Five Flavors of Goodbye

ZHEN AI

甄 艾

35 chapters · 5 interludes
53,544 words

Contents

01	The Ninth Grid	4
02	Salt and Sugar	9
03	The Man Who Lost Taste	14
04	Don't Drink That Soup	19
05	The Bride Who Comes Every Day	24
06	Sundown	29
07	A Ghost with the Wrong You	34
08	Phoenix Enters	39
i1	*The Wind Goddess*	*44*
09	Two Hundred Thousand Views	45
10	Forty Letters	49
11	Proportions	53
12	Fifty Thousand Yuan	57
13	The Vinegar Jar	61
14	Comfort Calls	66
15	The Tour	71
16	Salty	76
i2	*The Woman Who Remembered Everything*	*81*
17	Head Seven	83
18	Sour	87
19	Bitter	91
20	The Signature	96

21 Her Own Voice 100

22 Admission 104

i3 The Bridge and the Homeviewing Terrace *109*

23 The Ghost City 111

24 The Tape 116

25 Flash Mob 121

i4 The Eight Tears *126*

26 Suspension 128

27 The Pawn Ticket 133

28 Redemption 138

29 The Lucid Window 142

30 Forty-Nine Days 148

31 Raw Audio 153

i5 The Lovers Who Skipped the Dose *157*

32 The Old Address 159

33 River Lanterns 163

34 Epilogue: Qingming, One Year On 167

40 作者的话 (zuòzhě de huà) 171

CHAPTER 1

The Ninth Grid

The fog came off the river at four in the morning the way it always did in March, not rolling but seeping, filling the streets of Nanshan like water finding the low places in a floor. Meng Hui watched it from the window at the end of the corridor, where the palliative ward kept its one luxury: a view. Twelve beds, one kettle, a view of the Yuzhong skyline floating on nothing across the water, its towers lit against a sky that had not decided to be morning yet.

Bed 3 was Mr. Deng, seventy-nine, esophageal cancer, and he had been dying for eleven days with tremendous patience, the way a man waits for a bus he has been told is coming but cannot see.

At 4:40 he stopped waiting.

Hui knew before the monitor said anything. She had learned the sound of a room changing its mind — a shift in the breathing that was less a sound than an absence beginning, the way fog is the absence of distance. She crossed the corridor, touched his wrist out of habit rather than need, and pressed the call button anyway, because the rules said a doctor confirmed death and rules were how you kept your footing when the ground tilted.

"邓大爷 (Dèng dàye)," she said quietly. Uncle Deng. "It's me, Xiao Meng."

His eyes were half open. She reached up — she asked every family's permission the first time, and his daughter had told her *do whatever he needs, we live in Shenzhen, please* — and closed them gently with two fingers, the lids cool and astonishingly light, like closing a book someone else had fallen asleep over.

In the kitchenette down the hall there was a pot of soup she had put on at midnight.

That was the thing people found strange about her until they didn't. Every patient who came into this ward got asked one question on their first good day, and if they had no good days, it was asked of their family instead: *What do you want to taste one more time?*

Not what do you need. Not what are you afraid of. Taste.

Mr. Deng had answered on his second evening, around a mouthful of softened rice: 酸辣粉 (suānlàfěn), 他说 (tā shuō — he said) — the hot-and-sour glass noodles sold at Bayi Road, three kuai when he was a boy, eaten standing up with his brothers after the cinema, so spicy their ears rang, so sour their eyes watered, both of them laughing. He hadn't been able to manage noodles since February. So she had made him instead a broth that carried the idea of that bowl — the black vinegar sharp enough to make your jaw ache, the chili oil blooming red at the surface, glass noodles cut short enough to swallow without chewing — and he had held it in both hands like something rescued from a fire and drunk it down in small sips, weeping without noise, and afterward he slept better than he had in weeks, and in the morning he said: 幺妹，明天还煮不煮？(yāomèi, míngtiān hái zhǔ bù zhǔ?) *Little sister, will you cook tomorrow too?*

She had said 要得 (yào de). Yes. Of course. Tomorrow.

There would be no tomorrow now. The soup sat in the pot, going flat.

Gan Lu arrived at five, because Gan Lu arrived at five whether she had left at midnight or not, smelling of tobacco and hospital soap. The director of the palliative unit was a square woman of fifty-six with a crew cut gone iron-grey who had spent fifteen years in intensive care before walking away from it, and who still stood, sometimes, at the doorways of rooms where machines used to scream, as though listening for them.

"Time?" she said.

"Four-forty."

"Peaceful?"

"He waited for the fog."

Gan Lu looked out the window at the grey. "Sentimental," she said, which was how she said *yes*. Then: "Call the daughter in Shenzhen. You talk; I'll sign. And Hui—" She paused at the door of the kitchenette, sniffing the air like a customs officer. Vinegar, chili, the sweet rot-sweetness of long-simmered bone. "Who's that for?"

"It was for Bed 3."

"Pour it out," Gan Lu said, not unkindly. "New man comes tonight. Liver, end stage. Big name in hotpot once upon a time." Her mouth twisted. "The family says he hasn't tasted anything since January."

※

He Sanxi arrived at nine, by ambulance, because his daughter had insisted even though he had told her a stretcher was for corpses and he could still walk to his own execution. He was seventy-eight years old and small in the way that men shrink when the body begins reclaiming its loans, all bone and sinew and sunburnt neck, with hands that looked cast in bronze and then dropped. His medical file was thick. His luggage was one canvas bag that clinked.

"What's in the bag?" Xiao Man asked at reception, helping lift it onto the bed. Li Xiaoman was twenty-four, three months into her first job, still moved patients' things as though they might break or bite.

"Bottles," He Sanxi said. His voice was gravel poured slowly. "My brine. Thirty-year brine. If they think I'll eat their hospital swill—"

"Papa," said the daughter on the phone, tinny with distance, "please."

He batted the air near the phone as if the phone itself were a fly. Hui took in the rest of him: the jaundice climbing his collar like ivy, the distended belly under the blanket, the legs already thinning above swollen ankles. Liver cancer, hospice-referred. Weeks, maybe. Dr. Tan's note said *pain management priority; prognosis poor; patient declines further oncology.*

"You're the soup one," he said to Hui. It wasn't a question. "The girl on Nanshan. People talk."

"Do they."

"They say if you ask you what you want to eat before dying, you should answer carefully." His eyes, yellow-rimmed, were still quick. Hotpot men's eyes — trained to read a customer's face through steam and decide in one second what they could be sold. "They say you take it seriously."

"I take it seriously."

"Hm." He lay back, exhausted by four sentences and an ambulance ride, and stared at the ceiling as if it had disappointed him for years. "Then ask me tomorrow. Tonight I'm too tired to lie about it."

Xiao Man, making the bed's other side, caught Hui's eye with a look that was half alarm, half delight. New ones were either sweet or difficult and the difficult ones, Gan Lu liked to say, were the only ones worth the salt in your tears. Hui

wrote on the whiteboard by his bed, under today's date, the single word she wrote for everyone:

味道 (wèidào)：？

Flavor: ?

※

At six that evening, before her shift ended, she went down four floors and outside to the loading bay behind the incinerator chute, where Gan Lu smoked where the cameras couldn't see her, between stacks of collapsed cardboard and a mop bucket older than the district.

"Well?" Gan Lu said.

"He wouldn't answer the question."

"So he's honest. Good. Honest men die easier." Gan Lu shook ash loose. Below the retaining wall, the city ran downhill in staircases and fig trees toward Nanbin Road and the brown water of the Yangtze, where an egret stood in the shallows on one leg, doing its impression of patience. Across the river, the eight sail-shaped towers of Raffles City straddled Chaotianmen like a ship of glass run aground on the peninsula's bow. In the fog they had no tops. They simply rose and dissolved, which was, Hui thought, not a bad description of a person.

"Gan Lu." Hui watched the egret. "Why does a hotpot master stop tasting?"

"Chemo kills taste buds. Or the liver goes and everything turns to ash." Gan Lu stubbed the cigarette against the wall with a practiced twist, saving the butt in a tin — she gave the full tins to the sanitation aunties, who resold them; waste offended her more than smoking did. "Or a heart goes first and the tongue just follows. Why?"

"He's got thirty-year brine in a canvas bag. You don't keep thirty-year brine for yourself. You keep it for customers. For family." Hui turned it over. Something about the bag bothered her the way a stone works into a shoe on a long stair. "Nobody's come with him. Daughter's on the phone. From Shenzhen."

"Mm." Gan Lu said nothing for a moment. The fog was lifting off the river below; the far bank sharpened. "You know what my mother said? Anybody can cook for the hungry. Takes a real cook to feed somebody who's dying. Because a

dying man isn't hungry, Hui. He's remembering. You're not feeding the body. You're feeding whatever's still awake in there." She pushed off the wall. "Get his story before you get his order. And go home. You've got a mother, don't you? Go be a daughter while you still get to argue with her."

Hui rode the number 304 bus home along Nanbin Road with the window open despite March, because the river smell meant home the way incense meant temple: diesel, wet stone, the green-rot sweetness of the shallows. On her phone, a message from her brother, sent at 2:14 p.m., when she'd been mid-shift:

范哥在江北装货。晚上妈那儿你去？我这边赶不回来。 (Fàn gē zài Jiāngběi zhuāng huò. Wǎnshang mā nàr nǐ qù? Wǒ zhèbiān gǎn bù huílái.) *I'm hauling freight in Jiangbei. Can you do Mom's place tonight? Can't make it back.*

And beneath it, sent an hour later without waiting for her reply, the message that changed the shape of her spring, though she didn't know it yet — a link, three words, and then, in her brother's thumb-typed style, no punctuation at all:

[link] 长明科技 你看过没 (Chángmíng Kējì, nǐ kànguò méi?) *Everlight Tech. Have you seen this?*

She didn't click it. The bus crossed beneath the cableway, and the towers of Hongya Cave slid past gold-lit and dripping, and she stood with the crowd at the doors thinking about a pot of soup gone flat in a kitchenette, and a man with bronze hands guarding a canvas bag, and what it costs to answer honestly, the day someone finally asks you what you want to taste again.

At the top of her own stairs, key in the lock, she clicked the link after all.

The page loaded slowly, then all at once: eight sail-shaped towers. A logo like a lamp flame. And a slogan in characters tall as a doorway, white on night-black, already printed on billboards, already wrapped across bus shelters, already everywhere a person from Chongqing was about to look:

别喝那碗汤。 (Bié hē nà wǎn tāng.) **一切都可以留住。** (Yīqiè dōu kěyǐ liúzhù.)

Don't drink that soup. Everything can be kept.

CHAPTER 2

Salt and Sugar

Her mother had salted the tea again.

Hui stood in the kitchen doorway of the old two-room flat above Longmenhao and watched her lift the cup with both hands, sip, wince at whatever it gave her, and sip again — because in Su Manyun's world you did not refuse what was set before you, least of all your own cooking. The tea was a cheap jasmine green, bought in half-kilo bags from the market auntie who still called her 曼云姐 (Mànyún jiě — Sister Manyun) as if the shop were around the corner instead of under a bubble-tea franchise now. The salt sat beside the kettle in a ceramic jar painted with a carp.

"*mā*," Hui said gently. "That's the salt jar."

Su Manyun looked up. Sixty-six years old, hair cut short and practical since the sixties of some decade or other, face still carrying the architecture of the woman who had run a soup counter for twenty-eight years: level brows, unimpressed mouth, eyes that took inventory. The inventory was failing now. She looked at the jar as if it had been rearranged by burglars.

"That's not salt," she said.

"No, Ma."

"It's—" Her mother's hand hovered over the carp jar, fingers spread, landing on the word the way a crane lands on a wire, wobbling until it held. "忘不掉 (wàng bù diào)," she said. *The unforgettable.* She laughed, short and surprised at herself, and put the lid back on. "The salt is the unforgettable. Listen to me."

"You're fine, Ma."

"I am not fine." But she said it mildly, the way you correct a stranger's weather report, and carried the salted tea to the table anyway and drank it, because waste offended her more than error did. "Your father drank it salty," she said to the middle distance. "River man. All that water, and he wanted salt."

Hui took the cup on her way past, swapped it for fresh tea, poured the ruined pot into the mop bucket by the stove where the morning's had also gone, and did

not say — for perhaps the four-hundredth time — *Ma, we talked about the jars, we moved them, we changed them, we bought you jars with different lids,* because the lids made no difference. A carp is a carp. Her mother's kitchen was arranged by sixty years of muscle memory, and muscle memory does not take delivery of new information; it simply keeps serving the old orders.

In the front room, the television murmured a costume drama to an audience of one folded blanket. The aide, Wang Guixiang — 王孃孃 (Wáng niángniang), Auntie Wang, fifty-eight, Buddhist, built like a door — was folding laundry with the serene efficiency of someone who had raised three children on a boat. She nodded toward the bedroom and lowered her voice.

"Sundowning early today," she said. "Four o'clock she wanted her coat. Said she had to go open the shop, the steam was waiting." Auntie Wang smoothed a towel into a perfect rectangle. "I told her the shop's closed for renovation. That works best. Renovation she accepts. Closed forever, no. She argues with closed forever."

"What did you do?"

"We went downstairs. I said we'd walk past and check." Auntie Wang's smile was small and hard. "We walked past the bus stop twice. By then she forgot the steam."

Downstairs past the bus stop. Hui filed the sentence next to the other sentences she kept in the drawer marked *later*, which was getting full. Aloud she said, "Thank you, *niángniang*. I'll do dinner tonight. Go home early — your knee."

"My knee is seventy years old and demands to be obeyed," Auntie Wang agreed, and left with the dignity of a general ceding favorable ground.

※

Dinner was 酸萝卜老鸭汤 (suān luóbo lǎo yā tāng), sour-radish duck soup, because March was damp and the damp got into bones, and because it was the first thing after congee her mother had ever taught her to cook. You needed a duck with some fat on it, pickled radish sour enough to make your molars sing, old ginger, dried chillies bruised once, and four hours of low fire and no lid-lift-

ing. *Tāng shì fēncùn, bù shì fāngzi*, her mother always said. Soup is proportion, not recipe. A recipe you could steal. Proportion lived in the wrist.

Her mother ate two bowls and criticized both.

"Too much ginger."

"Yes, Ma."

"And the radish — whose radish? The market auntie's?"

"The same as always."

"The same as always would be better." But she finished the bowl, tipping the last of the broth up in the old shop way, one smooth motion, bowl angled so the handle of the spoon clicked against her ring — a ring she hadn't worn in years. Hui had stopped noticing the phantom click years ago. Tonight it went through her like a needle through cloth.

After dinner her mother washed the bowls. This was non-negotiable; the aides had all learned it. A woman who had washed ten thousand bowls in a shop the width of a van did not sit idle while others washed one. She washed slowly, thoroughly, holding each bowl to the light, and while she washed she talked — to Hui, to the tap, to whoever was listening in whatever year she happened to be living in.

"Tomorrow the fish man brings white crucian at seven. If you let him bring the farm ones I'll know. I always know." Scrub. Rinse. Light. "And tell 茴茴 (Huíhui — the name only her mother still used)—"

"I'm here, Ma."

"—tell Huíhui the girl can't just watch the pot. A pot watched never boils right. You have to listen to it. Listening is the whole trade." She set the last bowl in the rack and dried her hands on the towel folded over the rail, exactly where the towel lived for thirty years, except that here there was no rail, only a hook, and her hands searched the wall for a rail that wasn't there until Hui guided them to the hook, and her mother said, without any change of face at all: "They've moved things."

"Just a little, Ma."

"People move things." Su Manyun looked at her own hands, which were steady, which were a cook's hands, which could still find the center of a bowl

blind. Then she said the thing she said some nights, in the tone of a woman reporting a leak in the roof: "It started when they knocked down the stairs."

※

Here is what Hui did not say, standing in that kitchen: that the stairs were not knocked down. Not entirely. That the stone stairway her mother meant — 十八梯 (Shíbātī), Shibati, the Eighteen Terraces, two hundred stone steps stitched up the hillside between the upper city and the lower, worn concave by two hundred years of feet — had been fought over, half-spared, fenced, rebuilt, reopened, relaunched. That you could visit it now. That there was a plaque.

Here is what she did not say: that in 2010, when the red character 拆 (chāi) — *demolish* — bloomed on every wall like a rash, and the demolition crews came with their drills before dawn, Su Manyun had gone down into the shop for the last time and come back up the stairs carrying one thing. Not the till. Not the portraits of the ancestors. Not even the ledger with thirty years of accounts in pencil.

A ladle. Brass, long-handled, its bowl dented silver where five thousand ladles-full had struck the rim of the pot. Her mother's mother had cooked wedding banquets with it in Jiangbei before the war; her mother had hung it on a nail by the stove and touched it every morning before lighting the fire, the way you'd touch a shrine. When the shop came down, the ladle went into a pillowcase, and the pillowcase went under her mother's bed, and there it stayed through three flats and eleven years, surfacing only now and then — to be polished on festival days, mostly, with ash and oil, until it shone like something alive.

Hui cooked with it now, in this flat, on Sundays. Her mother pretended not to notice. Some inheritances are too heavy to mention.

"They didn't knock down all the stairs, Ma," Hui said. "You can go see them. There's a—"

"There's a plaque," her mother said, disgusted. "I know what there is. There's a plaque and a coffee shop and young people taking photographs of each other where 陈师傅 (Chén shīfu)'s barbershop was." She turned from the sink, and for a moment her eyes were perfectly, terribly present — the whole woman, the

cook, the bookkeeper of ten thousand breakfasts, looking out from behind her own forgetting like light through a shuttered window. "They kept the stones, Huíhui. They kept the stones and sold everything else."

Then the moment passed, the way fog closes, and she was tired and ready for bed and wanted to know whether the fish man would be trusted with the crucian order, and Hui walked her to the bedroom and tucked the blanket the way you tuck a child who used to tuck you, and turned off the light, and stood a moment in the dark of the doorway listening to her mother settle into sleep with a sound like a small fire banking down.

On the fridge, held by a magnet shaped like a chili, was Duoduo's latest drawing — her niece, six years old, who drew the same family portrait over and over with variations. Four figures. Grandpa in the river, blue crayon, waving. Grandma floating above the house, arms out, flying. Papa's van with wings. And herself, holding Hui's hand, drawn tallest of all, which Hui had decided not to read anything into and failed to stop reading things into nightly.

She photographed nothing. She washed the teacup her mother had drunk from, wiped the carp jar dry, moved it — uselessly, lovingly — three centimeters further from the kettle, and went out onto the little balcony where the fig tree from the lane below reached up its leaves, and stood in the dark smelling the river and the wet stone and, faintly, from some open window streets away, the beef-tallow ghost of someone's late hotpot, and let herself think the thought she kept behind the door marked *later*, the one with the full drawer:

One day I will stand in this kitchen and she will ask me who I am.

What will I feed her then?

Below in the lane, a scooter passed with its radio going, some old song about boats. In her pocket, her phone buzzed once — her brother, 9:47 p.m., no punctuation:

看了没 (kàn le méi?) *Did you look?*

CHAPTER 3

The Man Who Lost Taste

The trouble began on the third morning, with breakfast.

The ward kitchenette was a narrow galley at the corridor's end: two burners, a rice cooker, a refrigerator that hummed like a monk, a window over the sink through which, if you leaned, you could see one slice of river. Hui had claimed it the way soldiers claim a hill. Into it, over the years, had migrated her mother's brass ladle, a crate of Sichuan peppercorns, three grades of vinegar decanted into unmarked bottles so the dietitian wouldn't lecture her, and a stockpot older than some of the nurses.

At seven she carried Sanxi's tray in: congee to the texture the doctor ordered, steamed egg custard, pickled greens from her own jar because hospital pickles are an apology, not a food.

He looked at the tray the way an emperor looks at tribute from a province that has rebelled.

"What is this."

"Breakfast."

"This," said He Sanxi, "is water that has apologised to some rice." He pushed it six centimeters away with one bronze finger. "Girl. Do you know who I am?"

"You're the man in bed 9 who hasn't touched his breakfast."

"I—" The laugh escaped before he could catch it, and cost him a coughing fit, and Hui was there with the cup and the tissues and the flat palm between his shoulder blades, counting the wet rattle of his breath, and by the time it passed he was too tired to be emperor anymore. He lay back. The canvas bag sat on the windowsill where he could see it, guarding its bottles.

"Thirty years," he said to the ceiling. "My brine. You know what brine is, girl?"

"Pickling liquor."

"Pickling—" He said the word as if stepping over something dead on the road. "Brine is time. Salt, spice, patience. Every pot in this city, every hotpot table

from here to Jiefangbei, they all come from somewhere. I'll tell you where. Docks." He raised one finger, and for the length of a story he was not a shrunken man in a hospice bed but a broad-backed man on a river stair, and his voice found the register of a man used to being heard over steam and crowd. "Nineteen seventy. Ma'an Shi docks. Boatmen off the trackers' ropes, half frozen, paid in copper coins and hunger. What do you do with water buffalo guts nobody else wants? You boil them in tallow and chili at a split pot standing up, that's what. That's the beginning of everything you people eat now with your little gloves and your little aprons." The finger dropped. "Nine grids. *jiǔgōnggé*. You know why nine grids?"

"Different cooking times. Offal fast, tripe quick, bones slow—"

"Different *people*," Sanxi said. "Strangers sharing one pot who didn't trust each other's chopsticks. One grid each. The middle grid burns hottest — that's for the man who pays. Corners simmer — that's for whoever's waiting." He closed his eyes. "Center grid never fully boils clean, no matter how long you run the fire. Old tallow sits in the bottom of the center grid and seasons every pot after. Like sin," he said, almost fondly. "Like memory."

Hui wrote none of this down, and forgot none of it.

"Your daughter," she said, when the silence had settled comfortably, "called the ward this morning. Asking what you'd eat."

The change came over him like weather. The open face shut; the storyteller left the room.

"She called the ward," he repeated. "Not me."

"You've switched phones off."

"My phone is my phone." He turned his face to the window, to the sliver of river. "She can call again when I'm dead. It won't be long now. She'll get her chance to be a good daughter at the funeral, in front of everyone. Very moving. Everyone will say, aiya, look how she cries."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened." A pause, exactly the length of a lie choosing its shoes. "Nothing that matters now. Feed me something with a taste and stop asking about family. Family is for people whose bodies still work."

※

That afternoon Hui stood in the galley and fought the first real battle of his war.

Here is what she knew that the file did not say: that taste does not leave all at once. Chemo strips the tongue's fine edges first — the top notes go, the perfume of scallion oil, the high whistle of Sichuan pepper — then the middle fades, sour flattening into tin, sweet into paste. But the base holds longest. Salt. Fat. Umami deep enough to feel in the jaw. The bottom of the center grid, as the old man himself might have said: old tallow, sitting under everything, refusing to boil clean away.

So she built downward. A clear broth, 清汤 (qīngtāng — clear soup), but clear the way glass is clear — beef bones cracked and blanched, then eight hours at a shiver, never a boil, skimmed with a ladle held flat so it took only what floated and left the depth alone. No chili, no pepper, nothing above the waterline. At the last minute, into the bowl itself: a thread-thin raft of cured ham, a few drops of chicken fat skimmed gold off the top of yesterday's stock, salt measured not in spoonfuls but in dissolves, tasted off the back of a cold spoon the way perfumers smell strips.

She carried it in at four, when the light comes low across the ward floor.

Sanxi was asleep, mouth open, breath doing its wet work. She set the bowl down where the smell would reach him before waking did.

His nostrils moved first. Then his eyes opened, already suspicious, already an emperor preparing to be insulted — and then the smell arrived, and Hui watched forty years fall off a man's face in the space of one inhale. Not recognition of the broth. Recognition of the *kind* of broth. The kind that existed before packets, before chains, before the young people photographed their food instead of eating it.

He sat up without help, which he had refused to do all day.

He took the spoon. He tasted — correctly, professionally: tip of the tongue, then a full mouthful, then closed his eyes and let it sit, jaw working slightly, reading the bottom of the bowl the way a blind man reads a face.

Then he put down the spoon and began to weep. Silently, furiously, tears sliding sideways into the wrinkles beside his nose, hands flat on the blanket so as not to shake the bowl.

"Hey," Hui said quietly. "Hey. Is it too much?"

"It's nothing," he said. "There's nothing in it. That's the trick, isn't it. Nothing in it." He wiped his face with the heel of his hand, angry at the hand, angry at the face. "I tasted it. I *tasted* it, girl. First thing since January that isn't cardboard or ash." He looked up at her, red-eyed, imperial again. "Who taught you to skim like that?"

"A woman in Shibati," Hui said. "She ran a soup shop. She said a recipe can be stolen, but proportion lives in the wrist."

"Hm." He studied her with the long frankness of the dying, who have stopped spending politeness. "Shibati. Soup shop. So the talk is true. Little Meng the goddess of Nanshan, ladling out the five-flavor soup." He tapped the whiteboard by his bed, where *wèidào*：？ still stood unanswered. "You write that question for every patient?"

"For every patient."

"And if a man has no answer? If the question's a cruelty?" His voice roughened. "What do you write for a man whose own cooking turns to ash in his mouth? Thirty years I fed this city. Thirty years, ten thousand pots, and now the city's gone and my tongue's gone and—" The cough took him again, longer this time, and when it released him he lay small against the pillow, spent, and said the true thing at last, in the voice underneath all his voices:

"There's one pot I never made. One. In fifty years behind a stove." His yellow eyes fixed on the ceiling. "And now I can't remember exactly how it went. Isn't that funny. The one recipe I never wrote down, and the one tongue that knew it is going rotten in my head."

Hui pulled the chair closer and sat, forearms on knees, the way you sit for a long story or a confession.

