any of it. "Forty mirrors in one night. Forty."

"They'll keep up until it stops being read."

"They'll keep up forever. That's the whole point of a mirror." Danran turned her phone round and pushed it across the desk. "Look. Look at this one. They've put the death account in a different font and they've got four hundred comments."

Lin Li looked. She did not touch the phone.

"Danran," she said. "The one who pulled it. Who was she?"

"My cousin knows her. Yanyan. She's at the vendor, two desks over from review." Danran took the phone back. "She's twenty-nine. She's been doing review four years and she reads every single thing —

all of it, top to bottom, she doesn't skip. Yanyan says she's the best reader in the building and she's on the lowest pay band."

She looked at Lin Li, and there was something in her face that was not quite the story.

"She read it twice," Danran said. "Yanyan says she read it twice before she actioned it. And then she said something to Yanyan, in the queue. She said: I know this one. I read him in school."

Lin Li sat down at her own desk.

"And then she deleted it," Danran said. "She read him in school, and then she deleted him, and then she read him again on somebody's mirror at her break, and Yanyan says she's not the only one."

"Don't write about her," Lin Li said.

"I wasn't going to."

"Don't. Not the name, not the vendor, not the two desks." Lin Li heard her own voice doing the office thing and could not stop it. "If you put her in it, she's the story, and she isn't the story."

Danran looked at her for a moment with the frankness she had.

"You're right," she said. "I'm angry."

"I know."

"I mean I'm actually angry. Not performing."

"I know," Lin Li said. "So am I."

And that was true, and it was the only thing she had said to Danran in two days that was entirely true, and it cost her nothing to say, because it was the one sentence in the whole matter that she was allowed.

Danran went back to her machine. Lin Li opened the entry, and took the red pen, and found that her hand was perfectly steady, and was pleased about it, and did not examine that either.

CHAPTER 23

Twenty-Three

In the twelfth moon she stopped shucking.

It did not happen all at once. The mornings got shorter, and then the sitting got shorter, and then one Tuesday in the eleventh moon Lin Li came down at four and found the knife lying on the step beside the basin and her grandmother sitting on the stool with her hands in her lap, looking at the flats, and the auntie two doors down doing the talking for both of them.

She could still hold a cup. She could still shell a bowl of peanuts. What she could not do, any more, was the thing she had done for seventy-nine years at ten hours a day, which was to put a blade into a hinge and twist.

Lin Li took the knife off the step and washed it and put it in her grandmother's apron pocket, and neither of them said anything about it, and went inside.

※

The roof was on.

It had gone on on the third of November, as written, in red, on a schedule in a folder, and the bucket under the landing ceiling was gone and had been gone for two months, and the stair did not smell of wet plaster, and the front rooms were fitted out and had a counter and a kettle and a young woman from the tourism bureau coming on Saturdays to check the fire extinguishers.

Geng's argument had expired in November and neither of them had mentioned it since.

She took the book out of the wall on the second day of the big ebb, with the mason's chisel, and she did the opening herself, and Ah-ma watched her do it and did not help, and the shells came away in her

hands the way old wax comes away, and the crock was sitting in the cavity where it had sat for sixty years, and she took it out and unwrapped it and put the book on the table.

It had gone back into the dark and come out again, and this time there was writing on the leaves that had not been there before, and the writing was her grandmother's, and it was in the middle of the book and not on a blank leaf, because the blank leaves were for the future and the line she had written was for the past.

※

Ah-ma dictated it on the third night, with the tide at its lowest and the flat bare out to the horizon and the channels full of the last of the light.

She sat at the table with the book open in front of her and her hands flat on either side of it, and Lin Li sat opposite with the pen.

"You write," Ah-ma said. "My hand won't go."

It was the first time she had said so out loud.

The pen was black hard rubber, with a gold nib, and it was heavier than a modern pen, and the nib was worn — worn at an angle, on one side, by sixty years of another woman's hand — and Lin Li's fingers did not sit on it naturally, and had to be put, and Ah-ma put them, with her own stiff fingers on top of Lin Li's fingers, and moved them to the angle.

"There," she said.

And then she dictated it, slowly, in the voice she used for other people's words, with her eyes on the book and not on her granddaughter.

> *Teacher, you said keep it until reading was safe. It never became safe. I kept it anyway. It was not the life you meant for me. It was the one you gave me.*

She stopped. Lin Li's hand had stopped too.

"Go on," Ah-ma said. "The last part. Your part."

And Lin Li wrote it, in the careful upright hand she had known since she was six, in a hand that was her grandmother's and was now also hers:

> *spoken by your student of the temple class, written by her granddaughter, on the big ebb*

※

She put the pen down and took out her phone, because she was an editor and she looked things up.

She had never once looked up his name. She had written it a hundred times. She had written it in entries and on panels and in readers, and she had never once looked up the character in it.

She looked it up now, with the pen still warm in her other hand.

Lin Zaizhi. The name at birth. The last character of it.

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

She sat with the phone in her hand.

The gift. The thing a student carries to a teacher on the first day, to say that the relationship is real and that it is not going to be pretended away. It was in his name from birth. He had gone through the whole of his life being called *the offering*, and had never been glossed for it in any document she had ever edited.

And she was sitting in her grandmother's bedroom with her grandmother's pen in her hand, having just written down a sentence dictated by the student of a woman who had been dead for fifty-eight years, in a book that had come from a bundle of garbage and out of a wall, on a big ebb in the twelfth moon.

The gift a disciple brings.

She had spent a working lifetime being the most reliable editor in the building, and she had never once brought anything to anybody.

※

She tried, then, to say something in Mandarin, and could not get it out.

What came out instead was the Minnan of the lane, which she had trained out of her mouth at nineteen and had not put back in twenty years, and it came out easily and without any warning at all, the way a thing comes back.

"Then tell her," Lin Li said. "Tell her I heard it."

Ah-ma looked at her. She did not remark on the language. She answered in the same language, which was hers, and had been hers all along, and had been spoken to her for seventy-nine years by a woman she had let believe otherwise.

"I heard you," Ah-ma said. "Tell her yourself."

And that was the whole of it, and the lamp was turned down, and the water lay out to the horizon and was not coming in for six hours, and the big ebb of the twelfth moon was the lowest of the autumn and neither of them had aimed it and both of them knew it.

Lin Li put the book in her bag. She put the pen in her bag. She went out to the sea wall and stood in the dark until the tide turned, and did not write anything down, and did not need to.

CHAPTER 24

Twenty-Four

She died on the last day of the twelfth moon, at ten past four in the morning, with the year turning and the light not yet up.

Lin Li was asleep in the chair by the bed, with the book on her knees.

She had stopped sleeping in the bed three nights before, not be - cause anyone had asked her to but because the bed was needed, and the chair was hard, and she had slept in it badly, and the tide had come in and gone out twice while she was in it.

She woke at four because her neck was bad, and shifted, and the book slid off her knees, and she put her hand out to catch it, and the room was wrong.

The generators at the pier had not started. The bed was making no sound.

That was all. There were no last words, because there had been last words on the third night of the big ebb and they had been written down and they had been final; there was no hand to hold, because the hands had been finished for a month.

She went down to the courtyard and washed her face at the tap, and the water was cold, and she stood in the dark with her hands dripping, and did not cry, and went on standing there.

The courtyard was the same. The shell piles were still there, forty pounds of them, drying where they had been drying since the au - tumn. The bucket was gone from the landing ceiling. The front rooms had a counter and a kettle and a set of four towels folded in the wrong way. The door with three layers on it stood shut. Somewhere out on the flats a boat engine started and then stopped and then started again.

She stood in the middle of it all with her hands dripping and did not cry and did not feel anything she could have named, and the not-crying was not discipline and it was not shock; it was the plain fact of the room. The room had been her grandmother's for eighty-six years and it did not know.

Then she went and woke the auntie two doors down.

※

The auntie came in a coat over her nightclothes and did not say anything sympathetic, which was the kindest thing anybody did that morning, and she looked at the room and said, "Ah," and went out and made the telephone calls, and by six the lane had the news of it the way the lane always had the news, which was from one doorway to the next, in the eleven minutes before the generators.

A woman Lin Li did not know came and stood in the lane and cried, and was let in, and sat on the stool, and was given tea, and it turned out her mother had shelled at that step in the 1950s, and she had come because she had heard.

By seven the lane knew, because the auntie two doors down had told the auntie beside her, and by nine the uncle had come on the first bus with his folder and his twist of Anxi tea, and he did not take the tea out, and by ten the mother had come, and had stood in the doorway of the room, and had not gone in.

She looked at the bed for a long time.

Then she looked at the wall behind the headboard — at the seam where the chisel had been, at the shells reset in the old pattern — and stood looking at it for longer than she looked at the bed.

Then she went out to the courtyard and sat down on the stool with the knife and the basin, which nobody had moved, and did not pick either of them up.

There was a form. There were two men from the subdistrict office, one of whom was young and had plainly never done this in a house with a stranger in it, and one of whom had. The young one kept say-

ing *the deceased's relative*, and the older one corrected him twice gently, and on the third time the young one got it right and said *granddaughter*, and Lin Li signed where she was told to sign, and the date was the last day of the twelfth moon, and nobody in the room remarked on it.

The book was in her bag. The pen was in her bag. She had not put the book back into the crock, and she had not put it back into the wall, and she was not going to. Someone from the subdistrict office asked what was in the bag, because it was on the form, and she said "papers," which was true, and he wrote it down, and it was the last time in her life that anybody asked her about the book without knowing what it was.