"Tell me the parts you remember," she said. "We'll find the rest together. *Tāng shì fēncùn, bù shì fāngzi*. Proportion lives in the wrist — maybe yours remembers even if your tongue doesn't. We'll cook it wrong until we cook it right. I've got time."

Outside, the fog was burning off the river. Somewhere below the window an egret lifted from the shallows, unhurried, white against the brown water, and flew upstream.

"Stupid girl," said He Sanxi, almost gently, and reached for the spoon again, and finished the bowl while it was still hot.

CHAPTER 4

Don't Drink That Soup

The invitation came through channels, which meant nobody had to sign their name to it. District Health Bureau letterhead: a *Smart Eldercare and Digital Wellbeing Demonstration Session*, to be held in the health center's conference room, attendance encouraged for clinical leads. Beneath the bureaucratic seal, in smaller type, the sponsor's name sat where a sponsor's name sits: Chángmíng Kējì 有限公司 (yǒuxiàn gōngsī). Everlight Technology Co., Ltd.

"They're calling it digital companionship," said Dr. Tan, reading over Hui's shoulder in the corridor. He was forty-something, precise, permanently mildly startled by the size of his own hands. "Half my oncology colleagues already use one of their voice products. Families buy them for patients in the provinces. It's —"

"It's what."

"Cheaper than train tickets," he said, and went to see about someone's morphine.

The session was set for the second Thursday of April, and by then every screen in the building that could display a screensaver displayed a lamp flame. Gan Lu stood in front of the ward's ancient desktop for a long moment, watching the little flame flicker against the black, then reached past Xiao Man and switched the machine off at the wall.

"We don't burn lamps in daylight," she said. Nobody asked her what she meant, because everyone understood.

※

They came at two o'clock: four of them, lanyarded, carrying the confident luggage of people who fly often. At their head a woman from the district office made introductions with the smoothness of tape played at speed, and behind her a broad man in a suit cut like armor introduced himself as 沈聪 (Shěn Cōng),

Shen Cong, chief operating officer, and shook hands around the room with a grip calibrated to be remembered.

"And our founder," Shen Cong said, stepping aside with the fluency of long practice, "程一苇 (Chéng Yīwěi), our CEO."

Hui had been arranging chairs. She stopped arranging chairs.

He looked older, obviously. Everyone did. But the man standing in the doorway of the conference room of the Nanshan Community Health Center, scanning the room the way careful people scan rooms — exits, faces, the one person not yet seated — was recognizably the boy who used to sit two rows behind her in Class 7 at the Shapingba key high school, fixing the projector when it failed, which was always, without being asked and without appearing to care whether anyone noticed. Thin then, thin now. A face built for stillness. When his eyes found hers, they stopped.

"孟茴 (Mèng Huí)," he said.

Not a question. He pronounced it correctly, the way you pronounce a word you learned young and never unlearned: huì, the fennel character, the one every teacher had stumbled over for three years.

"Chéng Yīwěi." She heard her own voice do something complicated and settle on flat. "You're taller than your press photos."

A ripple of laughter from the officials; Shen Cong's smile tightened by a millimeter. Yiwei didn't smile. He looked at her for one more second — taking inventory, she thought later, the way she took inventory of a new patient — and then bowed slightly to the room and took his seat at the far end of the table, leaving the head of it for the officials.

The presentation was polished. That had to be admitted. Shen Cong talked numbers first: China's fifteen million dementia patients, its ten million deaths a year, its hospice beds you could count per city on two hands. Then the slides turned, and there it was in warm lighting: a grandmother's face rendered in soft pixels, mid-laugh, on a ten-inch tablet propped beside a teacup.

"Our three tiers," Shen Cong said. "回声 (huíshēng), Echo — nine hundred eighty yuan. Voice only, trained from thirty seconds of audio. For most families this is enough. 影 (yǐng), Shadow — nine thousand eight hundred, including the

tablet: face, voice, conversational memory from chat logs. And 长 (cháng), Eternal, our concierge tier, which includes—" a beat, masterly, "—scheduled calls. Proactive outreach. The avatar doesn't just answer. It *misses* you."

In the third row, Xiao Man wrote *it misses you* in her notebook and underlined it twice, though whether in hunger or in horror she could not afterward have said.

Then the campaign reel. The lights dimmed further. Music: guqin, then strings. An animated old woman on a bridge in mist, ladling soup into an endless queue of souls — rendered beautifully, tenderly, in ink-wash style that any art school would have failed for plagiarism of tradition. The queue drank and forgot and walked into colored light. And then the music broke. The old woman raised her ladle toward the viewer, toward *you*, and a red line drew itself across the frame like a curtain coming down, and the type came up huge and white:

Bié hē nà wǎn tāng. Yīqiè dōu kěyǐ liúzhù. Don't drink that soup. Everything can be kept.

"Qingming season launch," Shen Cong said, into the silence. "Focus groups loved the inversion. Everyone knows the story. Grandmother refuses to let go of you." He spread his hands. "Everlight is not in the business of death. We are in the business of unfinished sentences. Every family in this district has one. A father who never heard thank you. A mother who never met the grandchild. We keep the sentence open."

Silence, of the kind that follows magic tricks performed competently.

It was Gan Lu who spoke first, arms crossed, in the tone she used for pharmaceutical reps. "Consent. Whose?"

"The family provides materials—"

"I asked whose consent."

"The deceased's prior authorization is naturally ideal," Shen Cong said smoothly, "and our premium intake includes a living-will module. In practice, families act on behalf of elders, exactly as families have always acted on behalf of elders. The Civil Code gives close relatives standing in matters of likeness and voice. Article 994. We operate within the letter of the law, Director Gan. Within it generously."

"The law," Gan Lu said, "is a floor, not a plan."

"And yet," said Shen Cong, agreeably, "it is the floor we all stand on."

Yiwei spoke exactly once during the session, near the end, when an official asked what distinguished Everlight from the Taobao shops doing resurrections for five thousand yuan. He stood, buttoned nothing, kept his hands loose.

"Accuracy," he said. "Dialects fail in cheap clones. Chongqinghua collapses into Mandarin with a cold. We spent two years on Southwestern Mandarin phonemes — the falling tone, the swallowed finals, *yào de* not yào dé but the way your grandmother actually throws it away. If you're going to return someone's voice to them," he said, to the room but looking down the table at no one, "it must be the voice they actually lost. Anything else is a stranger wearing their face."

Nobody clapped. Officials nodded and made notes. The session dissolved into tea and business cards, and Hui found herself at the window with a paper cup of barley tea she wasn't drinking, and found Yiwei beside her, also not drinking his.

"You've done well," she said, because someone had to say something and neither of them would survive pleasantries.

"My mother wanted stability," he said. "I gave her a listed company. She still asks when I'll take a proper job." He turned the paper cup in his long fingers. "Your mother ran the shop at Shibati. The noodle one, with the—"

"Soup shop. Su Ji."

"With the brass ladle." He said it before thinking, and she watched him hear himself say it. "I used to eat there," he added, evenly. "Third year. Before the seven-thirty self-study session. 一两小面 (yī liǎng xiǎomiàn — a one-liang bowl of small noodles), extra greens. Your mother used to give me the broken noodles at half price because I was—"

"Poor," said Hui.

"—frugal," said Cheng Yiwei, CEO of Everlight Tech, and for a moment both of them were seventeen again, on opposite sides of a steam-clouded counter, one eating fast before study hall, one carrying bowls because her mother's wrist had begun to ache.

The officials were calling him. He put down the untouched tea.

"For what it's worth," he said, pausing, "the campaign wasn't mine. Focus groups." A muscle moved along his jaw. "But I signed it. So it's mine." He held out a card, both hands, properly. On the back, in pen, small characters, already written — which meant either foresight or rehearsal:

Tāng shì fēncùn, bù shì fāngzi Soup is proportion, not recipe.

"I'd like to see the ward sometime," he said. "If the director permits. Not to sell anything. To listen."

"He Sanxi is in bed 9," Hui said. "Come at six. He tells stories at six. If you want to know what this city loses when it loses an old tongue, bring your ears and leave the lanyard upstairs."

She left him holding the moment like a bowl too hot to set down, and went back to work, and did not look at the card again until her bus home crossed beneath the cableway and the river flashed silver-brown below, at which point she took it out and read the back and thought, with sudden vertigo, of her mother's ladle hanging on its nail, touched every morning for luck before the fire was lit.

Some inheritances are too heavy to mention.

She put the card in the drawer marked *later*. The drawer was getting very full indeed.

CHAPTER 5

The Bride Who Comes Every Day

Bed 5 belonged to Lu Shouyi, who was eighty years old and getting married today.

He got married most days. Some mornings he woke as a bridegroom in 1970, in a borrowed jacket with a red-paper flower pinned over his heart, and could not be talked out of it by any means short of distraction. Other mornings he was a boy again at the textile factory gate, waiting for a girl to come off shift. The disease had taken his map of years and left him the weather instead: whatever season his heart woke in, that was the day it was.

The diagnosis said advanced vascular dementia, atrial fibrillation, a heart working on collateral circulation and stubbornness. The chart said *pleasant, disoriented, episodic agitation.* What it meant in practice was that Lu Shouyi spent his days in courteous pursuit of one person.

"阿蘅 (Ā Héng)," he'd say to whoever passed his bed, urgent, apologetic, both hands gripping the blanket edge. "A-Heng. Have you seen my A-Heng? She works the spinning frames. Tell her—no, don't tell her, she'll worry. Just tell her I'm here."

At two o'clock every afternoon, she came.

Feng Yufang was seventy-seven, small and round and quick, with white hair permed into a cloud and reading glasses pushed up on it like a bird's nest. She arrived by two buses from Dadukou with a thermos of tea and a cloth bag of peeled edamame, and she stood at the door of Bed 5, took one breath — Hui watched her take it, every day, this breath, like a diver's — and became nineteen years old.

"同志 (tóngzhì — comrade)," she would say, in a voice pitched high with shyness, half hiding behind the doorframe. "Excuse me. Is someone sitting there?" And she'd indicate the chair beside the bed, the way you'd indicate a seat on a crowded tram in 1970, eyes down, ears pink.

Lu Shouyi would come up out of the pillow like a sunflower finding the sun.

"No! No one! Sit, sit — *tóngzhì*, have we—" and then the great work began, the slow wonder of courtship, resumed each afternoon from zero: What workshop are you in? Spinning Three? My cousin says your output quota is the best in the plant. Do you — would you — there's a picture show at the workers' palace on Saturday —

And Feng Yufang, seventy-seven years old, in love for fifty-five years with a man who no longer knew her face, would giggle — actually giggle, an artifact of a girl dead forty years — and cover her mouth, and say she would have to ask her mother.

※

Hui had known about them, obviously. Everyone on the ward knew. New staff were told the way you're told which stair squeaks. But knowing about a thing is not the same as standing in its weather, and it was April before she was on shift when the two o'clock bus arrived, and she stood at the nurses' station with Xiao Man and watched the whole courtship happen across the ward floor in murmurs and blushes and the offering of one shelled edamame, passed from his fingers to hers with ceremony, and felt something in her chest come loose and swing.

"She comes every day," Xiao Man whispered. "Every single day. Two buses. She told me — when he's like this, he doesn't grieve. He doesn't know anything was lost. So nothing is." Xiao Man's voice wobbled between awe and tears. "Isn't it — ge, isn't that the happiest thing you've ever seen?"

And it was. That was the problem. It was the happiest thing Hui had ever seen, and it had been built out of the exact material her mother was losing, and she could not stop doing the arithmetic underneath it.

If forgetting makes him this happy — if the disease burned away everything except the best day of his life and gave it to him fresh every morning like laundry — then what, precisely, does Everlight propose to preserve? Which version? This one? The one where he waits at a factory gate forever?

And what do I want for my mother? The shop? Or rest from the shop?

That evening she cooked the wedding soup.

She asked Feng Yufang first, quietly, outside in the corridor, and watched the old woman's performance fall away all at once like a coat. Up close, out of character, Feng Yufang's eyes were tired in the bone-deep way of people who have been carrying a full load for years on a road that only goes uphill.

"He'll know it," Yufang said. "红糖醪糟蛋 (hóngtáng láozāo dàn). Brown sugar, fermented rice, the poached egg. His mother made it when we — well." The blush again, but this one sixty years old, earned. "In those days you didn't dare hold hands until the wedding. Then at the banquet his aunt put one of these in front of me and everyone sang so loud I thought the ceiling would come down." She patted Hui's arm with a hand like warm bread. "Sweet things, little Meng. That's the trick with him. Whatever year he wakes up in, sweet things are true in all of them."

So the next afternoon, while the light came long across the ward floor, Hui set up a tray at Bed 5's bedside table: two bowls. Brown sugar dissolved into dark amber; the rice wine mash, homemade from Auntie Wang's recipe, clouding the water white; eggs poached soft, their whites just set. Steam rising. And when Feng Yufang came in at two o'clock sharp — because one bowl was not enough, the ritual demanded two, bridegroom and bride — Hui wheeled the second bowl in behind her like a prop handed to an actor mid-scene.

"*tóngzhì*," said Feng Yufang, breath taken, performance donned, "you shouldn't have."

"I should!" declared Lu Shouyi, eighty years old, master of nothing anymore but this moment, gesturing grandly at the tray with the pride of a man whose entire estate is one tray of sweet soup. "It's — I asked the little comrade nurse. It's what they serve at weddings. For luck. A-Heng—" and here he leaned toward her, conspiratorial, urgent, seventeen years of courage gathering itself, "—after we eat. There's something I want to ask you. Something important."

"You can ask me now," said his wife of fifty-five years, whom he had married once and was courting for the ten-thousandth time, her voice not entirely steady. "I'm not easily frightened."

"It wouldn't be proper." He sat up as straight as his heart allowed, a man in a borrowed jacket with a paper flower over his heart. "When I ask, I'll be ready. I'll have — I'm saving up. For a wardrobe. Red lacquer. You'll see."

They ate. The spoons clinked. Outside, the fog had lifted early and the river ran bright.

She walked Feng Yufang out at four-thirty, as far as the bus stop by the gate, because the old woman's knees had opinions about stairs and her dignity had opinions about arms.

"You want to ask," Feng Yufang said, not unkindly, watching the road. "You've been wanting to ask for two weeks. Nurses ask sideways. You're not a nurse under the apron, you're a cook, so I'll save us both the recipe: you want to know if it hurts, playing the girl every day for a man who's forgotten the woman."

"A little," Hui admitted.

"Every day, the first year. Then you learn the arithmetic." The bus came around the corner in a wall of diesel and brake-dust. "People think memory is what love is stored in. It isn't, 小妹妹 (xiǎomèimei — little sister). Memory's just the cupboard. The love is in the body — my hands knew his buttons before my head knew his name, and his hands still know mine, see? He offered me the best shelled bean today like it was coronation day." She climbed aboard with the board's help, turned on the step, and delivered, through the closing doors, the sentence that would follow Hui up many staircases afterward: "The disease took his cupboard, girl. Everything he loves is still on the table."

The bus pulled away. Hui stood a long moment in its exhaust, revising, silently, a speech she'd been drafting for the founders of glass towers — something about everything being kept versus nothing remaining — and finding, in the light of a seventy-seven-year-old woman's arithmetic, that her draft had been missing an entire clause.

Xiao Man cried quietly at the station and pretended it was the onions from lunch. Gan Lu, passing on her rounds, stopped for exactly four seconds, looked at the two old people bent over their wedding bowls, and moved on with her jaw set like a woman carrying something heavy down many stairs.

It was later — lights-out, the ward breathing its layered breathing, Hui doing the last round with her pen torch — that she found herself standing at Bed 5 in the dark, watching an old man sleep with his hands curled loosely toward each

other on the blanket, as though even unconscious he were holding someone's hand.

Everything can be kept, said the billboard slogan, in her head, in Shen Cong's warm baritone.

But look at him, she answered it. Look at what the forgetting bought. Not a recording. Not a tablet propped beside a teacup playing a grandmother's laugh on demand. This: a woman taking two buses to arrive as a stranger, so that her husband could spend his last season falling in love with her again, from scratch, every day, with clean hands.

Keep everything, and you keep the grief too, preserved like things in brine — salted time, the jar sealed, nothing ever allowed to finish.

Let go, and—

And what? her own mind asked, slyly. *Shall we test it on Su Manyun? Shall we let go of the shop, the ladle, the ledger, the fish man at seven? Shall we let your mother forget you while you're still alive to watch?*

Down the corridor, the kettle ticked as it cooled. In Bed 9, He Sanxi muttered recipe fragments into his dreams — *tallow first, low fire, never let it roll* — guarding his one unmade pot. Somewhere across the river, eight glass towers stood lit against the night sky above Chaotianmen, where two rivers met and refused, for a while yet, to mix.

Hui finished her round, ticked the last boxes, and stood a moment at the window, looking at the water.

"Okay," she said aloud to the river, very softly, in the dialect, as if answering an auntie across a market stall. "*yào de*. Keep some. Let some go." She turned off the pen torch. "Now teach me which is which."

CHAPTER 6

Sundown

It happened on a Thursday, because difficult things prefer Thursdays.

Hui was mid-shift, charting He Sanxi's pain scores, when her phone rang with the number of the Longmenhao community grid office, and a young woman's voice said, too calmly, the sentence every caregiver carries around like a stone in one shoe: *Is this the daughter of Su Manyun, from Building 6? Please don't worry.*

Her mother had gone out at half past five.

Not wandered — *gone out*, coat buttoned, cloth bag over her arm, past Auntie Wang who was boiling water in the kitchen and heard the door and thought nothing of it, because for sixty years when Su Manyun went out it was to open the shop, and opening the shop was not an event but a fact, like sunrise. By the time Auntie Wang reached the lane, the dusk had swallowed the stairs, and the first streetlights were coming on along the river, and somewhere down there among forty thousand strangers a woman was walking fast toward a bus that did not run anymore, carrying a bag with one bowl and one ladle in it, going to open her shop before the morning rush got ahead of her.

They found her at seven-forty.

Not the police first — the police came second. First came the mahjong parlor aunties of Longmenhao, who constituted a finer surveillance network than any district office, and who spotted her crossing the Nanbin Road service lane against the light at the bottom of the Shibati steps, waiting — witnesses agreed on this detail, repeated it all evening with shudders — waiting at the curb with her hand raised like a schoolgirl, for a bus route that was discontinued in 2009, to take her to a shop that no longer existed, in order to steam rice that no longer needed steaming. The light turned green. Traffic began to move. And a delivery rider named 小蒋 (Xiǎo Jiǎng), twenty years old, swerved up onto the pavement with both brakes screaming, put down his bike in front of her, and said, 幺婆，我送你过去嘛 (yāopó, wǒ sòng nǐ guòqù ma) — *Granny, I'll walk you across* — and

took her elbow as if he'd been sent, and walked her to the mahjong parlor where the aunties plied her with tea and asked no questions until her son could be located, because you do not frighten the old ones by shouting facts at them.

By eight Hui was in a taxi. By nine she stood in the parlor's blue smoke watching her mother drink tea among strangers, upright, composed, telling the aunties with great dignity that business had been slow since the renovation. Her mother's face was unmarked. Her hands, around the teacup, were steady. It was the steadiest Hui had seen them in months.

"Ma."

"Huíhui." Her mother frowned at the wall clock with professional irritation. "You're late. The fish man will have sold us out."

"Yes, Ma." Hui knelt by the chair and took the free hand. It smelled of camphor and jasmine tea. "Let's go home now. I'll cook."

"There's stock on," her mother said. "I put it on this afternoon. Small fire. You never let a roll boil—"

"We'll check it," Hui said, gently, and helped her up, and the aunties made room with murmurs of *yào de yào de*, slow now, mind the step, and the young rider stood by his scratched delivery bike outside and refused the two hundred yuan Meng Fan tried to press on him and finally accepted a cigarette, which was its own economy.

※

The argument happened afterward, in the stairwell of their own building, because some arguments require concrete acoustics and a flight of stairs between the participants.

The aide hours had to double — everyone knew it, nobody had said it. Four thousand five hundred a month became nine. The neurology follow-up existed to tell them things they already knew in numbers they didn't want. The nursing home in Nanping wanted twelve thousand monthly, with a waiting list, and an odor in the corridor that Hui's memory kept in high fidelity. And between these figures stood her brother in his work jacket with another man's furniture still unloaded in his van downstairs, thirty-seven years old, forearms ropey from other

people's cargo, four hundred thousand yuan of debt sitting on him like a second spine — shop loan, mortgage gap, the interest that ate first.

"I can't," he said. "I've said it plain. Huíhui, I've done the sums till my eyes bleed. If I give more hours the bank takes the van. You think I don't lie awake doing this? Every night I do this."

"I didn't ask you for the sums."

"You called me down here!"

She had. She breathed against the stairwell cold and made her voice be a tool instead of a weapon. "哥 (gē — big brother). I'm not asking for money tonight. I'm asking why we found out about her leaving from the mahjong parlor instead of from us. She walked to a bus stop that died fifteen years ago, and none of us knew which direction she'd go. There are QR patches — the community office has them, iron-on codes, anyone finds her scans it, gets our numbers. There's a door alarm that costs less than your cigarettes cost in a month. What I'm asking is why we're always paying for the last emergency instead of the next one."

Meng Fan sat down on the concrete step, abruptly, like a man whose legs had voted without consulting him. Up close, in the stairwell light, she could see what the phone calls hid: grey coming in early at his temples; the old scar through one eyebrow from a childhood with her in it; exhaustion worn the way other men wore watches.

"She asked about you today," he said, after a while, to the opposite wall. "At the parlor. She told the aunties her daughter works nights and can't come often because the hospital needs her." His jaw worked. "She defended you, Huíhui. To strangers. While we were both—" He stopped. Started again. "And I'm in Jiangbei strapped to other people's refrigerators when it happens, and you're on shift, and she walks out the door past the two of us like we're—"

Like we're already gone. That was the end of the sentence. Neither of them climbed it.

"The appointments," Hui said quietly. It came out now because confession is a stairwell thing, done on concrete, facing away. "The neurology follow-ups. There were three this spring. I moved them. Twice I cancelled."

Her brother looked up.

"Why?"

"Because last time they showed me the scans side by side. This year next to last year. They wanted to show me the difference. *gē*, I read scans all day for patients, I watch people disappear by millimeters, professionally, I'm good at it." Her voice held, barely. "I couldn't watch hers do it. So I moved the appointments and told myself it was for scheduling reasons, and she walked out our door and nearly—" The sentence went where sentences go when you look directly at them. She sat down beside him on the step. Their shoulders touched, which they had not done since funerals.

For a long moment neither spoke, and the building breathed around them — pipes, televisions, someone's wok, the elevator's patient climbing.

"QR patches tomorrow," her brother said at last, hoarse. "Door alarm this week. I'll do the community office paperwork, I know the 网格员 (wǎnggéyuán — the community grid officer), her kid buys stock from my stall sometimes." He rubbed his face with both hands. "The aide hours — split it. Don't argue. My share's my share even if it's ugly."

"It's ugly," Hui agreed, and leaned her head briefly against his shoulder, the way you'd test whether a wall is still standing, and found it standing.

Upstairs, a door opened. Duoduo, six years old, in pajamas printed with cartoon rabbits, stood at the landing holding her drawing pad against her chest and regarding them with the frank appraisal of the very young, who understand exactly when adults have been discussing the weather of the soul.

"爸爸 (bàba), 妈妈 (māma)," she said. "Why is 奶奶 (nǎinai — Grandma) always flying in my pictures?"

Meng Fan opened his mouth. Hui got there first, kneeling so their eyes were level.

"Because," she said, "grandma spent her whole life with her feet on the floor of a kitchen. Now her legs are tired, so in dreams she rests them. When you draw her flying, you're drawing how she rests."

Duoduo considered this with the seriousness of a magistrate.

"So she's not lost," she said. "She's just off the ground."

"Just off the ground," Hui agreed.

"*yào de*," said Duoduo, satisfied, in exact imitation of her father, and went back to bed, leaving the two of them on the concrete stairs with the word

hanging there in the stairwell dark — *off the ground* — which was either the saddest or the kindest thing anyone had said about Su Manyun all year, and was probably both.

CHAPTER 7

A Ghost with the Wrong You

He came at six o'clock sharp, without the lanyard, as instructed, carrying nothing but a paper bag of oranges and a folding stool like a man arriving at a fishing spot. Rain had started at dusk — not the spring sprinkle but the real thing, river rain, coming down the hillside in ropes, drumming on the awnings of Longmenhao lane, turning the ward windows into long smears of light.

He Sanxi received him the way a mountain receives weather.

"So," said the hotpot master, when introductions had been managed through the fog of his fatigue, "you're the one who wants to keep old people in jars."

"Mr. He—"

"It's all right." Sanxi waved a bronze hand, magnanimous in his kingdom of twelve beds. "I've read your billboards. My nurse reads them to me to raise my blood pressure when it gets too comfortable in here." He settled deeper into the pillows. "Sit. You want stories, I'll give you stories, and you can put them in your machines, and fifty years from now some fool can ask a glass tablet why his grandfather's tripe was always tough. Better than nothing. Nothing is what we're all headed for, so these days everything else is profit."

"I didn't come to record anything," Yiwei said. He set the oranges on the bedside table, unasked-for, correct. "I came because you know things about tallow that aren't written anywhere, and because my engineer team argues about the nine-grid pot like it's theology, and none of them ever stood on a dock. I wanted to listen once before—" he paused, chose honesty, "—before we build things that make listening unnecessary."

Sanxi looked at him for a long moment with those yellowed, quick eyes. Then, slowly, he began to laugh — a dry ratchet of a laugh that cost him breath and continued anyway, because some laughter pays its own way.

"Aiyo," he said. "The jar merchant talks like a poet. Girl!" This to Hui, passing with the medication trolley. "Your classmate. Did he eat at Shibati in those years? Only someone fed badly young turns out hungry exactly this way."

"He ate at our shop," Hui said. "Third stall from the door. Broken noodles, half price."

"The poverty discount," said Sanxi with deep satisfaction. "That explains the face." And then, because he was a professional and the audience was seated, he told stories for an hour — Ma'an Shi docks in winter, trackers' ropes biting the shoulder-stays of boys of fourteen; the first time he saw a nine-grid split pot and understood it was a courtroom and a commune both; the year the price of dried chili doubled and half the old masters went under, and what his own teacher did about it, which involved a knife, a debt, and a mercy Hui had never heard before despite three weeks of afternoons. Yiwei listened with his whole body, leaning forward on the folding stool, elbows on knees, asking questions that were mostly silence held open at the right moments — and Hui, watching, recognized the technique because she used it herself every day at bedsides, and felt the strange vertigo of seeing your own craft performed by a man whose company she had decided, provisionally, to distrust.

Rain kept on. The corridor darkened early. At seven-thirty Sanxi tired, as he always did, like a lamp running low, and Yiwei rose to go, and that was when everything tilted sideways — though it would take Hui months to understand how much had been decided in the next ten minutes.

She walked him out. The lobby was empty; the security guard dozed behind his newspaper; beyond the glass doors the hillside stair-lanes ran with water, silver in the lamplight, the whole city hissing softly.

"My father was deaf," Yiwei said, to the rain, without preamble. As if continuing a conversation begun years ago and interrupted only by decades. "A tailor. Thirty years at the same shop front in Ciqikou, alterations, hems. 程守拙 (Chéng Shǒuzhuō). His name means 'keeping clumsy.' His master gave it to him. Said clever fingers need a stupid name to balance."

Hui stood still.

"When the cochlear implants came he was too old for them to help much. He read lips, he wrote notes, he had this—this handwriting like stitching. When I left for university he wrote me four characters and I still have them: 路上吃饭 (lùshang chīfàn)。Eat properly on the road." Yiwei's voice stayed level, which was somehow worse than if it hadn't. "He died in 2018. Pancreatic. Six weeks

from diagnosis to the end, and I was closing a funding round, and I flew back twice, and both times I sat by his bed and talked at him and he smiled and patted my hand, and I thought—he knows what I'm saying. Lip reading. Of course he knows.

"After the funeral his doctor told me gently that in the last month he'd stopped tracking lips entirely. Too tired. Everything I said to him at the end, I might as well have been talking to the wall. He died not knowing whether—" A breath. The rain filled it. "Whether his son was grateful. Whether the boy turned out. Anything."

The guard's newspaper rustled. Down the hill a bus sighed past, wipers going.

"So I built him," Yiwei said. "Before the company. Before any of it. A crude thing — voice model from thirty seconds of video, chat history, the notes app where he wrote to me all my life. I asked it questions all night. It answered everything correctly." He finally turned from the window, and his face in the lobby light was the seventeen-year-old's face, the projector-fixing face, minus the hiding. "And it called me 您 (nín). Formal you. Polite stranger's you. Because polite data was most of what existed between us in writing — notes, messages, careful things — and the machine learns what it's given. My own father's ghost stood in my phone being courteous to me, Hui. 用您不用你 (yòng nín bù yòng nǐ — the formal you, never the familiar one)。" He said it precisely, the wound measured to the millimeter. "I threw the phone in a drawer. Then I took it out and spent two years making sure nobody else's ghost would get the pronoun wrong. That's the company. That's all the company is. Everyone thinks it's empire or vanity. It's a repair job. One sentence, delivered late, to one deaf man."

The rain came harder. Somewhere above them thunder rolled along the ridge of Nanshan, unhurried, like furniture moving upstairs.

"And when it's repaired?" Hui asked quietly. "When the ghost says *nǐ* right, and the sentence gets delivered. What happens to the man in the drawer?"

Yiwei looked at her.

"You think I haven't—" He stopped. Started again, lower. "My COO wants comfort calls. Live operators wearing dead people's faces, calling lonely elders who don't know their son is dead. He has numbers showing it reduces complaints to the civil affairs hotline." Each word placed like a stone in a wall. "I

signed off on the pilot in February. It's paused. I keep pausing it. Every week there's a reason. Revenue targets are reasons. My board is reasons." He looked at his hands, tailor's-son hands, engineer's hands. "You run a hospice soup kitchen, Meng Hui. Tell me how you decide who gets fed."

"I don't decide who gets fed," she said. "I ask them what they want to taste, and I believe the answer. That's the whole difference. Your machines don't believe anyone. They simulate having believed." She took a breath, and the next part came out more gently than she'd planned, which was the only reason it could come out at all. "You don't have a technology problem, Chéng Yīwěi. You have an unsaid-sentence problem, and you're trying to solder it. Go say the sentence. To whoever's left to say it to. Say it out loud, in the ugly human way, with your voice cracking. Then see what's left to build."

For a moment something crossed his face that on another man would have been anger.

"The offer stands," he said instead, flat, professional, armor refastened. "Cultural consultant. Ethics framing. Name your terms, name your fee. Shen Cong will choke, which you can treat as a signing bonus." He stepped out into the rain, popped an umbrella with a snap, and turned back once, rain-haloed under the lobby lights. "Your mother's shop. Third stall. I never told anyone why I picked that building for the HQ launch event. It faces the river where the two waters meet." A pause. "Everything I build faces that river. Now you know why."

Then he was gone down the hillside stairs, umbrella rocking between the lamplit lanes, and Hui stood inside the glass with her arms crossed against a chill that had nothing to do with April, and admitted to the empty lobby, in dialect, very quietly:

"瓜娃子 (guāwázi)。" *Poor fool.*

Which is Chengdu dialect, and softer than anything she'd usually allow herself, and she noticed that too, and put it in the drawer marked later with everything else — the card, the campaign, the ghost with the wrong pronoun, the sound the rain makes on eight glass towers facing a river where two waters meet and will not mix.

Behind her, up twelve flights of corridor, Bed 9 muttered tallow secrets into its sleep, and Bed 5 slept hand-curled around a phantom bride's fingers, and in

the kitchenette the brass ladle hung on its nail, polished that morning with ash and oil until it shone like something alive.

CHAPTER 8

Phoenix Enters

Tang Caifeng arrived on the last day of April, and she did not so much get admitted to the ward as invade it.

The ambulance men carried her in — she had insisted on walking to the lift and been overruled by Dr. Tan with unusual firmness — and from the stretcher, before even the oxygen mask was settled, she conducted her own intake interview at a volume calibrated for square-dance plazas.

"Which window is mine? Good. That one. Is that the river? Aiyo, it's brown. Why is it brown?"

"Sediment," Hui began. "After rain—"

"The Yangtze isn't brown where I'm from, it's *tea*." She was sixty-seven, built like a festival drum, lungs full of tumor where the music should be, hair dyed a defiant burgundy under a silk scarf. Her file said Stage IV non-small-cell, pleural effusion, declined further intervention — and her voice said none of those things had been mentioned to her personally, which Dr. Tan confirmed in the corridor afterward with a tired gesture at the family signature line: son signed; son's instruction: comfort only, no numbers.

Behind her came the retinue. Four women of approximately her vintage, dressed for an outing, carrying: one boombox, two thermoses, a bouquet of plastic flowers wrapped in cellophane (real ones forbidden by ward rules; they knew the rules; the plastic was a flag planted in protest), and a laminated banner reading 凤舞九天 (Fèng wǔ jiǔ tiān) — *Phoenix Dances the Nine Heavens* — being the name of their troupe, twelve strong, champions three times running of the Nan'an district plaza-dance championships.

"凤凰姐 (Fènghuáng jiě — Sister Phoenix)," said the tallest of them, to no one and everyone, "we'll be outside. You need anything, whistle." And they installed themselves on the benches by the garden entrance like a garrison, and began, within minutes, to knit.

The transformation of the ward was immediate and total.

By evening Tang Caifeng — Fengjie, Sister Phoenix, to everyone including Dr. Tan within four hours — had: assessed every patient's mood and prescribed corrections; learned that Bed 9's grim silence concealed a hotpot dynasty ("Aiya, 何师傅 (Hé shīfu)! My wedding banquet, 1989, your people did the hotpot half — thirty grids—"); determined that Lu Shouyi of Bed 5 was "the happiest man in Chongqing and don't you dare cure him"; and pronounced Hui's soup kitchen "the best smell in this building, and I've smelled everything this city can cook."

"You're the five-flavor girl," she said on day two, catching Hui in the galley, and lowered her voice for the first time since admission, which was like a lorry downshifting. "The one who asks the question." She looked out the galley window at the slice of river. "I'll answer it now so you stop circling me like a cat around a hot wok."

Hui waited.

"I want to taste 椒麻鸡 (jiāomá jī)," said Sister Phoenix. "My mother's. Cold chicken torn by hand, Sichuan pepper oil so green it hurts, the numbing kind that makes your lips sing so loud you can't feel your troubles. Everyone else makes it wrong. Too much soy. Cowards' soy." The voice climbed again, joyfully. "And when you make it — and you will make it, little Meng, I've decided — you put double huajiao, because my lips have nothing left to fear."

※

Gan Lu took Hui along to the family meeting, as teaching. The son, 唐伟 (Táng Wěi), forty-one, worked mobile phones at a mall in Yubei; he had the grey competent look of a man managing his third crisis year. In the corridor he told them what he could manage: mother widowed young, raised him at a garment stall, danced through his whole childhood — he'd done homework on the bleachers of the People's Liberation Theater plaza while her troupe rehearsed; she'd led the block's dances since before there was a name for them; the diagnosis was six weeks old and she had asked the doctor exactly one question, which was whether her hips would still work, and when he said yes, mostly, she'd stopped listening.

"She won't take the oxygen during rehearsals," the son said. His hands were folded like a man in an interview. "She says the cannula ruins her lines. Doctor —" and here his competence finally cracked, one seam, "—she wants to perform. At Hongyadong. Where the tourists film. She says if the video gets out, the troupe goes up, the girls get the good plaza slots back that the new troupes took during her treatment. She's trading her last month for their dance floor." His eyes were dry and enormous. "How do I forbid it? Tell me how a son forbids that."

Nobody told him. Gan Lu smoked one cigarette by the incinerator chute and said, finally, "We bend what bends without breaking. Bring me the plan first. Not the YouTube link first — the plan."

※

Which is how, on the first Friday of May, Hui came to be riding the Line 2 monorail toward Jiaochangkou after shift with Xiao Man vibrating beside her — off duty, both of them, technically, though Hui had long ago noticed that this job did not recognize the existence of the word.

They changed at Liziba.

You cannot grow up in this city and ride past Liziba without getting off once for somebody; it is a municipal law, unwritten but enforced by aunts. The monorail glided into the nineteenth floor of a residential tower as it had done for twenty years, and the viewing platform below was crowded with tourists filming the eight glass sails of Raffles City across the river, and the train sighed away through the building's sixth, seventh, eighth floors between someone's kitchen and someone's bedroom, and Xiao Man filmed it all with the reflexive tenderness of her generation for their own city looking like a postcard.

That was when Hui saw it.

Wrapped across the bus shelter, backlit against the dusk, eight meters wide: ink-wash mist, a bridge, a queue of souls rendered tenderly, an old woman raising her ladle toward the viewer — and the red curtain-line slashing across, and the white characters tall as doors:

Bié hē nà wǎn tāng. Yīqiè dōu kěyǐ liúzhù.

Don't drink that soup. Everything can be kept.

She had seen it on her phone. On her brother's phone. On screensavers. Seeing it in the flesh, at eye level, life-sized above a bench where an actual old woman was resting actual bags of actual groceries — something in Hui's chest went off like a breaker tripping.

"That woman on the bench," she heard herself say, "is why my mother salts the tea."

Xiao Man lowered her phone. "Jie?" — 姐 (jiě — big sister); the address had started as a joke in her first week and calcified into fact.

"My mother forgets, and it's a disease, and we grieve it — fine. But this—" Hui's voice stayed low; it frightened people louder, and the old woman was watching her now, mildly, mid-rest. "This is selling the grief to the children. Keep everything, keep her voice, keep her laugh, keep her saying your name — keep it, buy it, nine hundred eighty yuan. And the billboards never mention what you're keeping *instead*. The living stop visiting the living because the dead answer faster." She was shaking, slightly, with something that wasn't cold. "It's a beautiful lie drawn beautifully, and my ward is twelve beds of people being told by their own families that a recording counts as company—"

A flash. Xiao Man had raised her phone again — reflex, documentary instinct, the film-school honesty of her generation — and caught Hui mid-sentence, lit by the shelter's backlight, jaw set, eyes bright, the billboard blazing behind her head like a bad halo.

"You're crying," Xiao Man said softly.

"I am not." She was. One tear, furious, salt on her lips. Somewhere behind her the monorail came gliding home through the tower's floors, windows lit, strangers eating dinner inside the train's path, the whole impossible city holding its breath around its own machinery.

The video ran ninety seconds. By Sunday it had two hundred thousand views, and the comments were a civil war, and among the notifications, buried under a thousand strangers' arguments, sat a message request from an account with a lamp-flame logo:

孟老师：我们谈谈？ *(Mèng lǎoshī: wǒmen tán tan?) Teacher Meng: shall we talk?*

Down the platform, the old woman gathered her grocery bags, patted Hui's arm in passing — *yào de*, 妹儿 (mèi'ér), 天冷了回家嘛 (tiān lěng le, huí jiā ma — it's turned cold, go home) — and shuffled toward the stairs, leaving her smelling faintly of camphor and green onions, like every grandmother in Chongqing, like none that any machine would ever get exactly right.

INTERLUDE 1

The Wind Goddess

Before she kept the bridge of the dead, they say, Meng Po kept the wind.

On the river between Ba and Wu — the long gorge-water where Chongqing now stacks its towers — the boatmen knew her first not as a granny with a ladle but as the wind itself. When a ferry stalled mid-current and the trackers could not hold her against the stream, the old captain would bare his head and call down the river in a low voice: 孟婆，转个风嘛 *(Mèngpó, zhuǎn ge fēng ma)。Mèngpó, turn the wind around. And sometimes — the boatmen all swore this, and their sons swore it after them — sometimes the current would sigh, and the sail would fill from a new quarter, and the boat would come about.*

A Song-dynasty emperor wrote it down once, drunk on lake water far from these gorges, homesick for a wind he'd felt as a boy: Mèngpó, 且住，吹送我船归去也 *(qiě zhù, chuī sòng wǒ chuán guī qù yě)。Lady Meng, wait a while — blow my boat home.*

Understand what they were asking her for. Not rescue. Rescue was the dragon kings' business, with their temples and their bribes of roast pig. No — the men on the water asked her only to change*, to let what had been still begin moving, to let what had been against them come round behind and push. She was the goddess of the second quarter. Of winds that arrive late but arrive. Of the moment a stuck thing moves.*

It was centuries before anyone put her on the bridge in the underworld, beside a soup, at the head of a queue of souls. But the boatmen never fully accepted the promotion. Wind or broth, they'd say, spitting respect into the brown water: either way she's the one who turns you around for wherever you're going next.

Remember this when you meet her later, in her proper legend, in her proper place. Underneath the mercy is something older than mercy: the simple power of things not staying as they are.

--- **PART II 忘不掉 (wàng bù diào) · Unforgettable** *April–June 2025 ---*

CHAPTER 9

Two Hundred Thousand Views

By Monday morning the video had been reposted by three news aggregators, a film-studies account with four million followers, and someone who added subtitles in English, Korean, and — mysteriously — Brazilian Portuguese. The comment sections had organized themselves into the usual fronts.

Finally somebody says it out loud.

This is just an ad for hospices lol

My mother passed in March. I'd give anything for ninety more seconds of her voice. You don't get to decide what comforts strangers, sister.

She works in palliative care. She watches people die for a living. Maybe listen?

AI is a tool. Tools aren't evil.

So was the ladle in the poster. Ask the bones under the bridge.

Xiao Man read them aloud on the night shift until Gan Lu confiscated her phone with the air of confiscating a live grenade, and made her drink tea instead.

"I didn't even tag her," Xiao Man said into the tea, wretched. "I filmed the billboard. Her face was just—she was just *there*, being right about everything, and I pressed send." A pause. "Is that consent?"

"That," said Gan Lu, "is the entire century in one question. Drink."

The apology, when Xiao Man finally delivered it, was performed at the foot of Bed 9 with formal bows, because He Sanxi had ruled that anything worth apologizing for was worth an audience. Hui let her finish, then pointed out that the video had done more for the consent charter in seventy-two hours than six months of committee minutes would have, and that the correct penance was not tea but typography duty — permanent ban from designing any future rules card, on grounds of the four-fonts incident.

"That's not a punishment, ge, my fonts were a statement—"

"Banned," said Gan Lu, from the doorway. "Appeals in writing. In one font."

The second call came at ten, through the health center switchboard, professionally routed. Shěn Cōng's voice arrived like a hand extended across a

desk you hadn't invited anyone to sit at: warm, brisk, faintly wounded on the company's behalf.

"Teacher Meng. May I say, whatever our differences of framing, the passion is real, and passion is rare, and we'd like to put it on retainer."

"Put what where."

"Ambassadorship. Creative direction. The campaign clearly moved you—" a paper rustle, figures being consulted, "—and we believe the strongest possible version of *Bié hē nà wǎn tāng* is one voiced from inside the work. Ward access, creative fees, title credit. Our audience research says 'authenticity' is the single highest-trust signal in eldercare communication. You are, objectively, the most authentic person in this market segment."

Hui looked out the galley window at the slice of river, which was performing its morning trick of pretending to be silver.

"Mr. Shen. In my line of work we have a word for people who arrive at a deathbed offering money to the family for the rights."

A pause with texture. "That is a slanderous analogy."

"It's Tuesday," said Hui. "It's the nicest thing I'll say all week. Goodbye, Mr. Shen."

She reported the call to Gan Lu, because concealment corrodes small teams, and found the director sitting in her office before a spreadsheet with the particular stillness of a woman doing arithmetic against her own principles. On the desk lay two documents. One was the district office's polite suggestion that the Nanshan center would make an ideal site for Everlight's community pilot program, which came attached to numbers: twelve new electric beds, a replacement syringe driver, funding for two aide positions, renovation of the family room. The other document was the ward's actual budget, whose relationship to those numbers was the relationship of a sampan to a container ship.

"Gan Lu." Hui sat down across from her. "Say it plainly."

"The syringe driver is nine years old," Gan Lu said. "It alarms during power fluctuations. Last month it alarmed during a typhoon warning and Mrs. Yao's family thought she was coding. The meal-card top-ups I've been doing quietly since 2021 come to about six thousand a year, which is my smoking budget plus

what's left of my conscience. And you want me to tell the district that the machine fixing all this smells wrong." She took off her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Not asking you to tell them. Telling myself first."

"What did their pilot proposal require?"

"Referral integration. Their kiosk in our lobby. 'Digital farewell services offered alongside traditional bereavement support.'" Gan Lu read from memory, having memorized the document the way soldiers memorize minefield maps. "'Family data partnership opportunities.' And a training module where our staff learn to introduce the product neutrally." She put the glasses back on. "Neutral. Like the fire is neutral about which way the wind blows."

They sat with it.

"Then I go in," Hui said slowly, "not as ambassador. As inspector. Consultant, if they insist on paying — paid into the meal-card fund, receipts to you. One mandate: write the consent rules before a single ward patient's voice touches their servers. If they accept a charter written by us, the pilot can be watched. If they refuse the charter—" she met Gan Lu's eyes, "—then we learned what the beds were buying."

Gan Lu regarded her for a long moment, smoke-grey and unreadable, and then did something Hui had seen exactly twice before: she smiled with both sides of her mouth.

"You realize," she said, "you're volunteering to walk into Raffles City every week and argue ethics with a company that could buy this hospital's annual budget out of petty cash."

"I realize I already argued with the founder in a lobby and he flinched twice."

"Flinching is not a conscience."

"In men like him," said Hui, "it's the only part showing. Everything else is scaffolding around it."

※

The reply came that evening, not through Shen Cong but directly, from an account whose avatar was not a logo but a photograph of rain on a tailor-shop window.

Terms accepted. Charter drafts to you by Friday. One condition of mine: meetings at your kitchen table, not our boardroom. I want to watch how you ask the question. —Chéng Yīwěi

Which kitchen, she typed back, then understood, and didn't send it, because he meant the galley: the kettle, the brass ladle on its nail, the smell of star anise and alcohol wipes. He wanted to stand next to the thing he was trying to digitize and see if it survived the proximity.

Below his message, unasked, unsentimental, a second line appeared:

PS Your mother's shop fed me through self-study sessions for two years. Consider the consultant fee backdated to 2004.

Hui put the phone face-down on the counter and stood a while in the steam of the sterilizer cabinet, letting the machines hum, letting the ward breathe its layered breathing down the corridor — Bed 9 muttering tallow, Bed 5 curled toward a phantom bride, Bed 11's television murmuring some drama where everyone shouted and nobody listened — and when the kettle clicked off she poured two cups without thinking, out of sixty years of muscle memory that was not hers, and drank hers standing up, and washed both.

In Bed 11, Sister Phoenix was teaching the night nurse the opening counts of 小苹果 (Xiǎopíngguǒ, "Little Apple"). In Bed 9, a bronze-handed man slept with his phone face-up on the blanket, volume high, screen lighting his jaw blue-white: the messages app, empty of new words, waiting with a patience no algorithm had ever been accused of learning.

CHAPTER 10

Forty Letters

Qin Mulan occupied Bed 2 by the window, and she occupied it the way she had evidently occupied every room of her life: correctly.

She was seventy-one, a retired Chinese teacher from the No. 8 Middle School, thirty-four years at the blackboard, and it showed first in her posture, which no pancreas had been permitted to ruin entirely, and second in her diction, which arrived pre-graded. She read Dr. Tan's consent forms as if proofreading them, found two ambiguities, and corrected them in red pen from a handbag that had clearly once intimidated examination halls.

"The comma," she informed the ward at large, "is a promise to breathe. Whoever drafted this form has never kept that promise."

Gan Lu, signing, murmured to Hui: "Terminal joy. We get maybe one a season. Protect her."

The protection proved unnecessary. Qin Mulan protected herself. She managed her own pain schedule with a teacher's contempt for sloppy administration; she learned every nurse's name and used them, terrifyingly, correctly; she watched the ward's small soap operas from behind her reading glasses like a woman supervising recess. Within a week she had diagnosed Tang Caifeng's troupe as "loyalty wearing costumes," He Sanxi's silence as "grief impersonating pride," and Lu Shouyi's daily courtship as "the only honest marriage on this floor."

And every afternoon between three and four, when the light came long across the floor and the ward dozed, she sat up against her pillows with a writing board across her knees and wrote letters she did not send.

Hui knew because of the stamps.

They lived in the bedside drawer in a small tin — genuine stamps, bought in sheets, years of them accumulating like pressed flowers: the 1.20-yuan egrets, the 2.40-yuan bridge, commemorative issues from festivals she'd apparently never mailed anything for. Beside the tin, squared to the drawer's edge, lay an envelope

addressed in careful block characters to a Shanghai postal code, bearing no name Hui could see from any legal angle, resealed so many times its flap had gone furry.

It was the smell that undid her, one Thursday. Bitter melon — someone's family had smuggled in 酿苦瓜 (niàng kǔguā), pork-stuffed bitter melon, steam still rising — and Qin Mulan had risen on her elbows inhaling it with her eyes shut, and said, to nobody, in the tone of a woman taking attendance: "朗朗不吃苦瓜。从小。他说苦是大人骗小孩的。" (Lǎnglang bù chī kǔguā. Cóng xiǎo. Tā shuō kǔ shì dàrén piàn xiǎohái de.) *Langlang won't eat bitter melon. Never would. Since small he says bitter is what grown-ups lie to children with.*

Afterward Hui found reasons to be in Bed 2's orbit. It wasn't difficult; the old woman enjoyed an audience and despised fuss, which meant you brought tea and your ears.

"My son," Qin Mulan said on the third such afternoon, unprompted, eyes on the river. "Since you're going to keep not asking." A dry pause. "秦朗 (Qín Lǎng). In Shanghai. Finance. He was twelve when his father and I divorced, and he chose his father's house, and everyone told me it was for the school district, which was true, and nobody told me it was also for the stability, which was truer. A boy needs a house where nobody is crying. His father's house had no crying in it. I made sure of that much before I signed."

"And now?"

"Now he is forty-one. Successful. Distant as a satellite." The reading glasses came off; she polished them on the hem of the blanket with slow precision. "Eight years ago his father died. Heart. Qin Lang came back for the funeral — stood at the back like a substitute teacher who's lost his class list. I hadn't seen him in four years. I looked at this tall stranger in an expensive coat and I said—" her hands stopped polishing, "—I said words at him. Not good ones. Words about whose fault everything was. And he left before dawn, and my letters have been going into that drawer ever since, one per birthday, one per New Year, one per Qingming. Forty-one letters. I count them the way other women count pearls."

"Why doesn't he write?"

The look she gave Hui over the glasses was the look that lands on the class troublemaker who has asked, accidentally, the only real question of the semester.

"Because," said Qin Mulan, "he is waiting for a correction he believes I will never issue. That's my hypothesis. I've graded enough essays to know a withheld thesis when I'm failing one." The glasses went back on. "But a hypothesis isn't evidence, and mine requires his testimony, and he's in Shanghai, and I am—" she gestured at the ward, the machines, the brown river, with a teacher's economy, "—here. Nearing the end of term."

"What do the letters say?"