There was no *shui* and no chair and no paper sedan, because the body was not going anywhere until the third moon, and because the geomancer's hour was in March, and because the natal kin had to assent, and because nobody is buried across the turning of a year. What there was instead was a room, and a form, and a small electric heater that somebody put in the corner and nobody plugged in, and the waiting.

She had sixty days of waiting ahead of her. She wrote the panel copy in it.

※

She went down to the sea wall at the turn of the tide, in the afternoon, and sat on it with her legs hanging over the water.

The flats were going back under. The channels that had twisted in the last light six days before were filling from the seaward end. The oyster stones were covered. The women were not out on them, because it was the last day of the year and the lane was doing other things, and because there was nothing to be got off a flat that was under four feet of water.

The tide had been at its lowest on the third night of the big ebb, with her grandmother's stiff fingers on her fingers on a pen. It had

come in ever since. It would keep coming in until the eighth day, and then it would go out again, and it would do that twice a day until there was nobody left in the lane to notice it.

Ah-ma had kept time by it for eighty-six years. Not the reign year and not the Gregorian and not the committees'. The moon and the water. She had known every day of her life, to within the quarter of an hour, what the estuary was doing — which hour the boats could go, which hour the flats would be walkable, which night the water would be at its furthest out.

And the last thing she ever wrote was dated to it.

On the big ebb. Not a day. Not a year. The water.

Lin Li sat on the wall and watched the water come up over the stones, and did not write it down, and did not need to: the tide would do it again in six hours, and again after that, and there was nobody left alive who would read it in her grandmother's language, and there was not going to be one for a very long time.

Behind her, the lane was doing what a lane does on the last day of a year. Somebody burning paper at a threshold. A child being told to come in. And at four, on the tide, the generators starting up at the pier for the dusk boats — at four, on the tide, as they had started at four every day of her grandmother's life.

The water came up over the oyster stones and covered them, and went on up.

※

Part Two ends here.

PART THREE — XU FENSHU

※

CHAPTER 25

Twenty-Five

They buried her on the second day of the third moon, two days before Qingming, in a grave cut into the hill above the oyster flats, with the empty place beside it kept for her husband, who went into the water in 1983 and never came back.

The burial had waited. It waited for the assent of the natal kin, because a dead woman in this country waits for the house she came out of before she is put in the ground; it waited for a geomancer's date; and it waited because nobody is buried across the turning of a year. She had died on the last night of the twelfth moon and had lain in the house for sixty days, and in those sixty days Lin Li had written the panel copy for the museum and sat beside the bed in the chair and read the whole of the volume twice, and the year had turned, and the committee had taken the entry to its second round, and nothing had been decided.

The lane had been preparing since the New Year. There is a machinery for a death in a place like this one, and it is the same machinery as for a wedding, and it runs on flowers.

※

The flowers came from Yunlu by the vanload, and they came before light, and Shi Lihua had been up since four with a basin and a knife and the ledger.

Lin Li went down to the shop at six and found her threading rings on hemp cord, working fast, with a girl from the village holding the bun steady.

"Jasmine for the outer ring," Shi Lihua said, not looking up. "Magnolia for the second. She liked the yellow chrysanthemum for the third. That one's for the shop." She nodded at the girl. "That one's

for the family. Two rings on the family's, three on yours, because you're the granddaughter and the granddaughter counts double, and that's not me, that's the rule."

She had the ledger open on the bench beside her, and Lin Li looked at it for the first time.

It was a school exercise book with a printed cover, and in it, in Shi Lihua's hand, were the flowers of the lane, family by family, funeral by funeral, going back years: who asked, and for whom, and which rings, and in what order, and what colour for a daughter and what for a grandson and what for a great-grandson, and the quantity, which encoded the closeness and which everybody in the lane could read at twenty paces.

It was the village's other archive. Ah-ma's own family's entry was on the page for her husband's mother, in 1998, in Shi Lihua's predecessor's hand, and the entry for her husband himself was not in the book at all, because there had been no body and therefore no flowers.

"Write hers," Lin Li said.

"I've written it." Shi Lihua turned the ledger round. *Huang Ama, end of the lane. Granddaughter present. Three rings. Yellow third.* "It's written."

※

By nine the mourners were coming up the lane, and they were all wearing flowers.

That was the part Lin Li had not been prepared for. Everybody in the lane who had ever had a death in it had brought flowers, and they were wearing them — in the hair, on the coat, in the buttonhole — and the quantity on each person said, to the whole lane, exactly how close they had been and how far they had come and whether they were owed a ring or owed a debt. A woman from three villages over arrived with one ring on her collar and was visibly, correctly, ashamed of it. A man Lin Li did not know arrived with four and stood near the front and said nothing to anybody.

They came in wearing the same flowers they would have worn at her wedding, in the same order, at the same quantity. It was the most ordinary thing in the world and it had been going on for four hundred years, and Lin Li stood at the gate and watched her grandmother's closeness to the lane arrive, bloom by bloom, and be counted.

Danran was there. She had come with a ring light and no tripod and had put the ring light away in the car when she saw the flowers, and she was standing at the back with her hands in her sleeves, and Lin Li saw her and looked away.

※

The eulogy was hers. Nobody had asked her; it had simply been assumed, in the way things are assumed in a lane, and the auntie two doors down had made her a bowl of something and sat her down at the table in the front room at ten and said, "You'll want to say something," and had gone out.

She stood up on the step, with the lane in front of her and the flowers on it and the flats lying out to the horizon behind, and she said:

"She came into the world in the year of the dragon, in the house at the end of the lane, and she went out of it in the last hour of the last day of the year."

"She worked the flats from before she was six years old until the twelfth moon of this one. She never bound her feet. She was the best shucker in this lane for sixty of those years, and the price of fish was settled by her at the pier twice a week, and she knew the state of the water to within the quarter of an hour, every day, for as long as any of us has been alive."

"There are things I am not going to say today, because today is not for them. There is one thing I am not going to say because I have only just learned it myself. And there is one thing I am not going to say because it is not mine to say."

"But everybody in this lane knows what she was."

She stopped. The lane was quiet. Somewhere out on the flats a boat engine.

"At eighty-six she still wore the morning in her hair."

That was the whole of it. She had written four paragraphs and had said the last line instead, and the auntie two doors down, who had known her for eighty years, nodded once, and the mourners put their hands up to their heads, and the flowers moved all down the lane at once, the way a field moves.

Danran, at the back, had gone very still. Lin Li saw it and did not understand it, and would not understand it for another four days.

※

Her mother said her one line at the grave, after the rope was given to the sons and before the school of mourners went up the hill.

She had been in the house all morning and had not gone into the room, and she had sat on the stool in the courtyard with the knife and the basin, and had not picked either of them up, and now she stood at the lip of the grave in the white that a daughter wears, with her hands empty.

"I knew," she said.

Nobody moved. The priest was counting out something under his breath and stopped.

"I was eight years old. It was 1972. I found her." Her voice did not go up and did not go down. "I kept it for her for fifty-five years and I was never asked and I was never thanked, and I have carried it, and I would like it written in the book."

She looked at Shi Lihua when she said *the book*, and Shi Lihua, who was standing at the back with the ledger in her hand, nodded once.

"She took me out of school the week after," her mother said. "I have thought about that every week of my life. You may all think about it too."

And that was all, and she stepped back from the lip of the grave, and the daughters-in-law took the rope, and the burial went on, and nobody in the lane said anything to her about it, and several of them looked at the wall of the house at the end of the lane, and then away.

※

Huang Kun was seventy-nine and he was standing by the gate of the lane with his hands behind his back, in the posture of a man who has stood at a great many gates.

Lin Li went and stood beside him. They watched the road for a while. Behind them the mourners were going up the hill in the order of closeness, and the flowers were moving on the slope above the flats, and the tide was out.

"He was seventeen," Huang Kun said.

"I know."

"He read the tide wrong. Flood where it said ebb. And they came a day and a half late, and that was the third night, and that was the only reason there was a third night." He stopped.

"That was the third night," Lin Li said.

"And nobody corrected him." His jaw worked. "Not one person in this lane corrected a boy who had the almanac upside down. Not the abbot, not his own father, not me. I was nineteen and I had the armband on and I had the list in my hand and I heard him say it, and I let him say it, and we all let him say it, and we came a day and a half late, and I have wanted to say that out loud in this lane for sixty years."

He stopped again. His hands were behind his back and the knuckles were white.

"And I'm not going to say it now," he said.

"No," Lin Li said.

"I've carried it sixty years and I'm not going to put it down in front of her."

"No," Lin Li said. "You're not."

And she stood beside him and did not help him and did not look at him, and watched the road, and he watched it too, and neither of them said anything else, and after a while he took his hands from behind his back and went up the hill to the grave, and stood at the back, and said nothing, and came down again.

That was the closest he came, and it was the closest anybody came all day, and it was about a boy with an almanac.

※

The uncle had been in charge since dawn. He had moved the tables, and directed the parking, and settled a dispute about a ring with two sentences, and stood at the gate receiving people in the black armband of the men of the lineage.

He found Lin Li at the grave and stood beside her and did not say anything kind, because he was not a man who said kind things, and then he said:

"She'd have hated all this."

"She'd have hated the flowers," Lin Li said. "She wouldn't have hated the counting."

The uncle's face did the thing it did. "She invented the counting," he said. "Sixty years she's been correcting the order of the rings at other people's funerals. I've seen her do it. She'd have counted ours."

And he went off to direct the parking again, and left her at the grave.

※

They filled it in before the tide turned, because the geomancer's hour was before the tide turned, and the mourners went down the hill with the flowers still in their hair and on their coats, and the lane was quiet, and the flat was bare, and the water was lying out where the channels ran.