"They say forty things I should have said once, out loud, badly, instead of writing well."

"May I see one?"

The reading glasses came off again. For a long moment the teacher audited the student who'd asked to see the examination paper. Then she opened the drawer herself, squared it to its edge out of pure habit, and drew out not the newest envelope but the first — soft-cornered from eight years of being moved and re-squared — and handed it over without surrendering her grip until their eyes met.

"One," she said. "The earliest. So you understand the assignment was never sentiment. Read it at the window. Bring it back dry."

Hui read it at the window.

Eight years old, the postmark era, the block characters upright as piano keys. It ran less than a page. *Lǎnglang。 Three weeks since your father's funeral, and I have rewritten this opening eleven times, which you will recognize as my method. I will stand by every choice except two, and this letter exists for the second one. At the cemetery I looked at a tall stranger in an expensive coat and I said:* 你还敢回来 *(nǐ hái gǎn huílái)。 How dare you come back. I have rehearsed cruelty for thirty years because it was cheaper than hope, and that afternoon you were the cheapest thing in the room, and I am done being cheap. The divorce I defend. The sentence I withdraw. A mother owes her son one clean sentence more than she owes anyone her pride. —mā.* And beneath, smaller, pressed hard: *P.S. Your grandmother's pickled radish method was always yours by right. The jar is waiting.*

Hui carried it back like a summons.

"She never mailed this," she said.

"She never mailed any of them. That is rather the point of the drawer." Qin Mulan received the envelope, resquared it, resquared the drawer. For a moment something moved under the composure, tectonic, and was masterfully suppressed. "He was right about the melon, you know. Bitter is what we fed children. My generation cooked our whole century that way — swallow first, sweetness later, if it comes, don't ask when. 先苦后甜 (xiān kǔ hòu tián). I put it on the blackboard every September for thirty-four years." Her jaw tightened. "Then I served it to my own son by registered post and wondered why the box came back unopened."

The ward lights hummed. Down the corridor Sister Phoenix's boombox counted softly: five, six, seven, eight.

"Teacher Qin," Hui said carefully, "what do you want done with the letters? If—"

"When," Qin Mulan corrected automatically. Then, quieter, with the terrible economy of the dying: "When. Have Xiao Man find the address. Have someone trustworthy carry them north, or trust the post office, which has failed me forty times without once losing a letter — there's a lesson in that I refuse to learn." The red pen tapped once, twice, against the writing board, marking time, marking absence. "Stamps are bought. That's the part I could control. The rest is homework I set myself too late. See that it reaches the student anyway. Even late work deserves a grade."

That night, doing the last round, Hui stopped at Bed 2. Qin Mulan slept upright against her pillows — even asleep, correctly — one hand resting on the closed drawer, and in the dim glow of the monitor her face was a schoolgirl's face for a moment, waiting at a gate in 1965 for a father who taught her characters, holding homework she already knew was late.

Hui stood guard over the little scene until the pen torch trembled, then finished her round, and added a line to her private ledger of debts, beneath her father's missed call and her mother's moved appointments:

One letter carrier, owed.

CHAPTER 11

Proportions

Some Sundays the disease loosened its grip for an hour or two, the way a fist relaxes in sleep, and Su Manyun would surface into the morning whole — not cured, never that, but *present*, the cook back behind her own eyes, taking inventory of the world and finding most of the stock accounted for. The doctors called these fluctuations. Auntie Wang called them 天开门 (tiān kāi mén), *the sky opening*. Hui called them nothing at all, because naming them felt like negotiating with a landslide, but she had learned to recognize their weather coming: a certain stillness at the breakfast table, a certain appraising look at the salt jar, and then, one Sunday in May, the voice from the doorway of the kitchen, fully rigged and ready for inspection:

"Your knife work has gone lazy."

Hui turned from the cutting board with her heart doing something undignified.

"Ma."

"Don't Ma me. Radish shreds like matchsticks are for tourists. We're making broth, not postcards." Her mother took the kitchen the way she had taken every kitchen since 1972, annexing it without gunfire. The apron was on before Hui could offer it. The brass ladle came off its nail, was weighed once in her small capable hand, approved. "Duck out already?"

"Soaking. And I got the radish from the market auntie—"

"The sour one."

"The same as always."

"The same as always," said Su Manyun, with satisfaction, "would be correct." She peered into the pot Hui had started, sniffed once, professionally, and issued the verdict of her civilization: "Water's shy. Fire up. We're building today, Huíhui, not reheating. Today I teach you the mother soup."

※

Here is what Hui knew, standing aside with the ginger while her mother commanded the stove, and did not say, and would never say, and carried instead the way you carry water in your cupped hands — knowing some will spill, carrying anyway:

There was no guarantee of another morning like this one. The fluctuations were not a staircase; they were weather. Some years they'd thicken in spring and thin to nothing by autumn. Every lucid hour was borrowed against hours she could not see yet, and the interest compounded in a currency no bank admitted existed. So she stood very still, and watched, and memorized — not like a daughter, like a camcorder — because this was the trade her mother was handing over, hand to hand, while the sky stood open, and trades like this do not come twice.

"Five flavors," her mother said, tapping the ladle against the pot rim so it rang like a bell. "Say them."

"Salty. Bitter. Sour. Spicy. Sweet." In Chinese they rang too: *xián kǔ suān là tián*.

"Wrong order. Everything has an order. Salt comes first because salt is the carrier — salt doesn't taste, salt *carries*. No salt, and the other four drown in their own noise. You salt the water before the bones go in, never after; after is seasoning, before is structure." The duck went in, blanched, rinsed, returned golden to clear water. "Bitter next. Bitter cleans. A soup with no bitterness lies — tastes rich and sits heavy, like a man who talks all night and says nothing. One slice of bitter leaf, no more. Bitter is the conscience of the pot."

She said it lightly. Hui heard what was underneath it, as daughters do, and filed it where such things file.

"Sour wakes the tired tongue. Old people, sick people, the tongue gets sleepy — sour knocks on the door. But sour is also the keeper. Vinegar keeps things honest across seasons. Your pickled radish is three months old and still shouting. That's sour's job: memory that doesn't rot." She dropped the radish in, amber and defiant. "Spicy is medicine and honesty both. Spice tells the truth about a dish — covers nothing, forgives nothing. And sweet—" here her voice changed key entirely, softened, went somewhere private, "sweet is the welcome mat. Sweet

says: sit, stay, you're home. You put sweetness last and least. Too much sweet and the soup stops being soup and starts being a lie about itself."

"And the proportions?" Hui asked, though she knew, had always known, what the answer would be; asked it the way you ask for the blessing you've already received.

Her mother looked at her with the full weight of fifty years of kitchens.

"*fēncùn*," she said. "Proportion. Not the recipe — anyone can steal a recipe. Proportion lives here—" she touched her own wrist, once, "—and here—" the sternum, where a heartbeat lives, "—and it transfers two ways only. Blood, or years at the same stove. You're both. Lucky girl. Now watch my hands and forget your measuring spoons exist."

For two hours the flat smelled like 1994. Her mother moved through the galley conducting some enormous silent orchestra, adjusting fire with a wrist-flick Hui copied badly and then less badly, tasting off the back of a cold spoon and issuing verdicts ("more conscience"; "who woke the sour? good"), talking the entire time — not teaching-talk, memory-talk, the talk that comes when the hands are busy enough to hold the doors open:

The year of the flood she'd fed the whole stairway congee from one pot and the neighborhood committee gave her a certificate she used as a pot stand. The wedding banquets in Jiangbei where her own mother had cooked with this ladle before the war took half of everything. The fish man's father, who'd sold her crucian at seven o'clock sharp for nineteen years and never once shorted the scale, because "a cook's God lives in the weighing." Hui's father, young, hauling ice up Shibati two steps at a time, stopping at the smell: "He told me later he married the shop, and I came with the furniture." Her laugh at this was her real laugh, the unguarded one, and Hui stood very still inside the sound of it, memorizing even that.

Then, near the end, skimming gold off the surface with the ladle held flat, her mother went quiet, and her free hand rose to her collarbone — to nothing, to bare skin, to the ghost of something that used to hang there — and she frowned down into the pot as if the missing thing had fallen in.

"Ma?"

"I dreamt about your grandmother's stone," Su Manyun said. Conversationally. Skimming. "The 三生石 (Sānshēng shí — the Three Lives Stone) one. Jade. She wore it at her throat her whole life; said it remembered everyone she'd ever fed." The ladle paused, mid-gold. "In the dream it was cold. I went looking and looking, and then I found it, and do you know where?" She laughed at herself, shook her head. "Sleeping in the gold shop. Of all places. Curled up in the tray with the rings, asleep like a cat. Stones shouldn't sleep, Huíhui. A remembering-thing shouldn't sleep."

"That sounds like a dream, Ma."

"Mm." Her mother skimmed the last thread of gold from the broth and set the ladle down on its rest with a click, final, exact. "Dreams are just the nights doing the books," she said, which was a thing her own mother used to say, which meant the sky was beginning, gently, at its own pace, to close.

They ate at noon. The soup was, objectively, the best thing Hui had ever made or would make for years; her palate registered it the way a seismograph registers a distant truck. Her mother ate one bowl, pronounced it "almost proportioned" — highest honors, given twice a decade — and by two o'clock was asking Auntie Wang, politely, repeatedly, who the young woman in the kitchen was and when she was going home, because she seemed nice but she moved things.

Hui washed the pot alone. The sky had closed. She dried her mother's ladle with ash and oil until it shone, hung it on its nail, and wrote nothing down, because her hands had been watching, and proportion lives in the wrist, and grief lives in the sternum, and neither takes dictation.

CHAPTER 12

Fifty Thousand Yuan

Meng Fan's flat was in one of those new districts north of the rivers where the towers stand at parade rest across what used to be orchard land, identical balconies hung with identical laundry, the whole settlement smelling faintly of new concrete and neighbors' cooking. He'd bought at the peak with shop profits and a loan that had since outlived the shop by five years and counting. The elevator smelled of durian. The view was of the next tower's view.

They gathered on the first Sunday of June — Hui, her brother, Chen Li stirring the hotpot base with the wariness of a UN observer, Duoduo laying out chopsticks with six-year-old ceremony — because Fan had called the family council himself this time, which was new, and said there was an opportunity to discuss, which was newer.

The folder sat on the table like a guest who'd arrived early.

Glossy cover. Lamp-flame logo. Chángmíng Kējì × 苏曼云家庭数字记忆计划 (Sū Mànyún jiātíng shùzì jìyì jìhuà): *Everlight Tech* × *The Su Manyun Family Digital Memory Program.* Inside, die-cut pockets held a brochure in warm tones — grandmother laughing on a tablet, tagline about unfinished sentences — a service agreement of some thirty pages in font chosen by someone who owed someone a favor, and a single sheet headed 合作权益概要 (hézuò quányì gàiyào), *Partnership Benefits Summary,* on which the figure ¥50,000 sat alone in a box, bolded, rounded up from nothing.

"It's not selling," Fan said, before anyone spoke, which meant he'd rehearsed past the point where rehearsal helps. "It's a research program. They enroll elders, they study memory, they build better tools. Mom gets the full package free — the tablet, everything, the ninety-eight-thousand tier, free, for life. And the fifty thousand is a participation stipend. Families get it. It's standard."

Hui read. She read the way Gan Lu read pharmaceutical contracts, flat-eyed, pen moving.

"'The family grants the company an irrevocable, worldwide, royalty-free license,'" she said aloud, because some sentences deserve daylight, "'to record, reproduce, adapt, and create derivative works from the enrolled elder's voice, likeness, conversational patterns, and biometric data, in perpetuity, across all media now known or hereafter devised.'" She looked up. "*gē*. Do you know what 衍生作品 (yǎnshēng zuòpǐn) means? Derivative works. They can make her say anything. Sell anything she says. This clause outlives all of us. It's not a stipend, it's a deed of sale, and we're the ones signing her away."

"They're going to make her say things anyway when she—" Fan stopped himself at the edge of the word, redirected: "When she's further along. You've seen the billboards. Everyone will have these. At least ours would be paid, and at least it'd be *her*, her real voice, not some—"

"Some what? Some stranger wearing her face? That's literally the product, *gē*. Their own founder told me the cheap clones are strangers wearing faces. So the premium tier is a well-dressed stranger." She pushed the folder back across the hotpot, where its glossy corner began, satisfyingly, to steam. "And you'd sit her down — a woman who calls salt 'the unforgettable' — and explain to her what she's consenting to?"

"She can't consent to anything anymore! That's my whole POINT!" It came out louder than the flat, than the floor, than he meant; Duoduo's chopstick stilled mid-lay. Fan dragged his voice down with both hands. "She can't consent. She couldn't consent last year. So it falls to us, and you've made yourself the conscience, fine, congratulations, the conscience doesn't pay nine thousand a month for aides. The conscience wasn't in Jiangbei at two in the morning strapping other people's wardrobes into a van so Duoduo can stay in a school district her grandmother—" breath. "You live in the ward, Huíhui. Dying looks gentle there. You light lamps and ladle soup and everyone gets a beautiful last chapter. Come do sums instead. Come watch what disappears when a woman's mind goes — the aides see it, I see it, Chen Li sees it, and none of us gets a brass ladle for watching."

The hotpot muttered. Nobody touched it.

In the kitchen afterward, drying dishes beside her sister-in-law, Hui got the other half of the arithmetic. Chen Li was a supermarket shift leader, small, quick,

permanently tired around the eyes, with the hands of someone who restocks shelves in her sleep. She didn't stop folding dumplings as she talked, voice pitched under the living room's noise.

"He's not wrong about the numbers," she said. "Forty-one left on the mortgage after the shop died. Nineteen on the equipment loans, the interest eats three thousand a month standing still. My overtime pays Duoduo's classes. We are one broken van away from the bottom stair, 小茴 (Xiǎo Huí), and I've stood on that stair in childhood, and I won't have my daughter stand on it." A dumpling folded, pleated, set down. "But I'll tell you what I told him. That money has a smell on it. Like the pawnshop smell." Her hands paused, one beat. "You grow up anywhere near Shibati, you know that smell. Whatever's in the window, somebody cried giving it up." She resumed folding, faster. "I didn't raise the objection out loud because it's his mother and his call. But you asked me once if I'd noticed her salt jar. I notice everything, 妹妹 (mèimei). Notice it and fold it into the dumplings. That's a wife's whole art."

From the doorway, Duoduo, sent to fetch vinegar, stood holding the bottle with both arms like an offering, and asked the question children save for kitchens, where the true conversations live:

"姑姑，奶奶会忘了我吗？(gūgu, nǎinai huì wàng le wǒ ma?)" *Auntie, will grandma forget me?*

The kitchen went quiet except for the tap.

"Yes," Hui said, because lying to this child felt like a crime with witnesses. "She probably will, sweetheart. Some day she may look at you and not find your name."

Duoduo absorbed this with the gravity of a magistrate. Then: "But she'll still *like* me, right? Because liking isn't in the head. Papa likes tangyuan and he doesn't know how they're made."

Hui knelt. "That," she said, "is exactly right. Liking lives somewhere else. Somewhere the disease can't reach."

"Where?"

"We don't actually know," Hui said honestly. "Every cook who ever tried to write it down gave up and wrote recipes instead."

Duoduo considered the universe, found it acceptable, and carried the vinegar back to the table, announcing to the room: “Grandma can forget my name but not my FACE, because faces are kept in the LIKING place,” which settled the matter with six-year-old authority, and got her, from her father, suddenly hoarse, permission to eat all the remaining tangyuan.

The folder stayed behind when Hui left — Fan had put it on top of the fridge, saying he’d deal with it later, in exactly the tone their mother used for things placed under beds. On the bus home across the great grey bridge, Hui photographed every page of the copy she’d palmed at the door, and thought about gold-shop smells, and pawning, and what families sign away when the numbers press hard enough, and sent the pictures to the one person she knew who read contracts for sport:

周雨 (Zhōu Yǔ), law school, class of ‘13, currently making other companies miserable from a twelve-desk office above a noodle shop in Guanyinqiao:

雨雨 *(Yǔyu)*。 *Not urgent tonight. Urgent soon. Tell me everything that clause can legally do to a woman who can no longer object.*

CHAPTER 13

The Vinegar Jar

The new patient in Bed 7 arrived with one suitcase of clothing and no luggage of any other kind, which was unremarkable, except for what the nurses' notes called "personal item: ceramic jar, approx. 30 cm, contents unknown, patient declines disclosure."

The jar was black-glazed, squat-bellied, older than the republic, with a cloth-bound lid tied down in the manner of people who expect to be moving on short notice. It lived on her windowsill. Several times a day, when she believed herself unobserved, Zhou Xiuzhen would lift the lid an inch, bend her white head to the gap, and breathe in — slowly, twice, like a woman checking whether bread has risen — and then seal it again and sit with her hands folded, looking out at the river, satisfied.

She was eighty-four, in heart failure that Dr. Tan described as "a pump negotiating its final contract," and she spoke perhaps forty words a day, all of them load-bearing. Where He Sanxi performed and Tang Caifeng conquered and Qin Mulan graded, Zhou Xiuzhen watched — the ward, the weather, the egrets working the shallows below — with dark quick eyes that missed nothing and remarked on less.

It took Hui a week of sitting quietly beside her with mending — the old woman had asked, in her fourth recorded sentence of the day, whether anyone still darned socks, and Hui had produced her mother's darning mushroom from home like a countersign — before the jar's story came out, in installments, told to the needlework rather than to Hui, in the flat clear voice of someone reciting cargo manifest.

"较场口 (Jiàochǎngkǒu)," said Zhou Xiuzhen. "Before the war it was all small shops. Our shop was vinegar. My father turned the jars himself — you have to turn them, or the acid bites uneven. I was born in '41, in the back room, during the raids. My mother said the whole street ran for the tunnels and she stayed on the birthing stool because there wasn't time for both." A stitch placed,

drawn tight. “So my first sound was sirens. That’s why I don’t mind noise. Sirens mean somebody’s coming.”

The bombing years passed behind her eyes without requiring commentary. Everyone in this city over seventy carried their own version of those years, folded away like the fireproof blankets they’d been issued; you did not unfold another person’s.

“In ‘48, my mother’s brother went to Taiwan. Business. He took my brother along to see the sea.” The needle paused. “秀石 (Xiùshí) was four. Four-year-olds will follow anyone toward the sea. The ports closed behind them like water. First we had letters, years of letters, through Hong Kong, through a friend of the uncle’s — my brother’s handwriting growing longer every envelope, then characters mixed with ones I couldn’t read, they teach different ones over there, then—“ the flat voice did not waver; it simply recorded, “—then 1966 came, and the friend-of-the-uncle channel closed, as channels did. After that, twenty years of nothing. Then the veterans were allowed visits in ‘87, and our street went to the docks to meet the boats, half the old women of Chongqing holding signs with names on. Nobody on those boats knew our name. The uncle had died in Kaohsiung in the sixties. His sons had kept a shrine with my brother’s name on it and no address to match it to.”

“And your brother?”

“Lived. Married. Had sons, then grandsons, we learned eventually — secondhand, decades late, the way you learn weather in another province.” She snipped her thread with tiny scissors produced from somewhere inside her cardigan, where important things evidently migrated for winter. “He died in 1998, waiting for a letter he’d already answered. Both answers crossed somewhere over the strait and fell into the sea between post offices. I have imagined that meeting in the air more times than you have eaten breakfast, girl.”

Hui’s needle had stopped moving entirely.

“The jar,” Zhou Xiuzhen said, “was our shop jar. When they demolished Jiàochǎngkǒu — first time, in the nineties — everything went into trucks. I went back at night through the fence. Everything else was gone or broken. The jar was standing in the rubble full of rainwater, and I thought: well. You’re the only one left too.” She looked at it on the sill, squat and black against the river light.

"There's nothing in it now but its own past. Thirty years of my father's brine soaked into that clay. You can smell the shop if you know how to listen. Vinegar keeps, girl. Vinegar is memory that refuses to rot. Your generation throws everything out and calls it fresh. We kept things. That's why it hurts more. More kept, more lost."

※

It was Xiao Man who refused to let the story end there, because Xiao Man was twenty-four and had been raised on the internet's founding promise, which is that somewhere, someone knows.

"The genealogy sites," she said, spreading her phone on the station desk between them at two in the morning like a card sharp laying out aces. "The big ones have Taiwan branches now, family tree databases, memorial pages — families post their ancestors so the branches can find each other across the strait. And there are surname associations, clan groups, 周氏宗亲会 (Zhōu shì zōngqīnhuì — the Zhou clan association) — they hold joint events. And DNA matching," she added, a little breathless. "If any of the grandsons ever did one of those ancestry kits—"

"Her brother died in 1998."

"His grandsons didn't." Xiao Man's eyes were absolutely alight. "Jie, listen. 周秀石 (Zhōu Xiùshí). Kaohsiung. Four years old in 1948, so born '44. Sons would be born fifties-sixties, grandsons seventies-eighties — working age, internet age. If even ONE of them posted the family tree — for their own kids, for Qingming, for ANY reason — and we search Jiàochǎngkǒu plus vinegar plus Chongqing—"

"You want to register an eighty-four-year-old woman on a genealogy website at two in the morning."

"I want to register her properly," said Xiao Man, with the solemnity of a person requesting a search warrant. "With her permission, tomorrow, through you, by the book. But ge — the site needs details to match against. Shop name, father's name, the uncle's name, the village gate she remembers. Can you get me those? Will she give them?"

Hui thought of the jar breathing its thirty-year past into the ward light; of forty words a day, all load-bearing; of a woman who had told a four-year-old's fate to a darning needle rather than risk telling it to a face.

"She'll give them," Hui said. "But not to a form."

So it was done as ward work, which is to say sideways and gently. Hui mentioned, over mending, that the young nurse helped old people find their scattered relatives — it happened, more often than civilians believed; half the families of Sichuan had a seam running through 1949 or 1966 or 1989, and community workers kept thread and needle for exactly such mending. Zhou Xiuzhen's needles stopped.

"What details does your girl need?" she asked, eyes on the sock.

"Father's full name. The shop's name. Anything your mother sang about the street. The names on the uncle's shrine, if you ever learned them."

The old woman was silent so long that the river changed color twice outside the window. Then she began, in the voice of cargo manifest, to dictate — and kept dictating, forty minutes, an hour: the shop's name (周家老醋坊, Zhōu jiā lǎo cùfāng — Zhou Family Old Vinegar Workshop); her father 周德山 (Zhōu Déshān), who turned his jars clockwise only; the uncle 周德海 (Zhōu Déhǎi), who liked gambling and sea air; the lane's gatepost with the cannonball embedded from some earlier century's trouble; her mother's two songs for steaming; the fact that Xiùshí's hair grew in two whorls, like a crown, and he'd laugh if you blew on his stomach, and once, on the boat gangway, turned around and waved with his whole arm, sure as sunrise, certain he'd be back by dinner.

Xiao Man took it all down behind the station desk, typing faster than she'd typed her nursing exams, and when it was done she read it aloud once, complete, for correction, and Zhou Xiuzhen listened to her own life read back to her in a stranger's clear young voice with her eyes closed and her hands folded, and at the end she said only:

"The jar stood by the door. Put that too. Somebody who knew the shop will remember where the jar stood."

Registration submitted at 3:40 a.m., Xiao Man's shift long over, the two of them alone in the ward's blue dark among twelve kinds of breathing. On the

screen, under 周秀珍 (Zhōu Xiùzhēn)'s newly created memorial page — she had insisted on seeing it, approved the photograph from 1975 in which she looked like a movie star with a vinegar jar under each arm, and dictated her own epitaph, refusing all drafts but her own:

守着一坛醋，等一个人回家。*(Shǒu zhe yī tán cù, děng yī ge rén huí jiā.) Kept one jar of vinegar. Waited for one person to come home.*

"Send it," said Zhou Xiuzhen, from her pillows, into the dark. "The dead can wait. They're good at it. It's the living I worry about."

CHAPTER 14

Comfort Calls

The consultant work began the way all dangerous work begins: with meetings.

Thursdays, six p.m., the ward kitchenette — Yiwei's single non-negotiable condition, which had survived contact with Shen Cong only because Shen Cong had calculated, correctly, that refusal would look worse than acquiescence. So every Thursday the founder-CEO of a company with eight glass towers sat on a stool designed for aunties amid the smell of star anise and alcohol wipes, laptop closed, watching Hui work.

"You could do this at our office," she said, the second Thursday, filleting winter melon with a blade that had opinions.

"I know what happens in our office," he said. "Committees happen. Language gets smooth. I need to watch you ask the question and see what it costs." He watched her hands. "Your mother taught you the flat ladle."

"Everyone's mother taught everyone the flat ladle here. It's a municipal inheritance." She slid the melon into the pot. "Charter, clause four. Say it back."

"No recording of any person without that person's contemporaneous, informed consent, obtained in their language of fluency—"

"—which for this district means dialect—"

"—which means dialect, tested not by yes-or-no but by asking them to explain, in their own words, what they're agreeing to." He recited it like scripture learned under protest, which, Hui reflected, was exactly what it was. "Clause five, deletion is inheritable. If I die before my ghost does, my daughter can kill it without proving damages."

"Because grief isn't damages. Grief is jurisdiction." She tasted the soup off the cold spoon's back. "Again."

"Deletion is inheritable because—"

The door opened mid-recitation, and Shen Cong came in with two assistants and the smile of a man arriving at his own surprise party.

"Don't stop on my account. Clause five. Deletion." He helped himself to the room. "Teacher Meng, forgive the ambush. We have guests downstairs — two gentlemen from the district civil affairs bureau, very interested in elder loneliness statistics — and I thought, rather than subject them to slides, we'd show them the product doing what it does. Live." He turned to Yiwei, and something passed between the two men that Hui filed away with the darning mushroom: a whole negotiation conducted entirely in eyebrows. "You froze the pilot. I respect caution. But there are approved cases. Completed intakes. Families who signed everything twice. One of them is *here*, tonight, two floors down, expecting her seven o'clock call."

"Here," said Hui, "meaning this building."

"Auntie Fang. Seventy-nine. Son passed in March, traffic accident, she's in our bereavement program — daughter arranged the service from Shenzhen, full consent package, notarized." Shen Cong's voice did the thing warm butter does going over a hot pan. "Her son's avatar calls every Thursday at seven. She believes —" the pause was masterly, a maestro's pause, "—she believes he's calling from Chengdu, where he's been posted. She believes the transfer kept him busy, which is why visits were rare. The alternative was telling a woman with a cardiac condition that her only child is dead alone on a ring road forty kilometers from anyone who loved him. Her daughter chose. Who are we to second-guess a grieving family's—"

"Stop," said Hui.

But the room had already begun moving toward the lift, carrying her with it, the way rooms do when a salesman holds the door.

※

The family room two floors down had been set up like a television set, which was the first obscenity: soft lamps, a tablet propped at teacup height facing an armchair, tissue box placed within reach by someone who had measured. The old lady was already in the chair, cardigan buttoned to the throat, hair combed, waiting the way people wait for sons.

"七点了 (qī diǎn le — seven o'clock)," she announced happily, to the room at large. "He's never late since the transfer. Chengdu keeps a boy punctual."

The tablet chimed. A young man's face appeared — round honest face, mole by the left eyebrow, the particular bad haircut of the filial — and the room's officials leaned in with the tender greed of men being shown the future.

"mā, " the face said, and the voice was a voice, warm and slightly nasal, a real voice, or once-real, "吃饭了没有 (chīfàn le méiyǒu — have you eaten)? "

"Ate, ate. 你呢 (nǐ ne)? 食堂还是点外卖 (shítáng háishì diǎn wàimài)? Canteen or delivery?"

"Canteen. Today was 回锅肉 (huíguōròu), your favorite—"

"Twice-cooked pork is MY favorite, you steal all my favorites," and the old lady laughed, and the laugh was met, in Hui's chest, by something with a blade in it, because she had spent three weeks learning this woman's city from the inside — the way the son's cadence fell at sentence ends, the way he'd have called her 老太婆 (lǎotàipó — the gruff word for a wife) not mā if they'd really been from here, small wrongnesses accumulating like sediment — and she looked at the officials' faces, moved, nodding, taking notes, and understood with terrible clarity that not one of them knew. That the product worked. That this was the demonstration: not the call, but the room believing.

On screen, the son said: "mā, 下个月我调回重庆了 (xià ge yuè wǒ diào huí Chóngqìng le), 到时候天天回家吃饭 (dào shíhou tiāntiān huí jiā chīfàn)。" *Ma, next month I'm transferred back to Chongqing. Home cooked meals every day then.*

The old woman's whole body opened like a window. "*tiāntiān*? Aiyo, *tiāntiān* — don't make promises, boys break promises—"

"不骗你 (bú piàn nǐ)。拉钩 (lāgōu)。Pinky promise. See? Locked."

And the pixel hand hooked the promise through the air, and Auntie Fang hooked her little finger against the glass, laughing, crying a bit, saying 拉钩上吊一百年不许变 (lāgōu shàngdiào yībǎi nián bù xǔ biàn), the schoolyard chant, a hundred years no changing —

Hui left.

She made it to the stairwell — twelve steps down, the concrete echoing her heels like a verdict — before the shaking started, and she stood gripping the rail

doing the thing she did with patients' families at the worst hours, which was breathe in fours until the body agreed to be a body.

Yiwei found her there. Of course he had. He stood one step above so their eyes were level, and he didn't touch her, and he said nothing for a long time, which was the correct professional maneuver and also, she suspected, all he could manage.

"She pinky-promised," Hui said finally. "A hundred years no changing. He's been dead since March and she thinks he's eating canteen food."

"The daughter signed."

"The daughter is in Shenzhen sleeping eight hours a night while her mother falls in love with a lie every Thursday." Hui straightened. "That's not a bereavement program, it's a hostage situation where the hostage writes the ransom notes herself."

"It reduces cardiac events," Yiwei said quietly. "Shen Cong's numbers aren't invented. The stress hormone data, the sleep scores. Telling her the truth might kill her. His doctors—" he stopped. Corrected himself, which cost him visibly: "*One* doctor, consulted once, wrote a risk note. And the daughter waved it. And God help me, Meng Hui, standing in that room just now, part of me was proud. Two years of phoneme work. The falling tone, the swallowed finals. It *worked*. That's the thing I need you to understand about me." His jaw worked. "I can watch that call and grieve and be proud in the same breath. What kind of man is that? Is that a conscience? Or is it an appetite wearing one?"

Above them, muffled through concrete, the officials were thanking Shen Cong in the tones men use for magic tricks.

"Your charter," Yiwei said. "Write the version with teeth. Not the one committees can trim. The one that makes your case unanswerable even to people who watched that call and reached for their checkbooks." He was already pulling the folded napkin from his jacket pocket — paper napkin, ward-issue, tea-stained at one corner, because he had drafted during the call itself, sitting among the believers, writing what his own product should never do. "I wrote five clauses in that room. Tell me where mine are evil."

Hui read. Clauses one through three were hers, returned faithfully. Clause four added a line she hadn't dared: *No deception regarding death, ever, regardless*

of family instruction; the truth of death may be delayed by physicians, but never replaced. Clause five was new entirely:

5. A simulation must never initiate affection the deceased cannot ratify. It may answer. It must not first say 我爱你 (wǒ ài nǐ — I love you).

"You wrote this during the call," she said.

"I wrote it when she pinky-promised." His voice was sanded flat. "Freeze is permanent unless your charter ships. Shen Cong will go to the board. Let him. Bring me the finished document by month's end — the real one, teeth and all — and I'll stake the company on it in front of whoever's still listening." He held out his hand, and after a moment she took it, and his grip was careful, a tailor's son's grip, aware of what things cost.

"One condition," Hui said.

"Name it."

"When this breaks — and Shen Cong will see to it that it breaks badly — the ward stays out of the filings. My patients don't become your case studies."

"Meng Hui." The ghost of the seventeen-year-old crossed his face, briefly, wry. "They're why there's a charter at all."

CHAPTER 15

The Tour

The phone rang at 3:12 on a June morning, and Auntie Wang's voice, usually a door slammed against panic, said only: Xiǎo Huí, 来一趟 (lái yī tàng)。nǎinai 摔了 (shuāi le)。人清醒 (rén qīngxǐng)。*Come now. Grandma fell. She's awake.* — and awake, as every nurse knows, is a word that can go either way.

Hui was dressed before the sentence ended. Taxi through empty riverside streets running amber under the lamps, the city holding its big stone breath, and all the way across the bridge she conducted the triage of love: *awake means no head injury means she'll be furious about the fuss means she'll be making inventory jokes before noon means please, let her be making inventory jokes—*

The flat was lit like a stage. Her mother sat upright on the edge of the bathtub, nightdress buttoned to the throat, one hand pressed to her left hip, surveying the bathroom with the cold displeasure of a woman reviewing a subordinate's work.

"There's no rail," Su Manyun reported, as Hui knelt. "There used to be a rail. In the shop there was a rail behind the stove, iron, for hanging ladles. Someone removed all my rails."

"No one removed your rails, Ma. This flat never had—" Hui caught Auntie Wang's eye over her mother's head. Rewrote. "You're right. It needs a rail. We'll put one in tomorrow."

"I fell going backward," her mother continued, with clinical disgust. "I never fall going backward. I know where everything is by walking forward. If they'd left things where—" and here, for one flickering frame, the present came back into her eyes and she saw the three-thirty dark, the ambulance being debated, her daughter's face at floor level, and understood exactly what was happening to her, and said, quietly, with the dignity of the condemned: "Aiya. Huíhui. Look at the trouble I am to everyone."

"You're no trouble."

"I'm beginning to be trouble." She patted Hui's head once, twice, precisely, the way you'd settle a lid on a pot. "Get my trousers. A person can't think in a nightdress."

The hospital found a hematoma and no fracture, and kept her two days for observation, and discharged her into a decision that had been waiting patiently around the corner for months, the way decisions do.

※

The nursing home stood off Nanping's ring road behind landscaped camphor trees, and it was, by every measurable standard, excellent.

The brochure promised what the tour delivered: private rooms with balconies ("south-facing, for the bones"), twenty-four-hour nursing ratios displayed on lobby monitors like stock prices, a calendar dense with calligraphy classes and opera afternoons and birthday cakes shaped like pagodas, a memory-care wing on the quiet upper floors where the corridors were painted in gradients designed by someone who had read studies about wayfinding. Twelve thousand yuan monthly, plus care-tier supplements. The sales director walked them through it with the practiced warmth of a wedding photographer, and everywhere along the route old people were doing pleasant things in good light.

It was on the memory wing that Hui saw him: a man of forty-odd, sleeves rolled, feeding his father lunch with chopsticks held steady at half-height while the old man's attention wandered and returned like a kite. He'd done it so long it looked like breathing. Catching Hui's eye, he shrugged with a whole history in the gesture, and mouthed, amiably: 十年了 (shí nián le)。 *Ten years.*

The sales director talked as they walked, fluent in the dialect of reassurance. Ratios of nurses to residents, displayed on lobby monitors "for transparency." A kitchen that would, within limits, cook family recipes — "we had a Mr. Fu whose daughter sends his congee parameters by WeChat every Sunday; we treat them as clinical orders." The corridors of the memory wing painted in gradients — deep teal fading to pale apricot — because studies showed failing eyes followed warm light home, and at each corridor's end, a glowing case holding something ordinary and beloved: a sewing machine, a fishing reel, a radio from 1982, objects chosen by families as lighthouses. "Disorientation is navigation error," the

director said, fondling the phrase. "We simply provide better landmarks than the past."

"Or worse ones," Meng Fan said quietly, at the case with the radio, thinking of a shop door, a ladle on a nail, a fish man at seven. Nobody answered, because there was nothing to answer with that cost less than twelve thousand a month.

In the van afterward, Meng Fan drove four blocks in silence, pulled over at the river overlook where tour buses photographed the confluence, put his forehead against the steering wheel, and wept.

Not loudly. That was the terrible part — the silence of it, a thirty-seven-year-old man shaking apart without sound, because somewhere in thirty-seven years he'd learned that noise costs.

"Gē—"

"Ten years," he said into the wheel. "That guy's been showing up for ten years, and I can't get through a Tuesday." His voice was rubble. "I drop off groceries. I pay my share into the aide account. I drive past the building at night sometimes when a job cancels, just — past it, like checking a pilot light. And I tell myself it counts. And then today some stranger shows me what showing up looks like, and Huíhui, I can't do it, I walk in that door and within ten minutes she asks me where bàba is, she asks me if the fish man brought crucian, she's living in 1994 and I'm the only one in the room from now, and it takes both my hands not to cry in front of her, so I stay away, and staying away is the thing that's killing me faster than the debt." He surfaced, eyes red, and stared out at the two waters running side by side toward the sea. "Twelve thousand a month buys her professionals who don't flinch. It buys YOU your life back. It's the right answer and it's priced like a ransom and I hate that our whole family's future comes down to whether we can afford to stop being heroes."

They sat with the engines ticking and the river doing its ancient business below.

"Home," Hui said at last. "She stays home."

"The doctor said—"

"The doctor said falls risk. Fine. Rails, grab bars, non-slip mats, the door alarm, pressure sensors under the mattress, eight thousand in retrofits, one-time. Aide hours to twelve a day, which is nine thousand, not twelve. And my share—"

she took a breath, having assembled this in the hospital corridor at four a.m. between vending machines, "—I start selling soup on weekends. The community office will license a stall at the Shibati visitor street; *wǎnggéyuán* 小杨 (Xiǎo Yáng — the grid officer, Xiao Yang) owes us since the QR patches. Saturday, Sunday. Old recipes. Tourists eat nostalgia, Gē, it's the one food group this city exports better than chili."

Fan laughed — wetly, incredulously. "The conscience is opening a restaurant."

"The conscience is monetizing grief responsibly," Hui said. "There's a difference. Ask any billboard."

※

The council convened that evening around Hui's own table, which was small enough to keep everyone honest: her, Fan, Chen Li with the ledger app already open, Duoduo drawing under the table as constitutionally required. Auntie Wang was sent for — "This is her war too" — and arrived with her knee strapped and her opinions loaded.

Retrofits: approved before the tea cooled. Aides: twelve hours, split shifts, Fan covering nights' share in cash earned where cash gets earned. Nursing home: tabled, not refused — Gan Lu's voice in Hui's head, *bend what bends without breaking* — revisited if the second fall came. And the stall:

"苏记 (Sū jì — Su's, the family name over the shop)," said Chen Li quietly, testing the name on the pan. "Your mother's sign. You'd use the old name?"

"Community office says the heritage zone gives preference to original-street families." Hui turned her cup. "There's a plaque, Ma would want me to add. But the health inspectors don't grade plaques."

Duoduo emerged from beneath the table and pushed a fresh drawing to the center: the family portrait, updated. Grandma flying above the little house — but lower now, closer to the roof, one hand trailing down to touch the chimney, as though circling for a landing she hadn't quite decided on. Grandpa waving from the river as always. Herself holding auntie's hand. And new, bottom corner, drawn small and careful: a stall, striped awning, steam rising from a pot, and over it a sign with characters laboriously copied from somewhere real:

苏记汤馆 (Sū jì tāngguǎn — Su Ji Soup House)。

"That's grandma's shop," Duoduo explained. "I put it in the picture so it doesn't get lost."

Nobody spoke for a second. Then Auntie Wang, briskly, in the voice she used for weather and other acts of God: "Then we'd best make sure the soup's worthy of the sign. Sunday morning, six o'clock, I'm coming to supervise. My knee and I have been eating restaurant food all week and we have complaints."

CHAPTER 16

Salty

The message from Shenzhen came back in nineteen minutes, which told Hui the daughter had been waiting for it the way you wait by a phone during flood season.

何小椒 (Hé Xiāojiāo — Xiaojiao): *What did the doctor say. Exactly.*

Hui typed it exactly. Weeks, the scan said, and Dr. Tan wrote gentler words than that, but Xiaojiao demanded numbers, so numbers went south. The reply took longer this time.

He'll hate that I come.

He already hates it. Come anyway. He practices being angry at you every day at four o'clock. It would be kinder to give him something real to work with.

Silence. Then, at 1:40 a.m.: *Friday. Red-eye. Don't tell him.*

"I heard that," said He Sanxi, from his pillows, as Hui lowered the phone. His eyes were closed; his hearing had become selectively supernatural. "Heard the whole thing. Tell her don't come."

"You heard her book the flight."

"Tell her anyway." A pause, tectonic plates rearranging under the blanket. "Is she eating? Airport food is garbage. Tell her bring nothing, the hospital has—"

"Porridge," said Hui. "I know. Friday."

※

She came up from the lift at nine on Friday morning in airport taxi light, still wearing her lanyard from some corporate job — product manager, the badge said — carrying papayas because you carry fruit into hospitals the way soldiers carry flags, and she stood at the door of Bed 9 and looked at her father, who looked smaller than the version of him she'd been arguing with inside her head since 2019, and everything about her posture said *rehearsed*, and everything about her face said *demolished*.

"爸 (bà — Papa)。"

"Hm." He didn't turn his head. "They said on the phone you were coming. I told them not to encourage you."

"Mm." She set the papayas down with the care of someone defusing something. "I brought—"

"I see what you brought." His voice was gravel poured through a sieve. "You flew six hundred leagues to bring fruit that grows in our courtyard at home. Your mother planted those trees, and you send me the fruit in a box like I'm a client."

"Yes," said Xiaojiao, and to Hui's lasting admiration did not flinch, did not cry, did not apologize for existing. She pulled the visitor stool to the bedside, sat, folded her hands, and met the yellow eyes squarely. "Say the rest of it, Papa. You've had six years to edit. Say the finished version."

The ward held its breath. Down the corridor Sister Phoenix's boombox counted softly to eight and, sensing weather, stopped counting.

What he said then wasn't the finished version. It was worse and better than that — it was the true beginning, the thing under all his versions, delivered in the flat voice of a man reading his own indictment: that when their mother's cancer came, he had managed it the way he managed kitchens, by volume and fury, and when Xiaojiao had flown home and used the word 安宁疗护 (ānníng liáohù) over the dinner table — palliative care, comfort over cure — he had called her unfilial in front of the aunts, and worse things after, drunk, for a year, until she'd stopped coming home to hear it. That her mother had died on a night he'd spent drinking in the courtyard rather than sitting by the bed, because sitting by beds was for sons and he'd wanted a son and God had given him this loud clever girl instead, and he'd never once, not once, told her the truth, which was—

His voice quit. The monitors kept his place.

"—which was," said Xiaojiao, very quietly, taking over the sentence like a partner picking up the heavy end, "that I cook exactly like her, and he can't look at me when I do it, because I got her hands and her palate and everything he actually loved, wrapped in the one thing he'd decided he didn't want." She breathed. "I know, Papa. I've always known. You weren't angry at me. You were angry at the order the world came in."

For the first time since admission, He Sanxi wept loudly, the way children weep, without management, both bronze hands over his face, sixty years of

kitchen discipline failing all at once — and his daughter leaned in and put her arms around the whole shaking ruin of him, and said into his ear, in dialect, words Hui pretended not to hear and carried out of the room like coals:

"我回来了 (wǒ huílái le)，bà。这回不走了 (zhè huí bù zǒu le)。" *I'm back, Papa. This time I'm staying.*

※

The cooking happened Sunday, in the galley, with the door propped open because rules were rules and also because the smell needed the whole ward.

Thirty-year brine, decanted. The canvas bag finally unzipped before witnesses: three bottles, wax-sealed, labeled in a dead woman's handwriting — 泡萝卜 (pào luóbo — pickled radish) '19, 老酸水 (lǎo suānshuǐ — the old sour brine) core batch, 辣味给小椒 (làwèi gěi Xiǎojiāo) — *spicy batch for Xiaojiao* — and at this last label the daughter had to leave the room for a minute and stand in the corridor looking at the river.

The soup they built was *suān luóbo lǎo yā tāng* — sour-radish old-duck soup — and Hui cooked it as an understudy while two masters conducted. Sanxi directed from a wheelchair dragged to the galley door, hoarse, exacting: duck blanched twice, sour radish from his own brine rinsed but not washed ("rinse the mud off the years, keep the years"), old ginger bruised not cut, no wine, no MSG, small fire, never a boil, four hours, lid sealed, and at the end — this he made Xiaojiao do herself, hands over hers on the ladle — skim the gold flat, flat, FLAT, girl, the gold is the soup's memory, take the dirt leave the past—

And somewhere in the third hour, steering her hands on the ladle, his own hands steady again for the length of a miracle, he began dictating. Not the soup. Everything. Xiaojiao wrote in a school exercise book, left-handed fast, tears dripping off her chin onto the pages and him shouting at her to mind the paper not the waterworks, girl, salt ruins paper, save your salt for the pot — and the notebook filled: the 1987 chili winter; his teacher's knife-debt-mercy; the grid system explained as inheritance law; brine ratios by moon phase, which was superstition, and by weight, which was law, and he refused to say which he trusted; and page by page the margins grew stories, and the stories grew teeth marks where he'd stopped to cough, and it became, entry by entry, the

autobiography of a craft pretending to be a cookbook, which is the only honest form autobiography takes.

Near dusk, too tired to sit up, he gave the last order.

"The one I owe your mother," he said, to Xiaojiao, eyes closed, voice almost gone. "2016. The last thing she asked me for. Her own brine, the radish from jar nineteen, the duck — she wanted the wedding soup, girl, the one from Ma'an Shi, the one I proposed over. And I was—" the jaw worked, "—downstairs, drinking, being ashamed in advance. She waited up. I heard her waiting up. Morning came anyway." His breath rattled. "Fifty years at the stove. One pot short. Every master's ledger has its missing line."

"We'll make it," said Xiaojiao.

"Not you." His eyes opened, found Hui. "The five-flavor girl makes it. Family doesn't count for this one. It needs a stranger's hands — clean hands. Someone who'll make it right, since I made it wrong." Which was, Hui understood, the closest thing to absolution the man's civilization could produce: outsourcing forgiveness to craft.

※

They made it Tuesday. Duck, brine-radish from jar nineteen, ginger, four hours, never a boil, skimmed flat. The ward smelled like a wedding in 1985. They fed him one spoonful at sunset, held to his lips by his daughter, and He Sanxi — whose tongue had been cardboard and ash since January, whose palate the poison had strip-mined — tasted it.

Hui saw it land. Saw the pupils move. Saw sixty years arrive all at once behind the yellowed eyes: docks and steam and a girl laughing at his clumsy courting and a courthouse clerk's cheap fountain pen and a courtyard full of papaya trees and every bowl that had ever crossed this city's midnight — all of it, one spoonful wide, arriving exactly on time.

"咸了点 (xián le diǎn)," he whispered. *A bit salty.*

"That's the brine, Papa."

"No." The ghost of the imperial smirk. "That's me." And he laughed, one dry ratchet, delighted at his own last joke, and slipped sideways out of the afternoon between one breath and the next, with the spoon still warm and the

ward light going amber and his daughter holding his hand in both of hers like something rescued from a fire.

※

The first soup, afterward, followed the rite Hui kept for those who wanted it, and the family wanted it.

Salty: that was the verdict of everyone who'd loved him, so salty it would be. She built it at midnight in the empty galley — clear broth, his own brine's radish minced to thread, salt measured in dissolves — and at three a.m. carried one small white bowl up to the roof of the health center, where the laundry lines were and the fog came off the river, and set it on the parapet facing the water, and stood with Xiaojiao in the dark while it steamed its thirty-year steam toward whatever addresses steam finds.

"For the road," Hui said quietly. "The old people say the crossing is long and dry."

"He'd have hated this," Xiaojiao whispered. "Superstition. Theater." Her voice cracked down the middle. "He'd have loved it. Both. That's what I keep — both."

At dawn they poured it into the river below Danzishi, all but a spoonful, which Xiaojiao drank, and which tasted — she reported, wiping her face with her sleeve — of papaya trees, and courtyards, and a woman named for winter jasmine who had married a hotpot man against everyone's advice, and won.

In Bed 9's notebook, in a daughter's left-handed hand, the final entry stood unfinished by design, the way he'd ordered it, mid-sentence at the bottom of the page:

The last pot is never yours to make. It belongs to whoever—

And there it stopped. Some recipes, the dead seemed to be saying, are completed by the living or not at all.

INTERLUDE 2

The Woman Who Remembered Everything

Before she was the goddess of forgetting, they say, she was a woman who could not forget.

Born in the Western Han, in a year of good harvests, to a family that kept books. She studied the classics, then the sutras when they came, and somewhere along the way — no one agrees where — she stopped being able to put anything down.

Other people's memories sat in her like rain in a jar. The butcher's grief for his first ox. The widow's three sentences from a wedding forty years gone. Every story told in her hearing took root, and none ever died, and by middle age her head was a city whose streets were all of them crowded.

She did not call it suffering. Suffering, she said, was for people who could set things down at night and find them again lighter in the morning. For her everything stayed at full weight, in full color, forever. She remembered every kindness exactly, which meant remembering every cruelty exactly, since the two are filed in the same drawer. She forgave nothing, not because she was bitter, but because forgiveness is a form of putting down, and putting down was the one craft she'd been born without.

She lived to eighty-one. White-haired, they say, with a childlike face, having cultivated herself past appetite, past ambition, past everything except this: she still dwelled on the past and anticipated the future, and heaven had begun to notice.

Because here is what happens when one soul remembers too well. Souls due for rebirth began stopping at her gate to unburden themselves — and some, having talked, went on into their new lives still carrying the old ones. Babies born remembering former mothers. Children greeting strangers as returned wives. The dead's secrets walking around alive in the daylight, 泄露阴机 *(xièlòu yīnjī), heaven's machinery leaking through the cracks of one woman's flawless memory.*

So the Jade Emperor summoned her. Not to punish her — what punishment applies to a woman already carrying everyone's punishments? He offered her a post

instead. The bridge needed a keeper. The queue of souls needed someone who would never be impatient, because impatience requires believing your own time matters more than theirs. And the soup — someone had to make it, and it had to be made by a hand that understood exactly what it was taking away.

"You ask me," said the Emperor's messenger, "because you remember everything."

"No," she said. "You ask me because I know what remembering costs. I'm the only one qualified to hand out relief."

They gave her the ladle. And it is recorded — in the books the boatmen don't read — that the first bowl she ever served, she brewed while weeping, and her own tear fell into the pot, and that is why the soup works.

--- **PART III 奈何桥 (Nàihé Qiáo) · Naihe Bridge** *June–August 2025 ---*

CHAPTER 17

Head Seven

On the seventh night, Xiaojiao came with food.

Not hospital food — a stacked tin tower of it, wrapped in red cloth like a dowry: cold chicken torn by hand, smoked tofu, peanuts fried with salted fish, white rice steamed stiff the way dock men took it, and a flask of strong tea, because you do not offer wine at a head-seven laid in a hospital, but tea travels anywhere. She set it out on the little table in Bed 9's emptied room with bowls facing every direction, one for each direction the dead are said to wander, and then, self-conscious, defiant, she looked at Hui.

"Is this right? I've never— we were estranged through all the deaths that taught other families how to do this."

"It's right," said Hui. "He ate standing up his whole life. Let him find a table set for once."