Shi Lihua closed the ledger on the bench and put the knife in the basin and carried both inside, and Lin Li watched her do it, and un -

derstood that the entry was now in the book, in the village's other archive, in a hand that would outlast every document in every committee room in the city, and that it said: *granddaughter present. Three rings. Yellow third.*

And that her grandmother, who had spent sixty years being care - ful about the order of the rings at other people's funerals, had finally been counted, correctly, by somebody else.

CHAPTER 26

Twenty-Six

She had it by the bus.

She had heard the sentence go by in the eulogy as a thing said, and it had gone into her the way a thing said at a grave goes in, and then somewhere out past the gun-fort it had come back out and arranged itself differently, and by the time the bus reached the city she had it.

Fourteen years. The same sentence. The age changed.

She went into the office at half past seven, before anybody, and stood in front of her own desk and looked up at the strips of paper taped to the plaster.

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

And, from a grave cut into a hill above the oyster flats four hours earlier, in the same voice, with the age changed and the tense changed and nothing else changed at all:

> *At eighty-six she still wore the morning in her hair.*

The short clause first. And then the longer one that turned it over.

She stood there for a long time. She did not sit down. She read the other strips — the armor, the plates, the oyster shell, the commem ‑ orating — and then she read them again, and then she sat down very slowly in her chair and looked across the office at the desk that faced the wall of the building next door, and at the woman sitting at it, who had been sitting at it every day for four years, who had marked her memo in pencil, who had told her the wind was changing, who had drunk tea poured by Director Geng, who had never once in four years written a sentence anybody had shared.

And she went on sitting there, and the office filled up, and at ten Geng came in with two cups, and Danran watched him pour one of them at Lin Li's elbow, and neither of them looked at the other, and Danran understood that she was the only person in the building who did not already know.

※

She waited until half past eleven, when Old Zheng had gone to lunch and Guo Xia was on the phone to a printer, and she went over and shut the door of Lin Li's room and stood in front of the desk.

"You're her," she said.

Lin Li put the proof down. "Yes."

"Sixty thousand followers. Nine years. I was twelve when you stopped and I was twelve when I started printing the forum copies, and I have taped your sentences to every desk I have ever had — " Her voice went and she pushed it down with the flat of her hand. "And you sat three metres away from me for four years and let me do it."

"Yes."

"And you folded my memo."

"Yes."

Danran's hands were on the desk, on either side of the proof, and they were shaking, and she did not put them behind her back.

"I wrote that memo for the secretariat because it was true," she said. "And you took the dates out and turned it into a note, and you took my name off it, and you gave me a saying about the wind, and you told me you were doing it for my own good." She leaned in. "You want to know the thing? It worked. It worked exactly the way you said it would. Nobody has ever pulled that file. Nobody has ever said the girl who wanted to argue about the burning. I got promoted in March." Her mouth did something. "So I don't get to be angry about the memo. I know that. I've had six months to be angry about it and I've worked out that I'm not allowed."

"You're allowed," Lin Li said.

"I'm allowed to be angry about the memo," Danran said. "I'm not allowed to be angry about this, and I am, and that's the part I can't get my hands on."

She straightened up.

"I know about the tea," she said. "I've known about the tea for years. Geng doesn't know I know. Everybody in the building knows about the tea — two men, a private room, a sixty-thousand-follower blog, deleted at post two hundred and thirteen. It's the only interesting thing that ever happened in this office." She was steady now and it was worse. "And here's the thing, Lin Li. I can be angry about the tea. It's easy to be angry about the tea. It's four hundred years old, it's bigger than you, it's got a shape."

She stopped.

"I'm not angry about the tea," she said. "I'm angry about the memo. You're not the first person it happened to. You're just the first one who did it to me."

Lin Li sat with her hands in her lap.

"Yes," she said.

※

"I want to know one thing," Danran said. "The blog. Are you still writing it."

"No."

"You're not writing *A Book to Burn*."

"That's not mine."

"It's on my phone. It's on ninety thousand people's phones. It's got four hundred comments on a mirror with the death account in a different font." Danran took her own phone out and put it face down on the proof. "It's not you. It's somebody with no name on it who writes about a wall at the end of a lane and a corpus with a hole in it and the hand in the margin. It's not you."

"It isn't," Lin Li agreed. "I haven't written a public sentence since April 2013. I have never written one. That was the whole of what was said to me, and it was said kindly, and I agreed to it, and I have kept to it."

"Then who—"

"Somebody who doesn't have a name," Lin Li said. "That's the only way it works. A post can be deleted. A person can be moved."

She looked up.

"That's not courage," she said. "It's arithmetic, and I've had thirteen years to do it."

※

Danran sat down on the edge of the desk, which nobody did, and put her face in her hands, and when she took them away her eyes were red and she did not wipe them.

"Teach me," she said.

"I'm not going to teach you a method. There isn't one."

"Then teach me the thing you do. The thing where you can read four folders in a store off a stairwell and know in three weeks that one of them is shaped." She was almost rough with it. "You found a book in a wall. You found out your grandmother has been reading for sev - enty-nine years. You found out the most famous sentence you ever wrote was a dead mission teacher's observation. You found all of that out and you've told nobody, and you've been sitting at that desk marking up proofs about the market price of oysters." She stopped. "Teach me how you see things."

Lin Li was quiet for a while.

"I don't protect people by editing them," she said. "I protect people by editing them. Those are the same sentence and it took me until November to hear it."

"And which one are you doing to me?"

"Both," Lin Li said. "I folded your memo because it would have followed you, and I was right, and it was also the cheaper thing, and I

didn't have to watch you be right in a room where I had already been wrong." She picked the proof up. "And I'm telling you the blog is somebody else's, and I'm telling you the corpus is shaped, and I'm telling you to read the margins, because if I don't, you'll work it out anyway and you'll do it without knowing what it costs."

"And what does it cost?"

"Everything I've got," Lin Li said. "And I'm not going to pretend to you that's noble. I'd have done it in November if I'd had a book then."

Danran looked at her for a long moment.

"One thing," she said.

"Ask."

"The channel. If I put you up — not your name, just you, in frame, being right at a desk — it gets four hundred thousand. It's got four hundred thousand twice. Everybody wants to see the person who found it."

"No," Lin Li said.

"Lin Li—"

"You don't put me in it. Not the name, not the back of my head, not my hands." Lin Li's voice was the office voice and she could not get it out of it. "That's the one thing. That's the prohibition. If you un-anonymise me you have to own what happens next, and you're twenty-four, and you don't get to spend that on me."

Danran was off the desk and at the door before Lin Li had fin - ished, and she had her hand on the frame, and she stopped there.

"You're allowed to be angry about the tea," Lin Li said, to her back. "You're allowed to be angry about the tea."

"I know," Danran said. "I just said. I'm not."

And she went out, and did not shut the door, and Guo Xia said something to her in the corridor that Lin Li did not hear, and Danran answered it in a voice that was entirely level, and went down to the floor below, and the office went on being an office.

Lin Li sat at the desk that faced the wall of the building next door and picked up the red pen and made a correction on a proof about

the market price of oysters, and her hand was steady, and this time she examined it, and put it down, and did not pick it up again until four.

CHAPTER 27

Twenty-Seven

The final round was on the eighth of April, in a room on the second floor of the museum with a table the size of a door and a screen nobody used, and the Qingming holiday had already begun outside and the tour buses were on Zhongshan Road.

There were six of them. Chen Yiping at the head of it. Yang Shufen with the folder open on her forearm. Two from the committee that Lin Li had seen before and one she had not. Geng standing at the back, because he was the publisher's man and this was not his room. And Wu Cuiping from the secretariat, who was thirty-something and had a cold, and who carried the instruction in a folder and did not want to open it.

She had been in the building since half past eight. Lin Li had come in at ten past and found her already in the room, alone, moving the chairs into the arrangement the room was always left in, and she had said good morning, and then she had said, "I'm not going to make small talk, if that's all right," and Lin Li had said it was all right, and they had sat either side of the table while the coaches assembled outside.

At ten to nine she had put the folder down on the table between them, open, with the instruction face up, and left it there, and had not said anything, and Lin Li had not read it, and they had both looked at it until the room filled.

Wu Cuiping opened it.

"Before we start," she said. "There's an instruction on the death."

She read it out. It was half a page. It had been issued from the province on the thirty-first of March and it had been through two offices and it was written in the voice of a document that had been drafted by four people and laundered by none of them.

"The entry is to give the death as death in prison. The circum‑stances are not to be specified at this stage or subsequently. The date is to be given as the year only." She turned the page. "That's it. It isn't a local decision. It came down."

Nobody said anything for a moment. Outside, a coach was reversing with a continuous beep.

Wu Cuiping put the instruction down and squared it to the edge of the table.

"I asked my father last night," she said. "He's seventy-eight. He taught primary school in Quanzhou for forty years. I asked him what he knew about Li Zhi." She looked up. "He said: died in prison. He said it the way you say the weather."

She stopped. Nobody helped her.

"That's all," she said.

※

Lin Li waited until the instruction had been read and put in the file and the minute had gone past, and then she said: "It's wrong."

Yang Shufen looked up from the folder.

"It's not that it's imprecise," Lin Li said. "He was arrested at Tongzhou. He was carried in on a door. He was sentenced to be es‑corted back to his native place, which is a journey. He died on the road, by his own hand, eight days after the arrest." Her voice was level. "He was never in a prison. That's in the record."

"The record is four folders in a box," Chen Yiping said.

"It's in Folder 2. It gives the year."