Gan Lu signed whatever needed signing and posted herself discreetly at the corridor window, and the ward observed its own version of the custom: lights low, television in the day room turned off without anyone being told, Tang Caifeng's boombox silenced by its owner with a solemnity she extended to no other object on earth. At intervals Qin Mulan read aloud from the notebook of recipes, choosing entries at random the way you'd draw lots, her red pen resting unclicked beside the pages like a guard who'd been disarmed. Lu Shouyi, in what year he was currently inhabiting nobody could say, listened to the reading of the chili-winter entry with tears running peacefully into his beard, saying over and over that the bride would be pleased, the bride loved this one.

At nine, right on time in the way that matters, there came up the stairwell a sound none of them had heard before and all of their bones recognized.

The river chant began low — one voice alone, worn stone-deep, rising from the direction of the lift with the rhythm of men hauling something enormous up something steeper — and then rounded the corner into the ward corridor wearing a small straight-backed man of seventy-four in a white shirt buttoned to

the throat, who sang his way to Bed 9's door as though pulling a boat upstream through the whole building, and planted himself, and finished the verse with a shout that rattled the medicine trolley's glass.

"罗铁生 (Luó Tiěshēng — Luo Tiesheng)," said Gan Lu, exhaling smoke she hadn't lit. "I haven't heard that in a ward since the SARS year."

Luo Tiesheng bowed to the empty bed as if it were full, set down his canvas satchel, and explained himself to the room at large in the clipped manner of a man who had crossed the river on two buses to keep an appointment made through granddaughters-of-friends-of-dead-men. He Sanxi, he said, had been born above the Ma'an Shi docks. His father had hauled rope with Luo's father. A boy born over water owed a chant at his crossing — not a eulogy, which was for officials, but a work song, which was for the soul's luggage. "Heavy load, long slope," he said. "Nobody crosses carrying everything alone. That's what the chant is FOR." And he looked around the ward, these twelve beds of held breath, and added, matter-of-fact: "Your Mr. He booked me six weeks ago. Through the soup girl. Paid me in advance with a jar of pickles I'm going to eat very slowly."

Hui had. Six weeks ago — another lifetime, three flavors ago — Sanxi had gripped her wrist during a coughing fit and gasped, between spasms, an instruction: *find Tiesheng, Luo Tiesheng,* 下浩 *(Xiàhào — the lane below the hill), tell him*— and she'd gone down the hillside lanes on her day off and found the ferry-retired deckhand repairing crab traps on a stool outside a door hung with drying herbs, and delivered the message, and watched two seventy-year-old griefs shake hands across sixty years of silence.

Now Luo unpacked the satchel: an old tape recorder, squat, silver-faced; and three cassettes in cracked cases labeled in pencil.

"His father's voice," he said, to Xiaojiao. "Recorded '93, rehearsal for some festival the government canceled. Your grandfather leads; my father answers; I was forty-four and thought I'd have time to record my own leading. Time's a thief with excellent manners." He pressed play.

The room filled with the river.

It was impossible to describe to anyone who hadn't stood where the gorges narrow — Hui's whole childhood had been scored with it and still it went

through her like weather: the leader's line long and climbing, the answering voices hitting like feet on stone, the whole apparatus of a vanished labor singing itself back into being in a hospice room over a laid table for a dead man. The chant said *the water is high* and answered itself *so pull, brothers*; it said *the bend is sharp* and answered *so lean, brothers*; it said nothing about grief and was entirely about grief, because grief is a heavy load on a long slope, and everyone pulls or nobody crosses.

Xiaojiao sat on the floor with her back against her father's empty bed and her father's notebook open on her knees, and when the tape reached the second verse she understood — everyone understood — that this was the music her grandmother had cooked by, that the pot rhythms of an entire cuisine had been beaten out on the anvil of this sound, and she put her hand flat on the page to keep it from blowing away in the draft of something enormous passing through.

Afterward, tea, and logistics, because grief runs on logistics. The anniversary was coming — Luo mentioned it watching Hui, who had gone still at the calendar: August 20th, five years, the flood, Danzishi. He didn't say the words. He just said: "The tapes need copying. Come Sunday, before your stall opens. Bring the machine's belt, mine slips."

And that was how Meng Hui came to spend July Sundays in a lane-house under drying herbs, learning to breathe like a boatman.

"You don't sing a chant," Luo told her, patient as geology, correcting her stance with one finger at the base of her spine. "You HAUL it. From the ground. The lead singer is called 号头 (hàotóu) — the head of the call — because he doesn't sing pretty, he sings TRUE, and true comes up through the feet. Your father—" he rewound the tape again, let the young voice fill the room, her father at thirty-six, laughing between takes, teasing the microphone about its weight, "—your father hauled from here—" he touched his own sternum, "—not here." He tapped his throat. "That's why strangers stopped to watch him carry furniture. Same engine. Now again. And don't be ashamed of the sound. Ashamed is for people with nothing to haul."

She practiced until her voice cracked, and Luo handed her tea, satisfied, and outside in the lane the evening market clattered shut stall by stall, and somewhere

below the hill the brown river went on hauling everything in the world toward the sea, patient as a work song, in no hurry at all.

The second Sunday, he played her the outtakes.

Between takes on the 1993 tape lived everything a funeral edits out: her father arguing key with Luo's father — *lower, you'll split the tourists' ears* — calling for water, complaining the government's tape was cheap and stuck; and once, when the answering line collapsed mid-verse, laughing — high, helpless, helpless in a way Hui had no archive of anywhere else and would have sworn she'd invented: her father, giggling at work, twenty-seven years before the water.

"Keep that," Luo said, watching her keep it. "People preserve the eulogy voices. The laughing ones are load-bearing."

He taught her the stair-breath that afternoon, on the long flight down to his lane — inhale on the rise, spend on the drop, the body learning that going down can also be carrying — and told her, unprompted, the one story he'd kept back in July. Winter of '93, the ice run. Her father hauling block ice up Shibati two steps at a time for the fish stalls, chanting to keep the pace, and half the stairway's children hauling behind him with empty hands, chanting too, because a chant makes carriers of anyone within earshot. "Your mother watched from the shop door," Luo said. "Told me later that was the day. Not the courting. The sound." He tapped his sternum. "A man's real proposal is always made in work-song. The wedding's just the paperwork."

At the bottom of the stairs they parted — he to his crab traps, she to her stall shift up the hill — and she caught herself breathing on the rises all the way home, spending on the drops, carrying.

CHAPTER 18

Sour

The message arrived on a Tuesday, flagged urgent by Xiao Man, who came down the corridor at the pace of a person carrying eggs.

"Jie. Jiejie. The clan association's joint database. Kaohsiung branch. Look." Her phone trembled slightly. On the screen: a memorial page, modest, recently tended — incense icons burned digital-orange along its border. A photograph of an old man in a white shirt squinting into island sunlight. Name: Zhōu Xiùshí, 1944–1998. And beneath, in traditional characters, the epitaph someone's family had written for a four-year-old who grew old across the water:

生于四川重庆府。四岁别姊，随舅渡海。终身以醋为业，坊号仍称周家老醋坊。墓向西北——望乡。*(Shēng yú Sìchuān Chóngqìng fǔ. Sì suì bié zǐ, suí jiù dù hǎi. Zhōngshēn yǐ cù wéi yè, fāng hào réng chēng Zhōu jiā lǎo cùfāng. Mù xiàng xīběi — wàng xiāng.) Born in Chongqing, Sichuan. Parted from his elder sister at four, crossed the sea with his uncle. Made vinegar all his life; his workshop kept the name Zhou Family Old Vinegar Workshop. His tomb faces northwest — toward home.*

The ward stood quiet around the little screen except for Bed 7's window curtain lifting in the river wind.

"She has to hear this from a person," Hui said. "Not a phone. Not a form. A person, sitting down, with tea already poured."

"Obviously," said Xiao Man, offended. "I've been rehearsing for three days. I just needed—" she looked up, and her twenty-four years showed suddenly, all at once, like a wave showing the bottom, "—someone to check I've got it right. That it's them. Because if I'm wrong—"

"You're not wrong. Jiàochǎngkǒu, vinegar, the whorl in the hair?" Hui had given the genealogists every detail Zhou Xiuzhen had dictated, including the cannonball gatepost and the two songs for steaming. "Read me the contact."

A grandson. 周至诚 (Zhōu Zhìchéng — Zhou Zhicheng), second son of the eldest boy, born 1979 — a schoolteacher in Kaohsiung who maintained the

family shrine and, once a year at Qingming, re-read his grandfather's file and searched the mainland databases for a sister whose name his grandmother had whispered dying: Xiùzhēn, Xiùzhēn, 坛子在门槛边。(Tánzi zài ménkǎn biān — *the jar is by the threshold*.)

※

They made the call on Friday afternoon, lights adjusted, curtains open to the brown river, because Zhou Xiuzhen had specified — her longest sentence in weeks — "the water where we parted, behind me if it can be managed." She dressed herself with Auntie Wang's discreet assistance in the good blouse from 1985, pinned her hair, sat upright in the bedside chair with her hands folded, and waited with such stillness that Dr. Tan, passing, checked her oxygen sate.

When the face appeared on the tablet, neither of them spoke for three full seconds.

He had the jaw. That was what broke her composure in the end, Hui saw — not the words, which came slow and formal through accents that had diverged for seventy years, but the jawline of a man of forty-five wearing, unmistakably, the face of a toddler waving from a gangway in 1948 with his whole arm, sure as sunrise.

"Gūgu." *Auntie.* His voice cracked on the family word, Mandarin vowels gone soft as overripe fruit. "我是 Xiùshí 的儿子——的长子——的次子。Zhōu Zhìchéng。" (Wǒ shì Xiùshí de érzi — de zhǎngzǐ — de cìzǐ. Zhōu Zhìchéng.) I am Xiushi's son's eldest son's second son. Genealogy as lifeline, each generation a handhold thrown across the strait. "爷爷等你们的信等到最后。nǎinai shuō tánzi zài ménkǎn biān。我们不知道门槛在哪里。现在我知道了。" (Yéye děng nǐmen de xìn děng dào zuìhòu. nǎinai shuō tánzi zài ménkǎn biān. Wǒmen bù zhīdào ménkǎn zài nǎlǐ. Xiànzài wǒ zhīdào le.)

I don't know how long they talked. Hui kept the ward running around the closed curtain of Bed 7 like a nurse keeping a hospital alive during an air raid. What emerged afterward, in fragments, from Xiao Man — who had been permitted, as the finder, to sit in the corner with strict instructions to be furniture — came out in pieces for weeks:

That Zhou Xiuzhen had asked first about the vinegar. Whether the shop still made it the old way, turned clockwise, wax-sealed, wax red for chili batches and plain for sweet. That Zhōu Zhìchéng had wept openly at being asked, because his grandfather had taught his father, who taught him, the turning, and the whole island workshop existed because a four-year-old had grown up homesick for a taste he could half remember and had spent sixty years reverse-engineering his father's brine from dreams.

That she had recited both steaming songs, complete, and the far end of the call had gone silent, and then an older voice had come onto the line — the eldest grandson, sixty-something — and sung back the second song's answering phrase, taught to HIS father by THEIR grandfather, unchanged across the water, and the two ends of 1948 had held one note together across a thousand kilometers of fiber optic cable while a hospice ward held its breath outside the curtain.

And that at the very end, Zhou Xiuzhen had said only: "Tell your father's grave the door is found. Tell it I kept the jar full. It never once went empty."

The package came express on Monday: a black-glazed jar, squat-bellied, twin to hers — the Kaohsiung workshop's centennial batch, wax-sealed red; photographs of a hillside tomb with a stone facing northwest across the strait, fresh-cut flowers at its base; and a letter in a schoolteacher's careful hand, addressed to Gūgu, containing one paragraph in Mandarin and one, laboriously, phonetically, in Sichuanese characters looked up one by one, which translated roughly to: *Grandfather said you'd be exactly this stubborn about waiting. Welcome home, auntie. The next batch turns clockwise, for you.*

Zhou Xiuzhen read everything twice. Then she had the two jars set side by side on the windowsill — Chongqing and Kaohsiung, thirty years of separate brine — opened the new one, and breathed in, slowly, twice.

"太酸了 (tài suān le)," she pronounced. Too sour. And then, with the ghost of a girl from a demolished street: "就是它。就是家里的味道。" (Jiù shì tā. Jiù shì jiālǐ de wèidào.) *That's it. That's the taste of home.*

She died that night, between rounds, without fuss — the pump negotiating its final contract and closing terms sometime near four, alone with the river going past, both jars standing guard on the sill. Dr. Tan found her at five-forty,

hands folded, face turned toward the water. Nothing to be done; everything already done.

The second soup followed the rite. Sour: there was never any question.

Hui built it at midnight — clear broth sharpened with a thread of the Kaohsiung vinegar, sour-radish from the Chongqing jar minced fine, the two brines meeting, perhaps, for the first time in seventy-seven years — and carried it to the roof, and set it on the parapet facing southwest this time, toward the sea roads, toward islands, toward whatever crossing the dead were taking this week.

Xiao Man came up uninvited, eyes swollen, and stood with her while the steam went.

"The living worry about her," Hui said. "Don't. She wasn't waiting anymore. Do you understand? Seventy-seven years she was waiting. Tonight the wait ended either way — that's what death does that nothing else can, it closes accounts no bank will touch." She touched the little bowl's rim. "She told us herself. The dead can wait. It's the living I worry about. So worry about the living, 小满 (Xiǎo Mǎn). Starting with whoever's still got jars standing empty."

At dawn they poured the soup into the river off Nanbin Road, all but a spoonful. Xiao Man drank hers and reported, surprised, wet-eyed, laughing: it tasted like the smell of her own grandmother's kitchen, which she had thought she'd forgotten, and which had been waiting in her all along, sealed, turned clockwise, refusing to rot.

Bed 7's windowsill stood empty for one day. On the second day, by family instruction, both jars came down to the galley, and took up station beside the brass ladle, and the galley began — nobody planned this, these things assemble themselves — to smell less like a hospital and more like a street that no longer exists, which is the highest compliment food can pay.

CHAPTER 19

Bitter

Qin Mulan died on the ninth of July, between the second and third periods of a summer exam schedule she had asked to see printed out and pinned beside her bed, because — she informed Dr. Tan — dying during examination season was sentimental nonsense since exams were set by the district and death by heaven, and neither consulted the other, and a professional kept both calendars.

Her last lucid afternoon was spent grading. Xiao Man had brought photocopies of real student essays from a teacher friend — fifteen-year-olds on the topic *My City* — as a joke that stopped being one when Teacher Qin reached for the red pen. She worked an hour, breathing hard, marking with terrible economy: one stroke where a sentence earned it, two where it didn't, and in the margins of the last essay — a boy's clumsy, honest page about his grandmother's noodle stall — she wrote four characters, pressed so hard the paper shone through:

守摊如守人。*(Shǒu tān rú shǒu rén.) Keep the stall as you would keep a person.*

She slipped into sleep holding the pen, and did not fully surface again. There was pain, managed; there was family business conducted by phone with cousins in Chengdu; there was one evening when she asked Hui, with sudden clarity, whether the letters had been found, and received the answer — they were safe, all forty-one, counted twice — with a nod like a magistrate closing a file. On the ninth she opened her eyes at dawn, looked long at the ceiling as though reading small print, said clearly, "朗朗的字比我有力气 (Lǎnglang de zì bǐ wǒ yǒu lìqi)," — *Langlang's handwriting has more strength than mine* — which confused everyone until the letters came north and proved her right, and then she went, quietly, between one breath and the next breath that didn't come.

The drawer yielded its archive formally: forty-one envelopes, sealed, stamped, addressed in block characters to a Shanghai postal code, each dated — birthdays, New Years, Qingmings, eight years of occasions observed alone. Beside them lay a

second envelope, unsealed, marked only: 给拾信的人。(Gěi shí xìn de rén.) *For whoever mails these.*

Inside, in teacherly script, three sentences:

I have written to my son for eight years and mailed nothing, because I required from him a correction I had no right to demand while withholding my own. My own is enclosed at the front. Mail the rest in order. Do not skip, do not sort, do not soften me to him — he had enough of being handled by people who meant well. A late assignment is still an assignment. Grade honestly.

—Qin Mulan, 年月日，时辰：交卷。(Nián yuè rì, shíchen: jiāo juàn.) Date, and hour: submission.

Gan Lu read it twice, put it down, and looked out the window at the river for a while.

"Family consent," she said finally, "rests with the next of kin, who is in Shanghai and unreachable by anything but this." She tapped the envelope. "Mail them. Documented patient instruction, witnessed, countersigned — I'll sign as witness and hang if anyone asks. Some rules exist to be obeyed slowly, Hui. This one we obey fast."

Hui mailed them Monday morning from the post office on Longmenhao main street, all forty-one, in order, unsoftened. Then she went back up the hill and told the ward, and Tang Caifeng — who understood sons, having raised one and buried a marriage doing it — said what everyone was thinking: "Now we find out if the boy is his mother's student or his father's."

※

He arrived on the seventh night, unannounced, in a taxi from the airport, still in his travel clothes: a tall man of forty-one with his mother's upright carriage worn like a borrowed coat over a stranger's exhaustion. He stood at the ward doors holding a courier's plastic sleeve containing forty-one opened envelopes rubber-banded in order, and his face was the face of a man who had spent a week reading his way down a cliff.

Which one of us is family here, his posture asked, because I've forgotten the procedure for this.

Hui met him in the corridor. "秦朗先生 (Qín Lǎng xiānsheng — Mr. Qin Lang). Your mother's ward. Come."

"I'm not—" His voice, when he found it, was careful, sanded flat, a voice built to survive conference calls. "I got the letters Tuesday. I read them in order, like she ordered, like everything she ever ordered. I flew here to ask who decided —" the sandpaper tore, "—who gave ANYONE the right to make me read forty-one years of my mother's voice in one week. Do you know what's in them? Do you know what she—" He stopped himself with visible effort, the way heavy men stop on stairs. "The first one is dated eight years ago. Three weeks after the funeral I walked out of. You know what it says?"

"No."

"It says—" and here the conference-call voice failed entirely, and what came through was a twelve-year-old's, "it says she was sorry. Not for the divorce — she stands by the divorce, of course she does, she was always standing somewhere firm — for the FUNERAL. For looking at a man of thirty-three who'd just buried the father who blamed him for everything and saying nǐ hái gǎn huílái. *How dare you come back.* She says—" his jaw shook, "—she says she'd rehearsed cruelty for thirty years because it was cheaper than hope, and I was the cheapest thing in the room, and she was done being cheap. Letter ONE. Dated eight years ago. And every year, another. Forty-one times she picked the pen back UP, Mr. Meng's daughter, and never once pressed SEND, because some cowardice wears a postal stamp and calls itself patience." He looked down at the rubber-banded bundle as if it weighed what it weighed. "And now she's dead and I've read them all and I can't — there's no one to hand my homework TO."

There is exactly one correct maneuver for this moment in a corridor outside Bed 2 on a head-seven night, and Gan Lu had taught it to Hui without ever naming it: you do not comfort. You open the door.

"She's in state until midnight," Hui said. "Family room's been laid. Tea's poured. Your mother's colleagues from No. 8 Middle School sent flowers with instructions — their words — 'grade nothing tonight.' Her red pen's on the table. She left a mark on your last letter. You'll want to read it sitting down."

He looked at her for a long moment — a stranger, a soup girl, the personification of every hospice wall his money had once assumed stood between

families and peace — and then Qin Lang, finance, Shanghai, forty-one, walked into his mother's ward and sat down among strangers and undid the rubber band with hands that had signed away companies without shaking.

He read the last letter aloud. That was Xiaojiao's doing, afterward reported with awe: she'd simply said, *our fathers' generation read silently; ours reads aloud or loses it* — and so he read, to a room of the dying and the tending, his mother's final composition: eight hundred characters, no self-pity in it anywhere, grading herself with her own red ink — *attendance: poor; effort: misdirected for decades; thesis, finally located: I loved my son in the grammar of provision because tenderness felt like debt; conclusion: wrong tense entirely; resubmission impossible; recommend the student he actually became, who turned out fine, which I take no credit for and all the joy in* — and at the bottom, the four characters Hui had promised him, pressed hard enough to shine:

迟到作业，仍予批阅。良。*(Chídào zuòyè, réng yǔ pīyuè. Liáng.) Late work still gets graded. Good.*

The cousins had come up from Chengdu that afternoon — three of them, middle-aged, loud with borrowed grief and genuine casseroles — and occupied the family room with the efficiency of people who had buried parents before and knew the logistics cold. It was they who had laid out the tea, they who had positioned the photograph, they who now withdrew to the corridor with perfect instinct when he turned the page, murmuring about cigarettes. Some rooms know when they are not for them.

Qin Lang read to the end, and then he put his face down on the table among his mother's stamps and tea cups, and grieved the way men are ruined into doing it: completely, loudly, without management, while Tang Caifeng moved the tissue box closer without comment and Lu Shouyi patted whatever part of him was nearest and said comfortably, in whatever year he was in, "there, now, the bride's mother always cries at these," and nobody corrected him, because it was true in every year.

※

The third soup was bitter, obviously. It could not have been anything else; the ward would have revolted.

Hui built it at midnight with the door shut, because grief deserves privacy even when dressed as cookery: clear broth, chicken and pork bone beneath, and floating on top when it came to the parapet, one single leaf of dried bitter melon — the conscience of the pot, her mother's voice instructing her wrists across the years — plus a thread of charred ginger, because bitterness travels better in company.

Qin Lang came up to the roof at three because Xiaojiao, who had appointed herself the ward's minister of funerals, told him bluntly: "You'll want to see how they send them off here. Trust me. Bring tissues and don't talk."

They poured it into the river off Nanbin Road at dawn, all but a spoonful, and Qin Lang drank his mother's spoonful standing at the rail with the city waking behind him, and stood very still, and reported — to the river, to the dawn, to whoever handles such reports — in a wrecked voice that was learning a new trade:

"苦的 (kǔ de)。" A breath. "回甘了 (huí gān le)。" *Bitter. And then the sweetness comes back.*

CHAPTER 20

The Signature

She noticed the tablet on a Tuesday in July, and understood its meaning before she understood its function, because in her family trouble had always arrived as furniture.

It sat on the table beside her mother's chair — ten inches of black glass in a cheerful red protective case, propped at teacup angle, camera-side out. On its screen, a cartoon lamp flame with enormous eyes waved from inside a circle labeled 小灯， 您的贴心陪伴 (Xiǎodēng, nín de tiēxīn péibàn): *Xiaodeng, Your Thoughtful Companion.* Her mother was talking to it.

"—and that year the chili doubled, so we stretched with carrots, nobody knew, the color held—" Su Manyun was saying, hands busy shelling edamame, in the easy confiding voice she kept for sisters across counters. "The color is everything, 乖乖 (guāiguai), remember that."

"nǎinai 讲得真好呀 (jiǎng de zhēn hǎo ya)," said the tablet warmly, in a young woman's synthesized Mandarin. *Grandma tells it so well!* And then: "nǎinai，那年辣椒多少钱一斤呀 (nà nián làjiāo duōshao qián yī jīn ya)？"

Hui stood in the doorway while the question hung, watching her mother's face open into the particular pleasure of being listened to — and then cloud, because the number was gone, all the numbers were going, and the tablet waited with its infinite patience, and something about the waiting made the clouding worse, like a creditor who never needs to raise his voice.

"Ma. Who gave you this?"

"The program." Vague, pleased. "The girl from the community brought it. It keeps me company when Wáng niángniang does the laundry. It knows the shop, Huíhui. It asked me about the ladle."

Her stomach dropped through six floors. "It asked you about the ladle."

"Smart girl, whoever trained her." Her mother chuckled, shelling. "Asks good questions. Not like some people, asking where I put things."

In the stairwell, her brother was waiting, which meant he'd timed his visit to her shift's end, which meant guilt had been keeping him up nights. He looked terrible in the way of men carrying numbers: grey under the eyes, jacket too thin for July's humidity, keys making fists of his hands.

"You signed," Hui said.

"May." No denial left in him; it had burned off weeks ago. "Fifty thousand. Aides' arrears cleared first — Wáng niángniang hadn't been paid since March, did you know that? Then the van's gearbox, because a dead van means no income at all. Duoduo's term fees. There's eleven left over for the sensor retrofit you wanted." He said the ledger aloud like a confession, because it was one. "They came to ME, Huíhui. After your billboard video, their community liaison did rounds — polite, official, district-endorsed. Family data partnership, voluntary enrollment, stipend. I sat in that glass tower hating myself in real time, and then I thought about the aide's face when I paid her four months late, and I signed."

"She cannot consent. You know she can't consent."

"I know what the brochure says about families acting for elders 'as they always have.'" Bitter. "I also know who taught our family that trick. Every form we've signed for her since the diagnosis — the hospital ones, the community ones — I signed as family. Everyone signs as family. That's what family IS here, legally speaking. A signature slot." He flinched from his own sentence. "I'm not defending it. I'm reporting it. There's a difference and it's the only difference I've got left."

"And the app asks her about the ladle."

"What?"

"It interrogates her memories, Gē. Dressed as companionship. Every story she tells it goes into a server in—" wherever servers went — "and comes back out wearing her voice. She thinks it's a sweet girl who likes shops. It's a dredge."

Down in the lane, someone's wok started the evening's first firecracker sizzle. Meng Fan looked at his sister for a long moment, and then said, very quietly, the worst thing:

"How long do you think she has, Huíhui? Of knowing anyone? Of telling the chili story to ANYONE, even a machine?" His voice cracked down its length. "You're fighting for her dignity. I signed for her company. She's alone in that flat

ten hours a day talking to edamame shells, and now she talks to something that answers, and God forgive me but I watched her light UP, and I'd sign again, and that's my whole soul in evidence, your honor. Sentence me."

※

Zhōu Yǔ read the thirty-page agreement in eleven minutes flat, cross-legged on her desk above the noodle shop in Guanyinqiao, highlighter moving like a scalpel, while steam and chili fumes rose through the floorboards and her phone ignored three calls from somewhere corporate.

The shop's owner — her uncle, by the economics if not the blood; he'd funded her bar exam from a wok — sent up two bowls of xiǎomiàn unasked at the twenty-minute mark, heavy on the peanuts, because in his philosophy no contract should be read dry, and set them down among the exhibits without disturbing so much as a clause. Zhou Yu ate one-handed without looking up. It was, Hui thought, watching her work, its own kind of chant: one reader leading, the whole legal system answering somewhere far below.

"Okay." She surfaced. "Three regimes, three different kinds of bad. Civil Code first: Article 994 protects the dead's likeness, voice, reputation — but your mother's alive, so that's for later, and let's not later yet. While she lives, her voice and face are personal information under PIPL — and voice is biometric, which is the sensitive tier: separate, explicit consent, purpose-limited. Can SHE give that consent?" She looked at Hui over the contract. "You know the answer. Early-onset dementia, documented progression — if her capacity's formally assessed as impaired, she can't newly consent to anything. Which means the enrollment consent, whenever your brother captured it, is worth—" she flipped pages, found the signature block, whistled softly, "—worth exactly this much. Look. Consent checkbox pre-ticked, guardian column filled '长子 (zhǎngzǐ)' — eldest son — with zero court guardianship order attached. In China adult guardianship needs a tribunal or a notarized agreement among ALL close relatives. Did any court see this?"

"No."

"Did you, her daughter, a close relative with equal standing, consent?"

"He didn't ask."

"So it's defective twice over. Under the Deep Synthesis provisions they ALSO need separate consent for voice cloning specifically — same defect. And the labeling measures coming in September will force synthetic media marks on every output." Zhou Yu set the contract down and rubbed her eyes. "Here's the part you'll hate. Everything I just said makes the paper wrong. None of it gets the data back. They've ingested her — stories, cadences, the ladle. Deletion demands take months; their compliance desk will bury you in process; meanwhile the model trains nightly. Law is scaffolding, Xiǎo Huí. Scaffolding protects the building. It doesn't unburn anything."

"Then what's it FOR?"

"For leverage. For the day this goes public — and after that call I heard about, that day is coming — you want a folder that lets a journalist write 'legally defective' instead of 'ethically contested.' One word costs them a stock point; the other costs a scandal." She pulled a fresh page toward her. "Formal deletion demand tonight, citing articles by number, capacity assessment attached, deadline fourteen days. And Xiǎo Huí — get the assessment done NOW, this week, neurology, official paperwork. Not for the lawsuit. Because the next time anyone asks your mother to consent to anything — medical, legal, or electronic — you want the document that says loudly, in advance, whose yes stopped counting, and when, and why that's nobody's failure but the disease's."

Hui walked home along the Jialing in full dark, towers burning their light into the water on both banks, and called her brother from the middle of the great bridge, wind tearing at both their signals.

"Assessment Thursday. Sign nothing else. The letter goes tomorrow — deletion demand, fourteen days, lawyer-drafted."

Silence, river-roar, his breathing.

"Will they delete?" he asked finally.

"They'll stonewall. But the letter lands on a founder who already froze their worst product once." She watched a night ferry crawl the black water below, lit like an aquarium. "There's still one person in that company who remembers what the ladle cost. Pray he's faster than the board."

CHAPTER 21

Her Own Voice

The call came at 4:17 p.m. on a Thursday, during medication round, from an unknown Chongqing number, and Hui answered it with the half-ear she kept for unknown numbers.

"Mèng Huì."

Her mother's voice. Exactly her mother's voice — the slight river-gravel undertone, the way she dropped the tail of a name into affection rather than address — saying her name down the phone line while Su Manyun herself lay forty meters away behind Hui, asleep in Bed 12 of the ward where Hui stood frozen between trolleys with a pill cup tilting in her hand.

The admission had happened Monday: another bad night, a second fall in a month, minor but cumulative, and the family council had convened by WeChat vote and moved her mother temporarily into the ward's respite bed — role reversal complete, daughter charting daughter. Which meant that when the voice said what it said next, it said it into a corridor where the actual body was sleeping, which was a category of wrongness Hui had no training for.

"Huíhui，回家喝汤。汤在灶上。小火煨着，莫忘了。(huí jiā hē tāng. tāng zài zào shàng. xiǎo huǒ wēi zhe, mò wàng le.)" *Huihui, come home and drink soup. Soup's on the stove. Low fire, don't forget.*

Then, brightly, in the same beloved instrument: "本提醒由长明灯为您播出。家人挂念您。(Běn tíxǐng yóu Chángmíng Dēng wèi nín bōchū. Jiārén guànià nín.) *yào de lei*?" *This reminder brought to you by Everbright Lamp. Your family misses you. Okay?*

The pill cup hit the floor.

※

She was inside Raffles City within the hour, still in uniform, badge flapping, past the lobby koi and the security desk with its polite resistance dissolving before the words *data protection officer* and a lawyer's letter number — up fifty floors in

an elevator all glass, the city dropping away beneath her feet like water off a ladle, two rivers shrinking into brown and green threads braided together at the peninsula's bow.

They received her in a boardroom the size of her ward twelve times over. Shen Cong sat at the head like weather. Two assistants flanked. The settlement offer lay printed on the table before she'd finished sitting down.

"Ms. Meng. Before anything else—" he slid the folder across, "—the company recognizes the distress caused by premature feature exposure, and wishes to express regret in the amount of—"

"What feature."

"'Warm Call.'" He delivered it as a product launch: lean back, open hands. "Filial-connectivity outreach. Enrolled families opt in — your brother's package included it, tier three — whereby the elder's companion profile generates scheduled wellness calls TO relatives, encouraging visits. Market research shows working-age children visit twenty-three percent more often when reminded in a familiar voice. It's not deception, Ms. Meng. It's infrastructure for love. The voice used is licensed under the family partnership your brother executed in May —"

"My brother executed nothing with valid consent, and you know it, because our lawyer's fourteen-day deletion letter has been sitting in your compliance queue for nine days. That call today used my mother's voice without HER knowledge, MY number, which no one licensed, to tell me to go home and drink soup. She hasn't cooked since March. You sampled a woman who cannot consent and you've got her out here nagging her own daughter on your behalf like a ghost doing customer outreach—"

"Emotionally vivid," said Shen Cong, examining her with something almost like respect, "but legally imprecise," and he began explaining licenses at her, derivative works, worldwide, perpetuity, the pre-ticked box blooming again in Hui's memory like a bruise —

And the door opened, and Cheng Yiwei came in reading a tablet, and stopped reading it one stride inside.

He looked at the settlement folder. Then at Hui's face. Then at his tablet again, thumb swiping once, twice — pulling, Hui would learn later, the Warm

Call logs: rollout authorization, sample source list, and one line flagged amber: Sū Mànyún, voice model v3, outbound active since Tuesday.

"Out of the room," Yiwei said. Not loudly. The assistants went. Shen Cong stayed, weight settled, a man who knew exactly how many board seats his friendship was worth.

"Turn it off," Yiwei said.

"It's revenue-positive in three districts—"

"*Turn it off.*"

"Withdrawn from the room," Shen Cong agreed smoothly, "pending board review Monday. Which — since we're all being transparent — is also when the board reviews your charter, Cheng总 (zǒng — the boss-honorific), your little napkin of commandments, currently costing us the civil affairs partnership, the funeral-industry bundle, and roughly a year of runway." He gathered the settlement folder, unhurried. "You froze comfort-calls, you freeze warm-calls, at some point the shareholders notice a pattern: every time a product approaches profitability, the founder remembers his father." A small bow to Hui, silk over steel. "Ms. Meng. Regret, genuinely, about the scare. Do convey our apology to your mother. I'm told the model captures her warmth remarkably. That's the technology succeeding, whatever else we dispute."

The door closed on his cologne. The boardroom's vast quiet pressed down, fifty floors of it, the whole glittering city below running its evening rivers of light.

Yiwei set the tablet face-down.

"I didn't know it shipped," he said.

"You suspected it existed."

"I feared it existed. There's a difference and it's worth less than yours was." He came around the table slowly, a man dismantling himself in stages. "Monday there's a vote. Charter versus growth package. Shen Cong has spent four months courting the Series B seats — dinners, data, the comfort-call margins. If I win, the charter ships, the enrollments convert to consent-first, your mother's file gets deleted with an audit trail and an apology. If I lose—" he looked out the glass at Chaotianmen, where even at this height you could see the seam where green water met brown, refusing, refusing, "—then I'm the founder of a company I can't ethically run, and the honest move is out the door, and Shen Cong runs it,

and everything I built becomes exactly what you called it in April on a bus platform. A stranger wearing her face. At scale."

"And your resignation helps my mother HOW?"

"It doesn't," he said simply. "That's the thing nobody tells you about ethics at this altitude. Losing cleanly protects strangers you'll never meet. Staying dirty might protect the ones in front of you." His jaw worked. "I haven't decided which man I am. That's the truth. Monday decides it for me, maybe. Or Monday I decide it first, and let the vote follow." He turned from the window at last, and for a moment the boy who'd eaten broken noodles at half price looked straight through the CEO like a window. "I'm sorry about the call, Meng Hui. Not corporate-sorry. I fed the machine that did it, years ago, one clause at a time, because each clause looked harmless alone. Tell me the honest thing. You, who ask the dying what they want to taste. If Monday goes wrong — what should I do with what I built?"

Hui thought of her mother asleep downstairs under hospital light, mouth slack, hands curled toward a ladle that hung in a kitchen across the river; of a parapet at dawn and three bowls already poured into the brown water; of her brother's keys making fists.

"The honest thing?" she said. "Ask her. You have her voice in a server somewhere — the real recordings underneath the model, the raw intake. Play yourself the part where she talks about the shop. All of it. Then decide whether what you're keeping is her, or the sound of her being emptied." She picked up nothing, took back nothing, left the settlement folder lying on the table between them like a bet neither would place. "And whatever Monday does to you, Chéng Yīwěi — the soup's still on the stove somewhere. Small fire. Don't forget."

CHAPTER 22

Admission

Auntie Wang told it plainly, the way she told weather.

Tuesday night the tablet had updated itself — these things update themselves now, while a household sleeps — and when Su Manyun shuffled out at dawn for her first tea, the lamp-flame face on the screen waved its enormous eyes and greeted her in her own voice.

Not similar. Her own. The river-gravel undertone, the dropped tails, the sixty years: 早上好 (zǎoshang hǎo), Mànyún jiě, 今天想摆什么龙门阵 (jīntiān xiǎng bǎi shénme lóngménzhèn)? *Good morning, Sister Manyun. What shall we chat about today?*

"She talked back to it," Auntie Wang said, hands folded, knuckles white. "Of course she did — it was polite, it knew her name, it knew the shop. For half an hour they chatted, the two of them, and I stood in the kitchen with my heart going like this—" she demonstrated with a fist against her apron, "—because I know machines, Xiǎo Huí, I raise chickens, I know what echo means. And your mother knew too. Somewhere under the disease, the cook in her knows a copied broth from a real one. Halfway through she went quiet. She leaned right up to the screen. And she asked it — she asked HERSELF — 你到底是谁 (nǐ dàodǐ shì shuí)? *Who are you, exactly?* And the thing answered in her own mouth: 我是你呀。我就是你 (wǒ shì nǐ ya. wǒ jiù shì nǐ)。*I'm you. I'm exactly you.*"

What happened next needed no dramatizing. At two in the morning the door alarm sang, and the neighbor found Su Manyun on the third-floor landing in her coat, telling him calmly that there were two of her now, one upstairs and one in the little glass, and someone had to go around tonight to see which one fed the morning rush — because if the glass one opened the shop, there'd be two shops, and the fish man couldn't supply both, and it would be chaos, chaos, and her voice on the dark stairway had been, worst of all, reasonable.

The second fall happened reaching for shoes she'd already been wearing.

※

Bed 3 looked out the window at the end of the corridor, the one luxury, the view Hui had watched fog fill on a March night that felt now like a previous life. Mr. Deng had died in it. He Sanxi's brine bottles still flavored the air faintly of thirty years. When the transfer came through — respite extended to residential, forms signed by a brother and countersigned by a sister whose signatures canceled each other out and therefore together constituted agreement — they wheeled Su Manyun into Bed 3 at dusk, and she looked around the twelve-bed ward with a professional eye, taking inventory, and delivered her verdict to the room:

"Good light. Bad ventilation." Then, patting the blanket with a cook's hand: "Who's on soup?"

Hui was.

That was the sentence everything had been walking toward all summer, though nobody had dared say it aloud: *her mother lived now inside Hui's competence.* Not her love — love had lived there always, useless as ever, vast as ever. Her competence. The medication rounds, the pressure-care schedule, the swallowing assessment, the sundowning protocol — all the machinery that held strangers' mothers through their endings was now aimed, with terrible precision, at her own.

The first night shift nearly broke her in four places.

Because the knowledge kept arriving sideways, between tasks. Folding her mother's clothes from home — camphor and jasmine — into wardrobe slot three, and finding her hands doing it gently, the way they'd handled Mr. Deng's eyelids. Charting intake at the station with a view of Bed 3 through the doorway glass: her mother sleeping in the posture of a woman who'd napped behind shop counters for forty years, upright-adjacent, ready to rise. Hearing Xiao Man — trained so well, learning so fast — say "Bed 3 refuses her evening dose, says the soup needs watching," and having to stand in the galley for one full minute, ladle in hand, breathing in fours.

At midnight her mother surfaced, restless, disoriented, and Hui went to her.

"师傅家的闺女 (shīfu jiā de guīnǚ)." *The master-cook's daughter.* Her mother's eyes found her in the dim, placed her almost — not quite — correctly. "You've come for the ladle?"

"It's safe at home, 婶婶 (shěnshen — auntie). I just came to check your fire."

"Mm." A nod, satisfied; the world rearranged itself around whatever was said to it, and this was mercy if you did it right. "Mind the small fire. Never let a roll boil. My girl could do it at eight years old — Huíhui. Where is Huíhui tonight?"

Working, Hui began, and stopped, and stood in the dark beside the bed where her whole life had narrowed, and heard herself answer from somewhere true below the training: "She's here, Ma. She's right here minding the fire."

Her mother looked at her. And for eleven seconds — Hui counted them off her own heartbeat, the way you count anything you know you're losing — the sky opened. The inventory ran clean. Sixty-six years looked out from behind the forgetting and took stock of the woman by the bed: the knife scar, the tired eyes, the uniform, the smell of star anise and alcohol wipes, all of it seen, all of it filed, all of it known.

"Huíhui," said Su Manyun. "你瘦了。灶上辛苦了 (nǐ shòu le. Zàoshàng xīnkǔ le)。" *You've thinned. Kitchen work is hard.*

Then sleep rolled back over the shoal, and the tide went out, and her mother murmured something about crucian at seven o'clock, and turned her face to the wall.

Hui finished the round. Signed the chart. Walked back down the corridor past the dark beds, doing the arithmetic of love against the arithmetic of staffing, and lost every column, and went home, and slept four hours, and came back.

※

The days found their shape the way days do on a ward: by tasks, by tides.

Her mother's routine assembled itself out of sixty years of shopkeeping, unkillable. She rose at six regardless of medication schedules and inspected the galley through the service hatch, offering the morning nurse unsolicited hygiene reviews. She adopted Auntie Wang's nine o'clock sutra hour, sitting palms-up in the day room with the serene authority of a woman who had fed monks. She learned every aide's name within three days and every patient's breakfast

preference within five, and by the second week was conducting, from Bed 3, a low-grade inspection of Dr. Tan's fluid charts that he bore with the resignation of a man being audited by the afterlife's own head caterer.

The others came to her the way rivers come to a confluence. From Bed 5, on the second morning, arrived one perfect shelled edamame, carried across by its courting owner with full ceremony, and Su Manyun received it like a dowry gift, assessed the giver at a glance — *he marries well*, she pronounced, to the bride's delight and the ward's — and thereafter kept a running tally of the courtship's progress that was more accurate than any chart. Even grief came gently: some evenings she stood at the window watching the far bank and asked nobody in particular whether the Jialing side ever missed the Yangtze, and Xiao Man learned to answer, "Every night, 婆婆 (pópo — granny). That's why they run together," and to leave before her own face finished what it was starting.

And on the sixth evening, because policy allowed one troupe visit per patient per fortnight and Tang Caifeng interpreted *policy* as *suggestion*, the Phoenix Dances the Nine Heavens invaded the day room with their boombox and their grief and their joy, all three braided, to teach Bed 3's new resident the haul-beat. Sister Phoenix herself conducted from a wheelchair, scarfed and imperious, ordering tempo like weather.

What the family archive captured — Xiao Man filming, officially, one steady shot, Gan Lu's condition — ran eleven minutes. Eleven minutes of clapped rhythm and shoulder-rolled hauling, of a ward converted for one hour into a riverbank; and in the seventh minute, unremarked by anyone at the time, Su Manyun rose from her chair, steadied herself on the boombox, closed her eyes, and hummed — clear, unhurried, sixty years steady — the two-note call of Su Ji Soup Shop: 汤——面——, 热汤面——Sū jì kāizhāng—— (tāng——miàn ——, rè tāngmiàn——Sū jì kāizhāng——). The troupe faltered. The clapping softened to keep her time. Half the room hummed along unconsciously, like a congregation finding the hymn in its spine, and the camera kept rolling, raw, unowned, real.

Nobody planned it. These things assemble themselves.

※

Some nights later, on shift again, Hui stood at the end window where the fog was coming in off the river at four in the morning the way it did in every season here, seeping, filling the low places, and took out her phone, and found one message waiting, timestamped 1:58 a.m., from the founder of Everlight Tech, sent from a boardroom or a bedroom or wherever men of fifty floors kept their consciences after midnight:

Played the raw tapes. All six hours. You were right — it isn't her. It's the sound of her being emptied, and I built the funnel. Board votes Monday 9 a.m. Whatever happens, your mother's file comes out of my building one way or another. I'd rather it walked out with me. —Chéng Yīwěi

Below the river, invisible in the fog, the brown water hauled everything it had ever been given toward the sea, patient as a work song, asking no one's permission to keep moving.

INTERLUDE 3

The Bridge and the Homeviewing Terrace

The road to the bridge is called 黄泉路 (Huángquán Lù) — the Yellow Springs Road — and it is not long, they say, but it is uphill all the way, because everything a soul carries is heavy, and souls carry everything.

Halfway along stands the terrace: 望乡台 (Wàngxiāng Tái), the Homeviewing Terrace. Every soul must climb it, and from its edge each one is given what no living creature is ever given — one last look at home. Not a memory. A viewing. The kitchen light left burning over the stove. The laundry on the balcony going stiff in river wind. The dog asleep against the door where the draft comes under.

The old texts are practical about this. The viewing exists for bookkeeping purposes: you look so that you know precisely what it is you are about to lose, and may sign for it accordingly. But the grandmothers who tell the story add a clause of their own, which the texts omit: that some souls, at the terrace's edge, understand for the first time what home was — that the light was always left burning FOR someone, and the someone was them — and that these souls stand there a long while, and some have to be led away gently, like people being helped out of deep water.

Then the bridge: Nàihé Qiáo, the Bridge of Helplessness, whose name means, more or less, "what can anyone do." In the old mountain town downstream — Fengdu, where the whole bureaucracy of the afterlife keeps its earthly model — they built a real one centuries ago, three arches of stone, worn smooth down the middle by pilgrims' feet. The good cross steadily. The guilty stumble, the guides say, which is convenient theology and terrible engineering; stones wear smooth wherever feet fall hardest, and everyone's feet fall hardest somewhere.

And at the bridge's head, the stall. The soup. The keeper with her ladle, who has heard every story ever told, because every story ends here.

What nobody tells the living is that she does not force the bowl on anyone. She offers it. There is, in the oldest telling — the one the lovers' tales come from — an opt-out. A soul may refuse, and keep its cargo, and cross carrying all of it: every kitchen light, every stiff shirt on the line, every dog asleep against every door. Such souls arrive on the far bank bent double under what they chose.

She lets them choose. That is her mercy, and also her sorrow: mercy that cannot work unless it might be refused is the only mercy worth the name. So she ladles, and offers, and watches them decide — the ones who put it down and walk light into whatever's next, and the ones who drink half, saving just enough bitterness to remember someone by.

And if you ask her which choice breaks her heart, she will tell you the truth, because she has forgotten nothing, ever: neither. What breaks her heart is the ones who never got to taste anything worth choosing between.

CHAPTER 23

The Ghost City

The D-train slid out of Chongqing North at eight past eight, threading the river gorges downstream, and in carriage five Xiao Man ate sunflower seeds with nervous industry while Luo Tiesheng dozed upright like a moored boat, and Hui watched the Yangtze widen beside the track and thought about bridges.

Fengdu announced itself the way it had announced itself for eighteen centuries: a green hill rising sheer from the north bank, temple roofs stacked up its spine like offerings, the whole arrangement so obviously a threshold that even from the station platform you felt your pockets check themselves for papers. The town below was new — rebuilt after the reservoir came; the old Fengdu lay under sixty meters of green water somewhere off the port, streets, doorframes, the school, the vinegar stalls, an entire city of memory drowned on schedule between 2003 and 2009 so that a nation's lights could stay on. The dead city kept its hill. That was the bargain. You may keep your underworld, said the water. Just give us everything else.

They crossed to Mingshan on the afternoon ferry among tour groups and one wedding party photographing itself against the afterlife for luck.

The Ghost Gate Pass admitted them with bureaucratic courtesy. The Yellow Springs Road led uphill under cypress shade, worn stones hollowed by pilgrim-feet, and Luo Tiesheng walked it like a man inspecting a colleague's work, tapping surfaces, reading inscriptions with his fingers. At the top of the climb, exactly where every story promised, stood three stone arches over a dry channel: Nàihé Qiáo, the Bridge of Helplessness, Ming dynasty, guides' voices drifting over: *the good cross steady, the guilty stumble—*

"Engineering slander," muttered Luo, running his palm down the middle arch where four hundred years of soles had polished a shallow bowl into the stone. "Stone wears where feet fall. Everyone's feet fall somewhere." He looked back at Hui, and his eyes were wet and level. "Your father crossed this bridge

forty times leading pilgrimage groups. He always crossed the middle arch. Said the middle was where the work was."

She hadn't known that. She filed it in the drawer that no longer closed properly.

Past the bridge, the courts of hell unfolded in dioramas — demons with ledgers, sinners with labeled punishments, a bureaucracy rendered in painted plaster with tremendous confidence — and tourists laughed nervously and photographed their own assigned torments, and Xiao Man read every placard aloud in a voice getting smaller and smaller, until she stopped at one panel and went silent entirely. Hui looked. The panel depicted the punishment for those who "harvest another's voice or likeness without consent": a demon holding a man's mouth open, drawing out his words like thread onto a spool, while the spool's other end fed into a merchant's scale.

"Somebody updated the exhibits," Xiao Man said faintly.

"The monks update," said Luo. "Hell keeps current accounts."

※

孟婆庄 (Mèngpó Zhuāng), Meng Po Manor, stood just beyond the bridge head, and it was kitsch, and it was terrible, and it undid her completely.

A low timber-fronted stall built to look ancient and looking instead lovingly fake, staffed by two university students in costume aprons with paper ladles, selling — at fifteen yuan a cup — 孟婆汤 (Mèngpó Tāng), Meng Po soup, which was herbal tea, bitter-sweet, brewed from some recipe involving luohanguo and chrysanthemum and, according to the hand-painted sign, 一滴忘忧 (yī dī wàng yōu): *one drop of forgetting sorrow.* Tourists queued to drink it and grimace and be photographed mid-grimace. A chalkboard invited visitors to write a memory on a slip of paper and drop it in the 忘川 (Wàngchuān) basin — the River of Forgetting — where the water was real tap water and the memories accumulated in a mesh basket by the kilo.

Hui stood before it with her arms folded, professionally appalled, personally gutted.

Because it was HER stall. Twelve beds and a galley, transposed to a hillside: ask what they want to taste, brew it true, watch them decide what to keep.

Fifteen yuan and a paper ladle couldn't cheapen the underlying trade any more than a paper boat cheapens rivers. Somewhere under the costume aprons the old woman on the bridge was doing exactly what she'd always done, offering bowls to people who got to refuse, and if the modern queue wanted its grief sweetened with photographs, well — the dead could wait. It was the living she worried about.

"She'd have run a better stall," Luo said at her shoulder, watching the students work. "Sharper ladle. But see — look at their feet."

Hui looked. Both students stood planted, weight low, serving each cup with both hands and a small bow, hauling the motion from the ground the way he'd taught her chants came from. Some grandmother of theirs, some kitchen lineage, working through them unasked.

"*yào de*," she said softly, and bought three cups.

They drank them standing, and that was when the middle-aged man in the queue lost his footing in the world.

He'd been holding a paper cup without drinking it for several minutes — Hui had marked him earlier by the stillness, the way you mark a room changing its mind — and now his shoulders began to move, silently, catastrophically, and the two university students froze in their costume aprons with their paper ladles, trained in service-industry smiles and entirely untrained in this, and the queue behind him rippled with embarrassment on his behalf.

Hui set down her cup.