"Folder 2 gives the year and it gives no month, no day and no place, and it has given exactly that to every entry since 1983, and I have been marking it up in pencil for forty years and it has never once been changed." He was not looking at her. "I taught that year. Two classes. I put the death in a test paper in 1994 and a boy corrected me and I couldn't tell him he was right, because right wasn't the thing on offer."

"Then let's correct it now."

"It isn't going to be corrected in the quincentenary," Chen Yiping said. "It's going to be in the quincentenary, in the quincentenary form, with the quincentenary panel behind it, and I am going to sign it, and you are going to write it, because you're the best writer in the building and it should be written well, and badly written truth is no use to anybody on a wall."

Wu Cuiping had taken a tissue out of her pocket and was holding it in her fist and not using it.

"She's right about the record," Wu Cuiping said, to nobody. "I read the case file. It's right."

"We all read the case file," Chen Yiping said. "Sit down, Miss Wu. It's four days old."

※

The argument took eleven minutes.

Lin Li asked for the month and the day. Refused. She asked for the place. Refused. She asked that the entry not say *in prison*, which was the one word in the thing that was simply false; she asked, at the least, that it say *in custody*, which was the same length and was true.

"That's a committee word," Yang Shufen said. "Nobody knows what it means."

"Then say nothing. Say he was arrested and that he died, and stop."

"There isn't a panel word for that," Chen Yiping said. "There's a panel word for died and there's a panel word for died in prison, and the panel word for *died in custody* doesn't exist, and the panel word for *arrested and died* is the same length as *died in prison* and it looks like we're hedging." He closed the folder. "In the quincentenary we do not hedge."

The minute was recorded. Wu Cuiping wrote it down, all of it, and Lin Li watched her write it down and knew that it would be in the file

and would be read by nobody, and that Wu Cuiping had written it anyway.

"Anything else?" Chen Yiping said.

"The name," Lin Li said.

"What name?"

"He was born Lin. Lin Zaizhi. He took the name Li Zhi when he was thirty-nine, and he took it for a reason, and the reason is in the record." She had her hands flat on the table. "It's the first fact of his life. It's not on the panel."

"It's not load-bearing," Chen Yiping said. "It says Lin Zaizhi, and the school groups can look up the rest."

"It's the first fact of his life."

"It's a footnote," he said. "Sit down, Lin Li."

She sat down.

※

Geng read the final version aloud.

He always read the final draft aloud; it was his ritual, and the room had settled into the posture of a room that is waiting for a document to be finished with, and he read it in his good voice, the voice of a man reading things out at meetings where the outcome was already settled, and his voice went flat on exactly two places.

On the eight words.

And on the last sentence, which the committee had inserted in January and which he read perfectly, in the voice of a man reading an inscription, flatter than anything else on the page:

> ***THE ENTRY — FINAL VERSION, FOR THE MUSEUM PANEL***
> *Quanzhou quincentenary commemoration, 2026–2027. Approved.*
> *Lin Zaizhi was born in Jinjiang, in the prefecture of Quanzhou, in the twenty-first year of the Jiajing reign.*

> *His native city had been for two hundred years one of the great emporiums of the world, where the ships of the Indian Ocean came in under silk and porcelain and went out with scent and shell in their holds. He passed the provincial examination at twenty-six and abandoned the metropolitan track for want of money. He held instructional and judicial posts in Henan and Nanjing, and finally the prefecture of Yao'an in Yunnan, where he built a bridge and resigned it mid-term. He shaved his head, kept the beard, and settled at the Hall of Flourishing Buddhism at Macheng, where he lectured and wrote the works for which he is remembered. He held that dressing and eating are the moral order; that self-interest is the human heart; that a man does not need Confucius in order to be a person. He died in prison in 1602, aged seventy-six. His thought contained progressive elements, and his limitations were those of his class and age.*

Nobody clapped, because nobody clapped at committee rounds, but the room made the sound a room makes when a thing has been finished, and Chen Yiping said, "Good. That's the tone."

"That's the tone," Geng said.

And Lin Li, sitting at the back, heard it for what it was this time: not an instruction, and not a compliment, but a man telling another man that both of them had read the same four folders and both of them knew what was in the hole between them, and that neither of them was going to be the one to say it out loud.

※

She lost the edit in the room, and it took eleven minutes, and there was no scene.

She walked out with the others and shook Wu Cuiping's hand at the door because Wu Cuiping's hand was out, and Wu Cuiping said, "I wrote the whole of it in the minute," and Lin Li said, "Thank you."

She went down to the street and the Qingming traffic was already on it, and the incense from the Guan-Yue temple came out into the road and mixed with the frying, and the whole city was going on being half hearth-smoke and half immortal.

In May of last year she had cut sixty-two characters out of her own draft with her own pencil, before anybody asked her to, and the sixty-two characters had been the charge and the cart and the shave, and what she had kept had been *He died in 1602, on the road back to Fujian*.

Eleven months later she had the corpus and the volume and the widow's margins and the teacher's Question and the three nights and the dictation and a shoe on a table and a shell at the other end of it, and it had all grown into a man.

And what was going on the panel, in the quincentenary, cut to eight hundred characters and approved at last, was eight words:

He died in prison in 1602, aged seventy-six.

She stood in the street in the Qingming traffic with the incense in her nose, and knew that she was going to take the razor into that committee room in April, and that the month was nearly out.

CHAPTER 28

Twenty-Eight

The assembly took eleven days and she did it at the table she had never moved, with the book at one end and the laptop at the other and the shoe in the middle.

She did not write it so much as assemble it. That was the point. The material had all been found already — in a store off a stairwell, in a wall, in a jar, in a bundle of garbage, in a ledger, in a forum thread, in a deck, in a grave cut into a hill — and the only act left to her was the putting of it in order, in a hand that did not pretend to be its au ‑ thor's.

She built it the way the widow had built the volume: with room in it for hands that had not yet arrived.

※

The uncle came on the Sunday with a folder and did not bring tea.

He put the folder on the table in the lane, in the front room, beside the shoe and the shell, and he opened it, and inside there was a photocopy and there was a thing.

The thing was a leaf. Printed. Torn at two edges, sewn at the third, and on the front of it a woodblock impression four hundred years old, in a column, the ink still black.

She read four lines of it and stopped, because she had already read them, in a hand.

> *Heaven gives each person his own use, complete at birth. He does not need to get the balance of it from Confucius.*

He turned the leaf over.

On the back of it was glue. Under the glue was another paper, and the two papers had been laminated together for a hundred years, and the other paper was the inside of a spine, and the spine was a Huang genealogy.

"They did a repair in 1927," the uncle said. "A cousin of my father's was re-sewing the binding and he found this. It was the backing." He turned the leaf back over. "Somebody in the Qianlong reign had a copy of the thing pulled apart for backing paper. This leaf survived because it was inside a genealogy that nobody threw away."

Lin Li sat with it.

"Keep it," he said. "I've had it since 1998. I've never shown it to anybody. I didn't know what it was until you started going quiet."

"Uncle—"

"They kept the name by knowing when to be silent," he said. "I said that to you and I was boasting. This is what it was." He put his finger flat on the glue. "They glued him into the spine of the lineage and carried him through four regimes and never once knew they had him. That's not silence. That's a shelf."

He shut the folder on the photocopy and left the leaf.

At the door he stopped, with his hand on the frame, and did not turn round.

"Put it in," he said. "Whatever you're doing. Put it in."

※

Four hands.

She went back through the whole of the marginalia, in order, and set them out, and there were four, and she understood for the first time that the four of them were not four people doing the same thing.

The widow's hand — small, dry, even — had **copied**. She had taken a book that was going to be burned and made another one, and had left room in it, and had written in it that a book only kept is a corpse.

The teacher's hand — rounder, in pencil, in the margins — had **asked**. She had opened a text in a courtyard and let twenty-two girls find out for themselves what it was, and had written one question in 1947 and signed it with a first name because she was not sure she was allowed.

The keeper's hand — careful, upright, in ink — had **hidden**. She had sealed, and pointed, and reset the shells in the old pattern, and had written on the flyleaf that she was not brave but only tidy, and sixty years later that she had kept it and asked who had kept her.

And the fourth hand was hers, and what it had done was **transcribe**.

Lin Li sat back.

The widow copied. The teacher asked. The keeper hid. The editor read out loud. Four centuries, one book, and four different answers to the same question, and none of them the same, and the novel of it — she caught the thought and did not write it down — was that a book is whatever people keep.

※

She put in the razor material and she did not adjudge it.

She put in the whole of the account — the door, the sick man, the sentence, the journey, the barber, the razor, the two days, the re‑ceived line about an old man having nothing left to seek — and she put in the fact that she could not account for it, and she put in the memorial that brought it about, and she let them sit side by side in one font with no comment between them, and she wrote one sen‑tence at the head of the section and no sentence at the end of it.

The sentence at the head of it was: *I have read everything in this book and I do not know why he did it. Nobody who tells you they know is telling you the truth.*

And she left it at that.

And she wrote the note about the hundred and fifty years, because it was true, and because it was the one part of the chain that had no hand in it at all:

> *Between the widow and the teacher there is nothing: a hundred and fifty years in which the book was kept by no one we can name, or by keepers who left no writing. There is no way to know which, and the difference may be nothing.*

※

The centre of it was one page.

She built the page herself, in the platform's own editor, in the platform's own font, with no image and no ornament, and she put two sentences on it, one above the other, and left the rest of the page white.

The first was the oldest sentence in the whole matter, four hundred and twenty-five years old by then:

> *The memorial's charge, four characters:* 惑世誣民 — *huoshi wumin, deluding the age and deceiving the people.*

And beneath it, facing it, in the same size, in the same face, in the same black, with four hundred years between them and nothing else on the page:

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

Four hundred years, two sentences, one font.

She sat and looked at it for a long time. It was the only thing she had ever made that did not need her in it.

※

The last thing she built was the contents page, and it took her an hour, and it was the easiest hour of the eleven days.

> ***CONTENTS***
> *A slip on the cover of a book that said: a book to keep hidden. A slip beneath it, in an older ink, that said: a book to burn. A plaque at a lane gate, in three languages, none of them the market's. A crown the tourists never learned the name of, and twenty-two girls wearing it with books on their knees, none of them there for the crowns. A question in pencil, signed with a first name and nothing else. A hole in a wall that a mason found and left alone and went to eat. A crock, waxed and oiled and oilclothed, set behind a headboard so that a book would sleep at a woman's ear for sixty years. A pale comma on the inside of a left wrist. Three nights, and a boat putty, and a sentence: I'll buy more. A thread of three hundred and forty replies, running from May 2012 to the week before. A shoe off the end of a line, size forty, white with a grey heel. A ledger of which flowers each family asked for at which funeral. A leaf of a banned book, laminated as backing paper in a lineage's spine for a hundred years. Four hundred characters of charge, and one sentence from a platform, in one font.*

She read it down and then she read it again from the bottom up, and she understood that it was a list of things she had held, and things other people had held, and that there was nothing in it that the

reader of the blog had not already been handed at some point in the previous eleven months, and that the whole of the act was the putting of them in one order.

She put it at the front and called the post #220.

Then she went and made tea she did not drink and sat with the flat doing nothing below her and the shoe and the shell and the leaf on the table, and waited for the anniversary.

CHAPTER 29

Twenty-Nine

The post was finished on the nineteenth and set for the morning of the twenty-second, and on the twenty-first Lin Li, who had not left the flat in six days, went out.

It was the medicine god's birthday. The old city does it properly: the palanquin out of the Huaqiao Temple in the morning, the drum and the shawms, fifty-odd formations through the streets of the Carp, the firecrackers banned inside the core and alive at the edges where the ban does not reach, and the red paper snowing afterwards as the procession's receipt. The god was a physician, and the temple stands on the site of his clinic, and there is a dispensary in it that has been giving medicine to people who cannot pay for it since 1878, and it was giving it that morning, through a side door, to a queue that had nothing to do with the procession.

The folklore has it that the medicine god's birthday is windy, because of an old quarrel with the sea goddess over whose weather it was. It was windy.

※

Lin Li had never believed in any of it.

She had been to four of these since she was twenty-six and had watched the mechanics closely, because watching the mechanics was what she did. She had read the ethnography and she had edited three readers on the local cults, and she knew that a medium serves one deity and one only; that he goes in on incense and drum, after half an hour or two hours of standing in the heat; that a ritual master works beside him with a flag, chanting, and interprets what comes out, because what comes out is not speech; that a judge at the upright table decides the god's intent when the flag is not enough.

She knew it was scheduled. She knew it was harvest-cued in the literal sense — the trance was set to a date in the ritual calendar the way the oyster harvest was set to the moon, and the medium was as much a functionary of the tide tables as any woman in a lane.

She had watched Wu Jinbao do it before, at a village wake, and she had watched the ritual master's flag go through its sequence, and she had timed the standing in the heat, and she had written the whole thing up in a reader for the eighth grade.

She knew how it worked.

She stood at the barrier by the cut-porcelain roofline with her hands in her pockets and let the procession go past her, and the drum came up through the soles of her feet, and the smoke of the temple incense and the sulfur of the firecrackers and the smell of the medicine from the dispensary's side door all went into the air together, and the god came round the corner on the palanquin, and the medium came behind it in white, and the ritual master came beside him with the flag.

※

The medium worked the palanquin.

That was the public half of the job: not prophecy, traffic. The medium went along the route ahead of the bearers and told them where to turn and where to stop and how long to hold, and the ritual master interpreted, and the crowd did what it was told, and it was the most practical thing Lin Li had ever seen a religious professional do. Twice the medium stopped the procession for a child in the way. Once he sent a formation into a side lane that the district's posted route had not included, and the district's man at the barrier swore into his radio, and then a woman came out of that side lane and said something to the ritual master and put her hands over her face, and the district's man stopped swearing.

Lin Li watched all of it and thought about the deadline.

And then the medium stopped, in the middle of the street, in front of the temple, with the palanquin still going and the drum still going, and he turned.

He was forty-odd and by trade a builder. She had seen him on a scaffold. She had seen him drinking tea at the stall by the school, shy and ordinary, with a towel round his neck, and she had seen him afterwards at the village wake with a bottle of water in his hand and his hands on his knees, embarrassed, being ordinary again.

He turned, and he looked at the crowd, and he looked past it, and he looked at her.

He said, in the flat voice of a man relaying something:

> *"The elder says you saw her. Not many did."*

It was generic. It was the most generic sentence in the repertoire — nobody's grandmother, nobody's elder, a phrase that would fit a hundred thousand mourners at a hundred thousand wakes. The ritual master made the standard noise behind him. Nobody in the crowd turned round; a woman with a pushchair adjusted a shawl.

Lin Li was the one person in that street it was for.

She had seen her. At eleven at night, in the last fortnight of the ninth moon, in the front room of a house at the end of a lane, with the book open on the table and her eyes going along the line at the speed of a person reading, and her lips not moving, and her hand going out to mark the place before she looked up.

Nobody had seen it. Her mother had found it in 1972 at two in the morning and had said nothing for fifty-five years, and had never told anyone, and had asked for it to be written in a book and had not been answered.

Not many did.

Lin Li stood at the barrier with the drum coming up through the soles of her feet and the sulfur in her throat, and the line sat down in

the middle of her chest and would not be moved, and all of her knowledge of how it worked — the incense, the schedule, the flag, the ritual master, the harvest-cued trance, the three readers she had edited for the eighth grade — stood around the outside of it and could not get in.

She had goosebumps on her arms in the heat. They were honestly earned. She did not take them for anything else.

※

She found him afterwards behind the temple, with a bottle of water and a towel, sitting on an upturned crate with his forearms on his knees, being a builder again.

"Which elder?" she said.

He looked up. "What?"

"The elder. Which one."

"He didn't say." He wiped his face with the towel. "They never say. That's the whole of it — it's never a person, it's always an elder. If it were a person you could go and check."

"Then how do you know it meant anything?"

"I don't." He screwed the cap onto the bottle. "That's your de‑partment. I say what comes. Whether it's something is between you and whoever's listening." He put the towel over his shoulder and stood up, and swayed a little, and put a hand on the wall. "You want to know if I knew. I didn't know. I didn't know about your grand‑mother until her flowers were on the table. You think I'd stand in a street and say a thing like that if I knew?"

"No," Lin Li said. "I don't think you would."

He nodded, and picked up the crate he had been sitting on and carried it round the corner, and she heard him put it down, and heard him say something to somebody in Minnan, and heard the somebody laugh.

※

She got home at nine.

The flat was as she had left it: the table, the laptop, the book at one end, the shoe in the middle, the shell at the other end, the leaf from the genealogy's spine squared beside them. The post was ready and the date was set, and the date was the sixteenth of the third moon, which was tomorrow, which was four hundred and twenty-five years to the day from the morning on which a sick old man in a cell at Tongzhou asked what day it was, and wrote four lines in answer, and took the razor out of a barber's hand.

She had read the ethnography. She had timed the standing in the heat. She had watched the flag go through its sequence and she had edited three readers about it, and she knew, with the whole of her rational and seventeen-years-trained mind, exactly what the medium was and how he worked and why he had said what he said.

She lay awake until two in the morning, in the dark, with the flat doing nothing below her, and the line went on working.

CHAPTER 30

Thirty

She set it for the morning and did not set the hour precisely, and at half past seven on the twenty-second she sat down with the tea she had not drunk and looked at the date on the screen.

The sixteenth of the third moon. Four hundred and twenty-five years to the day.

Her hand did not move toward the hour. She did not set it for the fifteenth, or the seventeenth, or for any other day in the month, and she did not write anything about it in the notebook, and she went and made tea she did not drink, and came back, and did not look at it again.

At nine it went up.

※

It went up quietly, the way everything on that platform goes up, and for forty minutes nothing happened at all, and then it began.

She watched it from the flat with the laptop open and the tea going cold, and she did not refresh it, because she was an editor and editors did not refresh, and she refreshed it.

Two hundred in the first hour. Two thousand by noon. The counter stopped being a number she could hold and became a num‑ber, and the comments began, and the first mirror appeared at twenty past eleven, and by the evening there were ninety of them, and a capture on an archive, and a page with the whole text as plain, and a thread that had renamed it, and a translation into English on a site she had never heard of, and a translation into Japanese.

Nobody could have predicted the Japanese. She sat and looked at that one for a long time: four hundred and twenty-five years earlier the book had gone to Japan to survive, hand-copied all four volumes

of it by a man who had never seen this city, and taught to eighty students in a village school, and now a sentence of it had gone back out of this city in a day, in a language it had already once been carried in.

It had left home again. That was all it had ever done.

※

The city was in the middle of its year.

The quincentenary commemoration was in full swing by the twenty-second of April. The museum's panel was being installed that morning — she walked past it at ten and they were lifting it into position with a sucker-lifter, the eight hundred characters going up against the wall in the hall of the late years, and a school party was being lined up outside by two teachers with a register. The exhibition of the genuine copy was being prepared for the autumn, on loan for six weeks, as the centrepiece. The postcards were selling. A party from a Japanese university was due in June and the secretariat had asked for three volunteers with cars.

She stood and watched the panel go up for a minute and then went to work, and nobody in the office said anything to her, because nobody in the office knew, and the office went on being an office.

※

Geng came in at half past ten with two cups and did not put either of them down.

"I read it at half past seven," he said. "I read it again at nine. I have not said anything to anybody and I am not going to."

"Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me." He looked at her. "You've done it for four reasons. Only one of them is the truth."

Lin Li put the proof down.

"How many do I get?"

"One true reason is a good ratio." He shifted both cups into one hand and took the pen out of his pocket and put it on the desk, which was a thing he did when he was going to be exact. "The truth. Yes. You found a book in a wall and you put it out where people could read it, and that is the truth and it is enough on its own and you would have been right to do it if it were the only thing."

"Go on."

"Vindication. Thirteen years of being careful, and now everyone can see what the carefulness cost. You have been the most reliable editor in that building and this is the receipt." He turned the pen over. "Vanity. You have written the best thing anybody will write about him this year, and you know it, and nobody would have written it, and you know that too."

"And the fourth."

"Revenge," Geng said. "Not against me. Against a tea."

She did not say anything.

"Not against Zhang either, if it comes to that. He's been dead eleven years and there's nothing left of him to be revenged on. Against the shape of the thing. Two men in a private room over a lazy susan and a sentence the censor admired, and thirteen years later the girl in the fourth chair has done the thing they told her not to do." He put the pen down. "You don't get to have that and not have that."

"I'm not denying any of it," Lin Li said.

"I know you're not."

"I want you to know that I know it."

"I know you know it," Geng said. "That's why I said it out loud. You'd have worked it out in about a year and you'd have worked it out alone, and you'd have believed it was worse than it is."

He put one cup down at her elbow. It was the ritual, and he had poured, and she had not said no, and it was the last time either of them was going to do it without thinking about it.

"It doesn't change whether you're right," he said.

"No."

"It doesn't make it smaller either."

"No," Lin Li said. "I know."

※

At half past eleven she sent the letter.

She had drafted it nine times. She had drafted it in the voice of the entry, which she had deleted. She had drafted it in the voice of a woman who had been treated unjustly, which she had deleted harder. She had drafted it in her own voice, and what came out in her own voice was four paragraphs of nothing at all, and she sent that.

> ***RESIGNATION — Lin Li***
> *I resign my post, with immediate effect.*
> *The post published this morning, Xu Fenshu, is my resignation, and it will not be withdrawn. I ask that it be treated as a work and not as a document for comment. Any reply, from this office or from any other, is to be addressed to me and to nobody else.*
> *My name is to come off the reader series — not removed from the books already published, which I did and am not ashamed of, but taken off the list of those who will do the next one.*
> *There is no further statement. Everything I have to say is in the post.*

She addressed it to Director Geng, with a copy to the secretariat, and she filed it in the out-tray at twenty to twelve, and she did not send it by any other route, and she did not keep a copy, and she did not write it in the notebook.

She had resigned the way he had died. Not by the door and not by the decree and not by the razor: by her own hand, in public, with her name on it, on the lunar anniversary of the death, in the middle of the celebration year.

She had thought about that too. She had thought about it at half past seven that morning, with the tea, and her hand had not moved.

※

She went home at six.

The counter had stopped being a number she could hold and had become a number. Ninety mirrors at dusk and three hundred by the time she was on the bus, and somebody had started a fund to pay for a lawyer if one was needed, and somebody else had started a thread asking where the book was now, and a third had posted a photograph of the lane.

The flat was as it had been in the morning. The book at one end of the table. The shoe in the middle. The shell at the other end. The leaf from the genealogy's spine squared beside them.

None of it was hers now.

All of it was.

CHAPTER 31

Thirty-One

It was deleted on the Monday.

She saw it at ten in the morning, on a white page, in the platform's ordinary face: the same sentence, word for word, the one she had already read twice in her life and had never expected to read a third time.

The original had been alive for three days and four hours.

By then there were four hundred and eleven mirrors, and the archive capture had been taken nine minutes after publication, and the plain-text page had been forked four hundred times, and there were two English translations that disagreed about the *zhi* in his name, and a Japanese one, and a Korean one, and a thread with seventeen hundred replies that had brought in a scholar from Taipei who had corrected the date of the 1625 burning, which had been wrong in two of her three sources, and who had been thanked by name.

The deletion did not touch any of it.

That was the thing nobody outside the industry understood, and it was the thing she had known since she was twenty-six and had spent thirteen years not saying: the original was the least durable form a text ever had. The mirrors were the text. The mirrors could not be deleted by the platform because they were not on the platform, and they reached only the people who were already looking, and the people who were already looking were, by Tuesday, forty thousand of them, and by Friday a hundred and six.

Thousands of small hands. It had left home again.

※

The dismissal came down on the Monday afternoon, on paper, and it needed two signatures.

One was the secretariat's, and that one was given at four o'clock. The other was Director Geng's, because the dismissal of a responsible editor for cause required the second review to countersign, and the second review was him, and he had never refused to countersign anything in thirty-eight years.

He held it for forty-eight hours.

He held it on his desk, in the tray, under the blotter, in full view of anyone who came in, and he did not hide it and he did not explain it, and on the Tuesday morning the secretariat's office telephoned twice, and on the Tuesday afternoon a man came up from it and sat in the chair nobody sat in for twenty minutes and went away again, and on the Wednesday at eleven Geng put the folder in his bag and went down to the second floor and signed it.

He was back at twenty past.

"They asked what I was waiting for," he said, standing in her doorway with his coat still on.

"What did you say?"

"I said I was making sure the arithmetic was right." He took the coat off. "It was the only true thing I could think of that wasn't a lie."

"Was the arithmetic right?"

"Wrong by one," Geng said. "The forty-eight hours got the post as far as the archive. I checked. If I'd signed on the Monday it would have been an office incident. On the Wednesday it was a thing with a capture." He hung the coat on the hook. "Two days. It's the last useful thing I'll do in this building."

※

He took early retirement as of the Friday.

It was announced in one line at the end of the Friday coordination meeting, and it said *for health reasons*, and everybody in the room knew what it meant, and nobody said anything, and afterward Yang

Shufen stopped Lin Li in the corridor and said, “His blood pressure,” and then, when Lin Li did not answer, said, “I don’t know why I said that. I’m sorry,” and went into her office and shut the door.

Lin Li went in to him at half past four with the letter of transfer of her reader files, and he signed those too, and they sat for a while.

“Are you relieved?” she said.

“Yes.” He did not hesitate. “Partly. I’ll admit it. Thirty-eight years, and a drawer, and a committee that meets four times a year about a man who said the sages were not high.” He turned the cup a quarter turn on the desk. “I’m sixty-two in June. I would like to read something I have not already read.”

“You’ll read everything.”

“I’ll read everything,” Geng said. “That’s not the same as having read it for the second time before the meeting.”

※

His son came on the Thursday, to the office, with a folder of his own.

He was thirty-two and he looked like his father had looked at thirty-two, which is to say that he looked like a man who had not been sleeping and was not going to bring it up. His name was Ming‑ming and he worked in logistics in Xiamen and he had come up about a clause in a lease, and Geng introduced them badly.

“This is — that’s Lin Li. She’s an editor here.”

“So was I,” Mingming said. “Once. You used to drive me to my examinations in that car.”

“I did.”

“I remember the route,” Mingming said. “I don’t remember much else about the drives.”

He sat down in the chair nobody sat in and took the folder onto his knees and did not open it, and Lin Li made to go, and Geng said, “Stay,” and she stayed, and the three of them sat with the folders on their knees, and nobody opened anything.

Old Zheng brought in an extra cup, which he did without being asked and without comment, and Geng poured — the reflex — and then caught himself, and pushed the pot across the desk to Lin Li, and she poured for the three of them, and Mingming watched her do it and looked at his father and looked away again.

"I found your drawer when I was fifteen," Mingming said. He was looking at the tea. "The folder with no label on it. I had it open on my knee and you came in and you said, *that's old stuff*, and you shut it, and that was the entire conversation we have ever had about anything that mattered."

"I know," Geng said.

"You could have said it was old. You could have said it was good." Mingming put the cup down. "You said *old stuff*. I've thought about that for seventeen years. It comes up. I want you to know that it comes up."

"I know," Geng said. "I don't have a better answer."

"I don't want a better answer." His hands were flat on his knees. "I needed you to have had something. You had a folder with no label on it and you told your son it was old stuff."

Geng did not answer. He looked at his hands for a long moment, and then he reached across and moved the pot six inches to the left, which was where the light would not fall on it, and which was a thing a man did when he had decided not to speak and wanted his hands to be doing something.

At the door Mingming stopped, with his hand on the frame, and did not turn round — the same gesture as his father's, in the same room, four feet away.

"The lease is in the folder," he said. "Read it. There's a clause about the water that isn't right."

"I'll read it."

"I know you will," Mingming said. "You read everything."

And he went out, and did not shut the door, and Lin Li heard him go down the corridor and stop to say something to Old Zheng, and

heard the something be polite, and heard Old Zheng answer at length, which was Old Zheng's way of being kind.

Nothing was resolved. The lease would be read. The folder would stay shut. The son would go back to Xiamen and would telephone at New Year, and the telephone call would be four minutes long and would be about the weather.

※

She wrote it in the notebook on the train home.

She had been drifting into the tide-and-moon hand for a year and she let it have the page now, all the way, for the first time: no Gregorian at the head, no platform date, no year of the office. The moon and the water.

> *Big ebb, ninth moon, three days before. Source: a private room on Zhongshan Road, four chairs, three used. Killed: the blog, the byline, sixty thousand readers, and the rest of my twenties.*

And underneath, in the hand she had been trained in and had not used in a year:

> *Recorded the second day after the publication, 26 April 2027. Thirteen years late. In the hand of the woman it happened to.*

She closed it. She did not turn back to the first page — the twelfth of April 2013, blank but for the date, thirteen years of nothing on it, the one deletion she had never recorded.

She turned to it now, at last, and looked at it for a long time, and then took the pencil, and wrote across it, in the drift hand, six char - acters:

> *the deletion. see above.*

And closed the book, and put it in her bag, and the notebook was full, and it was the last entry she ever made in it.

※

The last tea was on the Thursday of the following week, in his office, with the boxes on the floor and the screensaver gone.

She had brought her own. She had bought it on the way in, at a shop on Zhongshan Road, in a paper twist — Anxi, because his had been Anxi, and the uncle's had been Anxi, and it was what people brought in that street when they were bringing something.

She put the twist on the desk and went out to the tap in the cor - ridor and came back with the pot and filled both cups and set one down at his elbow and took the other herself, and sat down in the chair nobody sat in.

Geng watched her do it.

He did not reach for the pot. He did not say *I'll do it*. He did not make the small apologetic movement of a man whose ritual has been taken from him. He sat back and put both hands on the arms of the chair, and let her.

That was the ending of it. Thirteen years of him pouring, three refills at a tea in 2013, and one Thursday of her.

They drank it. He asked her whether she had found a flat and she said yes, in the old city, over a shop, with the light bad and the table under the window. He said the light was the only thing that mattered and that she would find that out at fifty. She said she had found it out at thirty-seven, in a store off a stairwell, reading four folders about his books.

"You'll write again," he said.

"No."

"No," Geng agreed. "You won't. Not for money, and not on a platform with a name on it, and not for the reader series." He drank. "You'll copy things. That's not the same and it's not worse."

At five he carried his box down to the car himself, and the secretary wanted to help and he would not let her, and Lin Li stood in the doorway of the office that faced the wall of the building next door and watched him go across the yard with it, and he turned at the corner and looked back at the building and not up at the window, and got into the car, and sat in it for a while before he started it.

Which was what he did.

CHAPTER 32

Thirty-Two

"Don't," Lin Li said.

"It's the best thing I'll ever make."

"It is. That's why not." She had her hands flat on the desk. "It's my grandmother's hands and it's a man cutting his own throat, and you don't know the half of what's behind either of them, and if you put it up you will have two hundred thousand people telling you what it means."

"I know what it means."

"You know what it means to you."

Danran put her phone in her pocket, which she did when she had decided and was being polite about it.

"It's going up on Sunday," she said.

※

It went up on the Sunday.

> ***EP.41: the razor (they wrote 'died in prison')***
> *They wrote "died in prison." Eight words. A woman I work with wrote the panel those words are going on, and I watched her do it, and I did not stop her, and I have thought about that every single day since.*
> *So here is the other version. Here is the door they carried him in on, and the sentence, and the barber, and the razor, and the two days, and the line about an old man having nothing left to seek. Here is my grandmother's hands, at eighty-six, opening oysters at a rate I could not do at twenty-six, saying there is no writing in this lane and nobody wrote anything down.*

> *Here is the wall behind her that somebody treated like a boat. Here is the seam.*
> *And here is the question I cannot get my hands around: which of them was the braver thing to do? The man who took the knife, or the woman who sealed the wall and stood in a lane for sixty years letting everybody think she could not read a fish price? I have read the letters. I have read the margins. I do not know. I do not think anybody knows, and I am going to stop pretending that I am going to work it out by Thursday.*

It had two hundred thousand views in the first day and a mirror in three hours and a translation into English, and on the Tuesday evening the same sentence appeared in the platform's ordinary face beneath it, and beneath that a second line about the channel, and on the Thursday the channel's first strike landed, and the channel was put on notice, and any further violation would close it.

Danran read the notice and did not cry and did not say anything for a day and a half, and on the second day she posted a video about it, furious, with the notice on the screen behind her and her own voice shaking in the places where she had not planned it to shake.

At the bottom of the video there was a link, and the link was to a paid tier that had gone up that morning, and six hundred people took it in two days.

※

Her mother telephoned at nine at night.

"The cousins have seen it," she said. "All of them. One of them sent it round with a message saying *our family's famous*, and there is a photograph of my mother's handwriting on a screen in three provinces."

"Ma—"

"I kept it," her mother said. "Fifty-five years. I never told anybody, not one person. I asked for it to be written in the book and Shi Lihua wrote it in the book, and I thought that was what the book was for." A pause. "You did not put it in a book. You put it on a screen in three provinces."

"I had to."

"You had to," her mother said. "Yes. That's the thing about you. You always had to."

And she rang off, and Lin Li sat in the dark with the phone in her hand and did not put it down for a long time, and the street below was doing what streets do at nine.

※

They worked on it for four days after that, in the flat, at the table she had never moved.

Danran had the copies. She had made them herself, in her own hand, on ordinary paper, because she had said that a photocopy of a hand-copied book was a thing with no hands in it, and she wanted there to be hands in it. There were nine pages done and the ninth was better than the first, which was the whole of the method and the only teaching Lin Li had ever given her that had gone in.

They were going through the ninth page when Lin Li saw the line.

It was in the copy, at the head, where Danran had written out the attribution — the copies were to be posted with the same attribution the original carried — and Danran had written it out correctly, and underneath it, in her own hand, Danran had written the name.

Lin Li put the pencil through it.

"Not that one," she said. "The name."

Danran looked at the struck line. She did not argue. She took the pencil out of Lin Li's fingers, which she had never done, and turned it over in her hand the way she had watched Geng turn a pen over, and drew a triangle under the struck words, and two vertical strokes

through the deletion mark, and pushed the page back across the table.

"Stet," she said.

"Danran—"

"You spent thirteen years not signing things and look where it got you." She was not angry. That was the worst of it. "Signed words get a throat. I know. You taught me that, or somebody did, and you did not teach it to me because you did not tell anybody you had written anything since 2013." She turned the page round so it faced Lin Li. "It already had a throat. It had a throat on Thursday and the strike landed. The name doesn't make it worse. It makes it true."

Lin Li looked at the triangle and the two strokes, which was the standard mark, which she had used ten thousand times and had never in her life had used on her.

"You'll lose the channel," she said.

"I've got the channel either way," Danran said. "That's what I worked out on the Thursday. I can lose the strike and keep the channel or I can lose the channel and keep the strike, and the strike is the one that pays."

She put the page in the pile and picked up the pen.

"So," she said. "When do I get the book?"

※

That night, Lin Li took the volume to the table and opened it at the women's essay and turned to the margin, to the question in pencil, in a rounder hand, signed with a first name and a year, seventy-nine years old by then.

She had the pen in her hand. She had carried it for five months and had written one thing with it, at another woman's direction, with another woman's stiff fingers on her fingers. She had never written a word with it of her own.

She wrote:

> *Both, teacher. Both turned out to be this point.*

Harder to marry. Harder to fool. Seventy-nine years, and the answer was that the two were the same thing and had always been the same thing, and that the choosing was the false part, and that a girl who read was both of them at once and had to be, and that the whole of the question had been built by people who wanted her to think there was a difference.

She looked at it. Then she wrote the date, in the drift hand, and signed it in a way she had never signed anything in her life.

Big ebb, ninth moon, six months gone. — Lin Li.

Then she closed the book on the pen and went to bed.

※

The book went to Danran on the Saturday, in the flat, with the pen.

Not to the museum. The museum had asked, through a letter on good paper with a letterhead, offering to display it for six weeks in the autumn alongside the facsimiles, with a label reading *lent by a private hand*, and Lin Li had written back three words — *not for display* — and had not explained, and the museum had not written again.

Not to the fire, either. That had been the other option and it had been Ah-ma's, and it had been right, and Part Two had earned why: the keeping had a body count, and the mother had spent fifty-five years in a room with a woman she could not talk to, and the letters had burned unread by the hand that would have read them, and the white buds had gone in the hair all one autumn.

Lin Li put the book on the table and the pen on top of it, and pushed them both across.

"It's yours," she said. "The pen too. The nib's worn on one side. That's her angle, not mine."

"From you or from her?"

"From her. It was a teacher's, and the teacher gave it to a student, and the student gave it to a granddaughter, and the granddaughter is giving it to a fact-checker." Lin Li took her hands off it. "The gift a disciple brings when first meeting a teacher. It's in his name. You'd know that if you'd looked him up."

"I've looked him up," Danran said. "I looked him up in March."

"Then you know what it means."

"I know what it means." Danran picked up the pen and turned it over and looked at the nib, and did not put it down. "Do I start now?"

"There are blank leaves sewn in at intervals," Lin Li said. "She bound it that way. For hands that had not arrived."

Danran opened the volume at the back, past the death account, and found the leaf, and put her finger on it, and took up the pen, and wrote a date at the top of the first empty page in a hand that was not fine, but steady.

And Lin Li sat at the other end of the table with the shoe in front of her and did not watch, because she had been taught, by a woman who had kept a book in a wall for sixty years, that the one thing you did not do to a thing you had handed over was stand behind it.

CHAPTER 33

Thirty-Three

The hall had mounted it in three weeks.

The uncle had done it with two helpers and a folding table, and it was better than it had any right to be: two bays of the east wall, six panelled cases, a printed sheet in large type for the school parties, and at the end a cabinet that had stood in the hall since before anyone could remember and had never had anything in it.

He had spent the three weeks on everything else in order to be allowed to do the cabinet.

She went on a Sunday in May. The lane to the hall was the lane she had walked as a child, past the Cobbler and the shop that had been a hardware shop and was now a shop that sold photographs of hardware, and the buses were on the corner with the tour groups, and the whole coast was in its season.

The exhibit was called *Keepers*, and it was not about Li Zhi.

That was the uncle's doing and nobody had argued him out of it. It was about the people who had kept things: the widow who copied; the teacher who asked; the grandmother who sealed a wall; the ma ‑ son who found a cavity and went to eat; Shi Lihua and the ledger of which flowers each family asked for at which funeral; a page of a banned book laminated as backing paper in a lineage's spine for a hundred years. Six cases, six panelled sheets, one object each, and no text longer than a paragraph, because the uncle had said that a paragraph was what people read in a hall and a page was what they walked past.

The school groups came through in shifts. A teacher was reading the sheet on the ledger aloud to a class of eleven-year-olds, badly, and one of them was writing something down.

※

The cabinet was at the end, under the eaves, where the light fell from a small window in the roof and lay on the floor all afternoon.

The leaf was in it, in a small case the uncle had made himself out of plywood and glass, badly, and it had its own sheet beside it:

> *A leaf of a banned edition of the Fenshu, found in 1927 laminated as backing paper in the binding of the Huang genealogy. A page of the correspondence with Geng Dingxiang. Kept for a hundred years by people who did not know what they had.*

Beside it, an empty space the size of a frame.

Lin Li looked at the empty space and then at the uncle.

"He didn't put the name in the lineage," she said. "He put the grandmother in."

"He put the keeper in." The uncle straightened the printed sheet a quarter turn. "The lineage keeps keepers. It's the only thing it has ever been good for." He looked at her. "You want to know about the blood. The blood stops at 1711."

"I know."

"It doesn't matter, and I'm going to say so. It's going on the sheet and the sheet is going up on that wall, and every scholar in the province is going to read it and every one of them is going to write to me and tell me it's unproven."

"Then don't put it up."

"It's already up," the uncle said. "I put it up on Tuesday. That's why you're here."

He took a paper folder out of his coat pocket and unfolded it and laid it on the table, and smoothed it flat with the side of his hand, the way her grandmother had smoothed a signature.

It was the post. Four thousand words and the contents page, printed out at a shop on Zhongshan Road in a typeface that was not the platform's and was worse, eleven pages, and the last of them was the contents list, ending: *four hundred characters of charge, and one sentence from a platform, in one font.*

He put the eleven pages into the frame, in order, behind the glass, and he put the frame into the cabinet, and he put it on the left, and the small case with the leaf in it he put on the right, so that the two of them stood side by side in the light from the roof window with the dust turning in it.

Then he closed the door of the cabinet and turned the key and put the key in his pocket and did not offer it to her.

"Visitors can see it," he said. "You have to ask."

※

The sheet that went up on the wall beside the cabinet was two paragraphs long.

> ***LIN LI (b. 1989)*** *Of this city. Editor. Author of the entry for the museum's quincentenary panel and of the post of 22 April 2027, published on the lunar anniversary of Li Zhi's death and deleted three days later.*
> *Granddaughter of Huang Ama of Xunpu (1940–2027), who kept a hand-copied book in the wall of her bedroom for sixty years and wrote, in it, that she was not brave but only tidy.*
> *Her line and this one join at 1711 and no further. The lineage has never been able to prove the connection, has never wished to falsify it, and has never once stopped being glad of it.*

Lin Li read it four times.

"You could have written 'descendant,'" she said. "Nobody would have checked."

"The scholars would have checked," the uncle said. "The scholars always check. That's the one useful thing about them." He was look - ing up at the sheet, not at her. "And then in thirty years somebody would have found the join at 1711 and pulled the whole sheet down, and the cabinet with it, and the leaf, and you. And we'd have had nothing."

He put his hands behind his back.

"You think I'm being careful," he said.

"I think you're being careful."

"I'm being a Huang," he said. "There's a difference. Careful is what you do when you're frightened. I did my arithmetic in 1974." He nodded up at the wall. "That sheet is true. It's the truest thing in this building and it's the only one that says *we don't know*. That's the arithmetic. You don't get the cabinet if you put a lie in the frame."

※

Outside, a school party was coming up the steps with a register, and the uncle went down to meet them, and Lin Li stayed a moment in front of the cabinet with the light on the floor and the dust turning in it.

The frame and the little case. The printout that had been deleted three days after it went up, and the leaf that had been glued into a genealogy's spine and carried through four regimes by people who never knew it was there.

The blood was unconfirmed. It had been unconfirmed at 1711 and it would be unconfirmed in 2227, and no document in any archive would ever close it, and the difference between her and the lineage was a question that had been open for three hundred and sixteen years and was still open.

She turned and went down the steps past the uncle, who was ex - plaining the ledger to a girl of about eleven and explaining it well, and out into the lane with the buses on the corner, and did not go back.

CHAPTER 34

Thirty-Four

It came up in a search for something else.

She had been looking for the date of the second burning — the one in 1625, the one that reached the *Cangshu*, the one the scholar from Taipei had corrected in a thread of seventeen hundred replies — and the search returned, fourth from the top, a page she had never seen.

A mirror of the post. In a translation, on a site with a name like a weather station, with a comments section under it.

The mirror had been up since the third day and had four hundred replies. She read the first twenty and then stopped reading and went to the bottom, the way a person goes to the bottom of a thing when there is only one thing they are looking for.

The three hundred and ninety-ninth was from somebody in Hangzhou, two paragraphs, setting out a correction to the 1625 date with three citations. The four hundredth was from a user with no name and no history, in a lowercase hand, and it was five words long.

> *so it wasn't only me.*

Lin Li sat back from the table.

The stranger never appeared. Not in the forum in May 2012, with three hundred and forty replies and a picture of a doorway. Not in the four hundred here, or the thousand small hands that had carried the post out of the platform and into the world. A comment is all a ghost gets. It had never had anything else and it had never needed anything else, and in four hundred years of the book's life it had never had a face, and it never would, and it turned out not to need one.

She read it and then she read it again, and what she understood was not about herself.

She did not know who it was, and she never would. It could have been a woman of seventy in a coastal town who had kept a book in a wall and had told nobody. It could have been a man of fifty who had folded a memo out of what he believed was kindness and had thought about it every week since. It could have been a girl of nineteen with a channel and a strike and a paid tier and a drawer full of other people's sentences. It could have been a woman of twenty-nine who read every word for a living and had said *I know this one, I read him in school* into a queue.

It could have been the boy from Zhangzhou who had corrected her in a test paper in 1994, forty-three years old now, teaching the panel to his own classes.

It could have been anybody who had ever had to decide whether to keep a thing or let it be folded, and who had kept it, or let it, and had never said so to a living soul.

That was the whole of what the post had ever done, and it was enough. It had gone out unnamed and unsigned and been deleted in three days and mirrored four hundred times and translated into three languages, and the one thing it had ever done was tell one person, in lowercase, that they had not been alone. Not a thousand. One. And the one was the whole of the wager — sixty-four years old, a book that was going to get him killed, one reader hoped for and not expected — and it had paid out four hundred and twenty-five years later in a comments section on a site with a name like a weather station.

Nothing supernatural had occurred in any of it. Not at the parade, not in the wall, not in the jar, not in the voice in a dream, not in the four characters on a white page facing one sentence from a platform in the same font. Not once, at any point, in four hundred years. Every uncanny thing had had its ordinary explanation, and every ordinary explanation had been one sentence late, and the explanations had all been correct.

And a miracle had.

She did not reply. There was nothing to reply with, and the notebook was full and closed on the table beside the volume and she had not written in it since the second day after the publication.

She had not written anything since. Not a memo, not a reader, not a caption. She had copied, which was a different act: she had made a fair copy of the volume's contents leaf and the women's letter and the Geng correspondence, in her own hand, on the machine at the table, because a photocopy of a hand-copied book was a thing with no hands in it and Danran had been right about that. The pages were in a folder in the drawer. They were not for the committee and they were not for the museum and they were not for anybody, and they were going to be read by whoever came looking, which was the whole of the method.

She shut the laptop. The shell was on the page in front of it, holding down a note she had made in May about the date of the second burning, and she put the shell back on the page and moved the note to the pile, and the pile was growing, which was the whole of the work.

Then she sat for a while at the table under the window, in the bad light she had chosen, with the volume at one end of it and the shoe in the middle and the shell at the other, in a flat over a shop, in a street where the buses turned, in a city that was half hearth-smoke and half immortal, and did not write anything down.

Nothing had to be burned. Nothing was hidden. Nothing was on a panel.

The book was in a copy, and the copy was in a drawer, and the drawer was in a room in a flat over a shop in a street where the buses turned.

※

[the final document]

A leaf of the volume — the first of the blank ones, sewn in at the binding before there were any hands to write in them.

The hand is not fine. It is steady. The angle is still a stranger's, and less so with every line.

> *First page. The pen still works. — D.*

Colophon

半城烟火半城仙。

Bàn chéng yānhuoˇ bàn chéng xiān.

Half the city hearth-smoke, half the city immortal. — the saying Quanzhou says of itself

A novel in three parts named for Li Zhi's three books — A Book to Burn, A Book to Hide, and A Book to Burn, Continued — told from the desk of the editor hired to make the port's most dangerous thinker safe for a quin‑centenary. She writes the honest version first; the cutting is the job. Between the parts run leaves of a hand-copied volume of his letters, which pass down through four hundred years of hands — copied out in the Qianlong reign, kept through one burning and threatened by another — until the volume and a teacher's pen are signed over to a fact-checker, not for display.

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.

CARP CITY · 36 sections · 56,078 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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