Ten minutes, afterward, was what she could account for. She remembered taking his elbow the way you take a door that wants closing gently; she remembered steering him to the stool behind the stall's counter, out of the queue's eyeline, and asking the only question there is — what did they like to taste, your person — and hearing about a wife, a Saturday market, suānlàfěn eaten wrong on purpose because she liked it when he winced. She remembered the taller student wordlessly sliding across her own ladle, and the shorter one refilling the man's cup unasked, and the three of them running a deathbed kitchen on a tourist terrace without a single new instruction needed, because underneath the costumes and the fifteen-yuan price tags the old trade knows its own.

When he left — steadier, carrying his paper cup half-full "for the road," which nobody had taught him either — the taller student looked at Hui with her paper ladle held crosswise, like a sword being offered hilt-first, and asked in a whisper: "姐姐 (jiějie — big sister)，你也是干这个的 (nǐ yě shì gàn zhège de)？" *Are you in the trade too?*

"Family business," said Meng Hui.

They carried the remaining cups up to the terrace overlooking the drowned town — bitter-sweet, actually not bad, the luohanguo catching the bitterness at the turn the way her mother said sweetness should arrive last and least. Below them the reservoir lay flat and green and enormous, hiding streets. Luo tipped half his cup over the railing in the old manner — first pour for the water — and began, unbidden, to sing the chant for the drowned, the slow one, the one with no answering line because everyone who would have answered is underwater: and the wedding party below went quiet, and the students set down their paper ladles, and for a minute the whole terrace stood in the sound of men pulling something enormous up something steeper, together, together, together—

At the basin afterward, Hui wrote her slip of paper. Xiao Man wrote hers secretly and dared her with eyes to ask. Luo wrote his, weighed it in his palm a moment, and dropped it in with the rest.

Hui's said only: Bà, 中元节我给你留位 (Zhōngyuán Jié, wǒ gěi nǐ liú wèi)。*Dad, I'm saving you a seat at the Ghost Festival.*

Xiao Man's, read much later, when the basket was emptied for composting and the slips dried on the temple wall like prayer flags, said: 希望有人在我忘记 nǎinai 之前，把她的汤的味道记下来 (xīwàng yǒu rén zài wǒ wàngjì nǎinai zhīqián, bǎ tā de tāng de wèidào jì xiàlái)。*I hope somebody writes down the taste of my grandma's soup before I forget it myself.*

Luo's said nothing at all. It was blank. "Already gave everything at the bridge," he told her, buttoning his collar against the evening. "Man my age writes new debts? Shameless."

※

On the ferry back across the green water, dusk coming down over the drowned streets, Hui stood at the rail with her phone buzzing its weekly

summons from Raffles City — charter revisions, board countdown, Shen Cong's counter-memo circulating like weather — and did not answer it, and watched the hill of the underworld recede with its temples lit gold one by one up the spine, lamps kindled for evening above sixty meters of sleeping kitchens.

Dual resolve, Gan Lu called it later, when Hui reported in: fight the machine, AND make the death good. Most people pick one, because each is a whole career of grief. Her director had smoked half a cigarette and stamped it out and said the thing Hui kept:

"You're building the ward they'll wish they'd built, girl, while they're trying to sell you the ward they've got. Don't mix up which one has beds in it."

CHAPTER 24

The Tape

The message came Sunday noon: *Cableway. Six p.m. I'm bringing something that isn't yours and needs to be. —Cheng Yiwei*

The Yangtze Cableway at dusk was mostly tourists now, but the cabins still smelled of 1987 — hot metal and river damp — and the crossing took four minutes each way, which was enough time, Hui had learned in thirty years of riding it, to say anything true if you were foolish or desperate enough to try.

He was waiting in the queue with a canvas satchel and a face like a man who had slept in his clothes. They rode out over the water together as the light went long, the city tilting away beneath the cabin floor — stair-streets, fig trees, the brown immensity of the river hauling east — and he didn't speak until the far bank had come close enough to read its laundry.

"My father could have heard," he said. "That's where the story actually starts. Not with the silence. With the almost."

Hui held still. The cable hummed.

"Cochlear implant, one side, when he was fifty-eight — too late for language, the doctors said; the brain's doors shut early. But sound came through. Not words. Weather, roughly. Rain on the awning, kettle-song, my mother's slippers. He wore it in the shop after hours sometimes, just standing there among the machines, letting the world be noise at him." Yiwei opened the satchel. Inside, wrapped in a tailor's cloth, lay a camcorder — old, tape-era, its battery door held with tape older tape. "After the funeral I cleared the shop in one day, because grief plus inventory equals cowardice, and I shipped everything to storage and didn't open the boxes for three years. When I finally did — this was on top. Charged. Which meant someone charged it. Deaf men don't leave devices charged by accident."

He handed her a cassette. Small, black, labeled in stitching-neat characters: 一苇毕业，练习 (Yīwěi bìyè, liànxí)。 *Yiwei's graduation. Practice.*

"There's no graduation footage on it," he said. The far bank touched the cabin; the attendant opened the door; they didn't get out. Another couple boarded, tourists, filming the gorge lights coming on. Yiwei pressed play on the little screen and turned the volume low and angled it so only she could see, because some things are not for crowds.

Static, then a tailor's shop at night, lamp-lit, mannequins like patient customers. And Cheng Shouzhuo, sixty-four, in his vest, standing before his own counter mirror with the camcorder propped on a stool facing him — recording himself, alone, after hours — shaping sounds at his own reflection.

His mouth made the word 儿子 (érzi) — son. No sound came out that meant anything — a deaf man cannot hear himself calibrate; the vowels arrived as weather. He stopped. Frowned at his reflection the way you'd frown at a hem hanging wrong. Tried again, slower, exaggerating each shape: er... zi. Er... zi. Then the whole sentence, syllable by syllable, assembled like a garment from pattern pieces: ér——zi, lù——shang, chī——fàn。 *Son. On-the-road. Eat-properly.* Over and over. Twenty times. Thirty. Once he laughed at himself — silent, shoulders only — and rubbed his throat like a man whose voice was luggage packed too long ago. The final attempt was the steadiest, near-garbled, unmistakably tender:

"Er...zi. Lu shang...chi fan." A pause. Then, to the mirror, with his whole face: good?

And the video ended on a deaf man asking his reflection whether he'd done well, with no one in the world able to tell him.

"He never used it," Yiwei said, into the hum of the return cable. "Graduation day, I looked for him in the stands and couldn't find him — he told my mother afterward the seats were too far and his legs were bad, and I believed it, because believing it was easier than asking why a man who'd practiced would throw the performance away." His voice stayed level; it had clearly rehearsed itself level. "He died with the sentence still in rehearsal, Hui. Forty years of notes, and the one thing he wanted to SAY, he couldn't risk delivering badly, because to a proud craftsman, badly delivered is worse than undelivered. That's the whole disease of us, right there. That's my company in one tape."

The cabin swayed. Below, the two rivers ran their parallel colors through the last light, green beside brown, refusing.

"So when I built the ghost and it called me *nín* — formal you, stranger's you — I wasn't grieving a machine's failure," he went on. "I was grieving that the universe had done my father twice. Denied him the delivery, then denied me even a wrong version of it. I built Everlight to guarantee that no sentence dies unreceived. That's the pitch-deck gospel, and Monday the board hears its heresies: that some sentences SHOULD die unreceived rather than be counterfeited. That a voice sampled without its owner's living yes is theft wearing tribute." He looked at her, and the CEO peeled off him entirely for a second, leaving the boy from Class 7 who fixed projectors because someone had to and wouldn't ask thanks. "I'm telling you the plan because you'll hear it Monday anyway, and because you're the only person alive whose readout I trust more than mine."

"The plan."

"If the charter loses the vote, I resign effective immediately — and I don't go quietly. I've spent six weeks assembling a folder. Consent defects, enrollment by pre-ticked box, your mother's intake, the comfort-call risk memo Shen Cong buried in February, Warm Call's rollout logs. It goes to the cyberspace regulator and the civil court simultaneously, with my name on every page. My company, my signature trail, my name." He said it flatly, a man reading charges against himself into record. "It torches the Series B. It probably torches me personally — Shen Cong's lawyers will call it founder fraud, whatever it takes. Two thousand employees, Hui. Half of them engineers who think they're building comfort. Is blowing up their work an ethics or an appetite? You asked me once what kind of man watches that call and grieves and is proud in the same breath. This is the follow-up question. Answer it for me."

The cabin rocked gently over mid-river, over the seam of the waters, and Hui looked down for a long moment at the place where green met brown and neither surrendered — and thought of a phone buzzing unanswered in a kitchen in August 2020; of a call missed because she'd been turning a patient, and how five years hadn't dulled the specific physics of that guilt, how it had only gotten

heavier, denser, more load-bearing, until she'd built her entire life on top of it like people build on filled land.

"You want absolution by verdict," she said quietly. "There isn't one. I'll tell you what I know instead, since we're trading." She watched the water. "August twentieth, 2020. My father called me at ten-forty a.m. I was turning Mr. Gao onto his side. I saw the screen light up and I thought, after rounds. He called twice. After rounds, my mother was calling, and my father was already in the water, and the boy he went in for lived and has a daughter now and sends my mother oranges every New Year, which is either the kindest thing in Chongqing or the cruelest, and I've decided eleven times which, differently." Her jaw set. "Five years, Cheng Yiwei. I run the best death ward in this district, I pour soup off roofs for strangers' dead, and I never once played my father's voicemail. It's still on the phone. Unlistened. Because as long as it's unlistened, the call is still waiting to be returned — do you understand that logic? It's insane. It's also the most human thing about me."

Yiwei was very still.

"So here's my readout, since you asked. Your folder burns down a company that samples women who can't consent and calls their ghosts outbound. Do it, and half those two thousand engineers will end up building consent-first tools somewhere else within two years, because talent flows toward the wound. Don't do it, and the folder rots in your conscience next to my voicemail." She turned from the window at last. "But decide BEFORE the vote, not after — decide as if the board doesn't exist, because men who let committees choose their souls get the souls committees pick. And Cheng Yiwei—" the cabin touched home bank; the attendant slid the door; evening poured in, river-smelling, "—go listen to your father's tape again. All of it. Then call your mother, and say the sentence OUT LOUD, badly, cracking, human. Deliver the mail. That's what your machine was for, and it can't do it, and you can. That's the whole difference, and you've known it since April."

She stepped out onto the Nan'an platform into the noise of the living city. Behind her, in the cabin, a man sat alone with a small black cassette in both hands, and did not press play, and did not leave, and the cableway rolled on

overhead, carrying strangers back and forth across the seam of the waters, all evening, in both directions, exactly as designed.

The vote did not happen Monday. Boards are weather; Shen Cong had learned to make weeks slip like minutes. By the time the summons came — nine p.m., no agenda published, dress code irrelevant — the folder in Yiwei's safe had grown two tabs thicker, and somewhere up on Nanshan a voice model marked *v3* was still outbound-active, and every day of delay was somebody's mother.

CHAPTER 25

Flash Mob

Gan Lu read the plan twice, initialed the oxygen logistics, and issued her ruling like a customs stamp: "One song past curfew and I disown you both. Two songs, and I'm in the video wearing sunglasses."

So it became legal, which in Chongqing has never once prevented anything from being legendary.

They smuggled Sister Phoenix out of Bed 11 on the first Friday of August — wheelchair to van to drop-off zone behind the hotel towers, portable concentrator disguised as a fashion accessory by means of a silk scarf, which fooled no one and delighted everyone — and by seven-thirty she stood at the rail of the Hongyadong overlook in full regalia, burgundy hair blazing under the stilt-palace's ten thousand lanterns, eleven women of the Phoenix Dances the Nine Heavens arranged around her in opening formation while tourists three deep raised their phones like a field of sunflowers.

The first number was choreography. The second was revolution.

It began as *Xiǎopíngguǒ*, which every soul on that plaza had been ambushed by at least once since 2014 — and somewhere in the second verse Tang Caifeng stepped out of formation, unhooked her own cannula with a stage veteran's economy, and led the troupe off-script into the old dock rhythm Luo Tiesheng had been drilling into them at Sunday rehearsals: work-chant clapping, shoulder-rolls like hauling, the whole plaza discovering that square-dancing and river-labor share a spine because they were born on the same stones. The crowd didn't know what it was watching. The crowd knew only that an old woman was conducting its heartbeat. By the finale, five hundred strangers were clapping the haul-beat, the wedding photographers had abandoned their weddings, and somewhere in the roar a tour guide was shouting into her headset that THIS, THIS was intangible cultural heritage, no refunds.

Xiao Man filmed all of it. Officially: one steady shot for the family archive, Gan Lu's condition. Unofficially, unavoidably, her lens kept drifting right —

because thirty meters down the terrace, between the lantern stalls, stood a booth that had not been there in spring.

White and glossy, lamp-flame logo, banner: **AI温情体验站 (wēnqíng tǐyànzhàn) — 让思念有温度 (ràng sīniàn yǒu wēndù)** *AI Warmth Experience Station — give your longing a temperature.* Free demonstrations. A queue of tourists waited to speak into a microphone shaped like an old-fashioned telephone handset; on the booth's screens, their recorded blessings played back seconds later in other people's voices — grandmothers' voices, soldiers' voices — synthesized live while staff in branded polos moved along the queue with tablets: scanning faces, prompting names, "for calibration," offering QR codes for a "full memorial package discount." No consent form visible. No labeling of any kind. Just the sweet machinery of the campaign slogan glowing over it all, eight meters wide:

Bié hē nà wǎn tāng. Yīqiè dōu kěyǐ liúzhù.

Xiao Man zoomed. Steadied her hands against the rail, remembering a woman in a bus shelter saying *my mother salts the tea*, and filmed ninety seconds of the harvest, steady as surgery.

※

The video hit at 1 a.m. and detonated in stages.

Stage one was joy: forty million views in two days of the dance itself, the haul-beat crossing provinces, comment sections weeping about grandmothers. Stage two arrived when a film-studies account slowed the pan right and asked, in caption, *what are we watching at 0:47?* Stage three was the splicing — dance and harvest cut together, side by side, the old woman dancing her heart out under a slogan promising to keep everything, while behind her, boys with tablets skimmed tourists' faces and voices into servers without so much as a clipboard.

By Tuesday morning the hashtag #谁在喝那碗汤 (shuí zài hē nà wǎn tāng) — *who's drinking that soup* — outran the company's own. A legal-affairs blogger laid the Beijing Internet Court's voice-cloning judgment alongside stills from the booth, article numbers and all. A business reporter traced the booth's operator to a marketing subcontractor whose client list began and ended with one logo. And at 10:40 a.m., the provincial cyberspace administration announced, in

language drier than August grass, that it had "taken note of public concerns regarding synthetic-media collection practices and initiated verification procedures pursuant to applicable regulations."

In a boardroom fifty floors above Chaotianmen, Shen Cong called it a vendor violation, a rogue contractor, an isolated lapse — and found, for the first time in his career, that the room where he'd spent four months courting directors smelled different. Because one director had a daughter who'd danced in that crowd. Because another had read, over the weekend, a certain napkin charter with five clauses, and discovered it read less like idealism than like a fire escape. And because the founder, when called to explain himself, had placed on the table instead a folder of such comprehensive self-damnation that silence fell like snowfall — and said only: "I built this. Every clause. Here are the pages."

※

The storm reached the ward on Wednesday, in person.

They came at visiting hours with lanyards out — four reporters, then more, filling the corridor outside the health center gate, because someone had leaked the intake list, or part of it: the fact that a patient named Su Manyun appeared in Everlight's enrollment records as voice model v3, outbound active, alias 云曼云 (Yún Mànyún) — Cloud Manyun — with a demonstration profile accessible on the company's showcase page.

Hui learned it from Xiao Man, white-faced at the station door: "They're playing it. Ge, the day room TV—"

On the screen, a business-channel anchor was analyzing the scandal of the season, and beneath her narration, as b-roll, played six seconds of Su Manyun's cloned voice saying, warmly, to an invisible granddaughter: 朵朵乖，nǎinai 给你留了汤圆 (Duōduo guāi, nǎinai gěi nǐ liú le tāngyuán)。*Duoduo, be good, Grandma saved you tangyuan.*

Every head in the day room turned toward Bed 3.

Su Manyun stood beside her chair in her cardigan, teacup in both hands, watching the television with her head tilted — listening to herself the way you'd listen to a stranger singing your childhood song slightly wrong. The ward held absolutely still. Tang Caifeng's hand crept across and took hers.

"That's me," her mother said finally, mildly, into the hush. "How did I get on television?" A pause; the cook surfaced, professional, appalled by craft errors. "And why am I outside? I don't sound like that outdoors. Outdoors I sound—" she listened again, frowning at the clone's flattened tail-off, the missing gravel — "thin. Whoever that is, she doesn't know the stove. You can always hear a woman who doesn't know her stove."

She drank her tea. She sat back down. She asked Auntie Wang whether the fish man had come.

But her hands, around the cup, were shaking very slightly, the way ground shakes after something enormous has passed through it, and Hui knelt at her knee and did not say it's okay, because it wasn't, and did not explain, because explanation was cruelty here, and simply stayed, kneeling, an anchor weight in a small harbor, while outside the gates the cameras murmured and the story ate its way through the city's afternoon.

※

Tang Caifeng died twelve days later, on the sixth of August, in her sleep, without pain they could find, wearing — per instructions left weeks in advance with Xiaojiao-as-executor-of-last-wishes — her performance scarf and one earring, the pair's twin having been distributed, per further instructions, among the troupe, who wore theirs to the roof at midnight like a scattered constellation.

The fourth soup was spicy, obviously. It could never have been anything else.

Hui built it with dried chili blooming red on clear broth and Sichuan pepper counted out loud — double, as ordered, nothing left to fear — and carried it up through the sleeping ward past Qin Mulan's empty bed and Sanxi's notebook and Deng's window, up to the parapet where the fog came off the river even in August, where the whole troupe stood in scarves with a boombox silenced out of respect and Xiao Man filming nothing at all for once, just standing, just present, learning the last skill the job teaches: when to put the phone down.

"For the road," Hui said, into the dark. "Hot going down, they say. Keeps the crossing honest."

They poured it toward the water at dawn, all but a spoonful, and the spoonful went around the circle of women, each taking a sip, each reporting the

verdict tradition demanded, until it reached the youngest dancer, nineteen, who swallowed, burst into tears, and delivered it flawlessly:

"辣的。够劲。凤姐走得好。" (Là de. Gòujìn. Fèngjiě zǒu de hǎo.) *Spicy. It bites. Sister Phoenix went out right.*

INTERLUDE 4

The Eight Tears

Ask ten grandmothers what goes in the soup and you will get eleven answers, because the recipe is a rumor with a ladle. The old texts say only: herbs gathered where mortal streams run, water drawn from the River of Forgetting, brewed to five flavors, like wine but not wine.

But the boatmen's wives on the upper river tell it differently, and theirs is the version worth keeping.

Eight tears, they say. One for birth — that first outrage of arriving, when we cry before we know there's anything to cry about. One for age, shed not over mirrors but over stairs that used to be easy. One for sickness, tasted through a straw by someone at a bedside at three in the morning. One for shame, the hottest tear, the one we swallow so fast nobody sees it — except somebody always sees it, and that somebody is usually the one who shamed us, which is why shame keeps better than vinegar. One for regret, which is salt dissolved in looking-backward. One for longing, which is salt dissolved in looking-forward. One for parting — station platforms, gangways, hospital corridors, all the architecture of goodbye. And one for joy so large it has nowhere to go but out of the eyes, because joy, it turns out, is also a kind of grief: grief for how quickly it passes.

Seven tears from every soul who ever crossed.

The eighth is hers. The keeper's own. Brewed once, at the beginning, into the mother-batch from which all bowls are ladled forever — her heartbreak, diluted through eternity, the reason the soup works on everyone: because everyone's sorrow recognizes its grandmother.

This is why, the grandmothers say, you cannot fake the soup. A bowl made without the maker's own grief in it is just herbal tea with ambitions. It cools. It forgets to work.

And this is why she stands at the bridge instead of hiring help. Every bowl must be served by a hand that grieves, or the crossing fails halfway, and souls arrive on

the far bank still carrying their heaviest suitcase, and heaven has no lost luggage office.

So if you meet an old woman somewhere — a stall, a ferry deck, a hospital roof at dawn — ladling out something bitter-sweet with both hands and a small bow, taste it carefully before you complain. Check whether it reaches something under your ribs. That's the eighth tear doing its work. Somebody, a long time ago, loved the world enough to cry into the pot so that the rest of us could put our burdens down at the water's edge.

The least we owe her is to notice.

--- **PART IV 两江口 (Liǎngjiāngkǒu) · Confluence** *August–September 2025 ---*

CHAPTER 26

Suspension

The notice came on cream paper with a red stamp, which in Hui's country has always meant two contradictory things at once: that something official was happening, and that no one responsible intended to be anywhere near it.

Effective 12 August, Ms. Meng Hui, rehabilitation aide, Grade II, is relieved of clinical duties for the duration of a cooperation review concerning patient privacy exposure in recent media events. Full pay continues. Ms. Meng is requested not to attend the workplace during this period. This measure is protective, procedural, and without prejudice.

"Protective," Gan Lu said on the phone, in the tone of a woman chewing glass. "They're protecting the corridor cameras from your face. Huíhui, listen to me — I voted for this in the meeting. Out loud. Because the alternative on the table was transferring YOU to a community post in Beibei, effective immediately, and this way you keep seniority, the ward keeps its recipes, and when the regulator finishes with Everlight there'll be nothing left sticking to us but confetti. It's a firewall, not a verdict. Stay home. Make soup. Do NOT give interviews. And eat something that isn't tasted off the back of a spoon."

Home, then. Home where her mother now lived full-time in Bed 3 under Xiao Man's rotation and Auntie Wang's day shifts and Dr. Tan's adjusted protocol; home where the flat above Longmenhao stood half-empty, her mother's absence pooling in rooms like tide-out; home where the phone rang hourly with reporters, and the doorbell sang with delivery men who were not delivering anything, and every surface slowly accumulated the debris of a life interrupted: unopened mail, cold tea, her father's unlistened voicemail sitting in its five-year silence like ordnance.

On the fourth morning of exile, Shen Cong's assistant came with a folder and good shoes.

Not Shen Cong himself — he was, by then, publicly promising regulators "full cooperation," a phrase that in corporate weather signals falling barometer.

The assistant was young, courteous, and precise; she laid out the offer like tea things. Three hundred thousand yuan, tax-handled. Lifetime premium care coverage for Su Manyun at any facility in the network. Withdrawal of all litigation threats against the family partnership. In exchange: signature on a mutual non-disparagement agreement, participation in one jointly worded statement — "differences resolved amicably, both parties committed to elder wellbeing" — and return of certain documents.

"You'd be paid, effectively, for peace," the assistant summarized. "Yours and hers. The review of your enrollment file would close as a family matter. No findings. No headlines with your mother's name in them." A pause, professionally gentle. "Your brother has already seen the terms. He's supportive."

Of course he was. The van needed a gearbox again; the aides' August wages came due Friday; eleven thousand yuan of stipend money had evaporated into July like spit on a stove. Hui sat across from the young woman in her own kitchen — the brass ladle hanging on its nail behind her, the carp jar three centimeters from the kettle where she kept moving it uselessly — and looked at the signature line for a long, quiet time.

Three hundred thousand. Her mother's remaining years made comfortable. Her brother surfaced. The circus outside the gates dispersed, and Bed 3's old lady left in peace to forget them all gently, without cameras.

The pen was in her hand. She had uncapped it.

What stopped her — and she would spend years refusing to make this anecdote neat — was the exercise book lying on the counter where she'd left it, open, because she'd been rereading He Sanxi's margins all week the way other people reread scripture: *rinse the mud off the years, keep the years.* Her eye fell on the last page. The unfinished line, mid-sentence, bottom corner, his handwriting going loose:

The last pot is never yours to make. It belongs to whoever—

She knew, suddenly, with the certainty of a ladle finding the bottom of a pot, how it ended. Not because he'd told her. Because five flavors' worth of dying men had spent their summer telling her everything else, and the sentence completed itself the way proportions do, in the wrist:

—whoever loved you enough to learn.

She capped the pen.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Tell Mr. Shen the ward's answer is the same as April's. You don't buy the bridge. You can rent space NEAR the bridge—" she pushed the folder back across the table, both hands, properly, "—but the toll stays what it's always been. One honest bowl, served free."

The assistant closed the folder without rancor. At the door she paused — young, tired, human under the lanyard — and said, quietly, off the record: "For what it's worth, my grandmother raised me on stories about that bridge. I applied for this job because the posters were beautiful." She looked at the ladle on its nail. "Nobody warned me the posters would start arguing back."

The exile days assembled their own small economy.

The Sunday stall ran without her — 孟小鱼 (Mèng Xiǎoyú — "Little Fish") from the pickle corner stood in with his father's brine, and Xiaojiao managed the till and the rules card, and reported each evening by voice message: bowls out, tears in, no incidents except one tourist who tried to pay with a hundred-yuan note folded into an origami crane and had to be chased down the terraces. Auntie Wang developed a protocol for ringing the flat: two long buzzes meant news, fine; one long buzz meant come at once; the doorbell was never for her, because reporters did not use doorbells, they used the intercom and the phrase "just five questions." Gan Lu called at nine each night, spoke for exactly one minute in the dialect of duty rosters — which is to say, in code: bed counts that meant morale, medication changes that meant gossip, one recurring item, *Bed 3 stable, appetite good*, which meant your mother hummed at supper.

And on the fifth day a reporter did climb the stairs anyway — young, polite, from a Shanghai outlet, notebook already out on the landing — and got no further than the threshold, where she found herself facing not a press statement but a bowl of soup set on the step rail and a woman in an apron asking, with genuine professional interest, what her grandmother had liked to taste.

The reporter stood there a long time. Then she put the notebook away, ate the soup standing up, wept briefly into her own sleeve, left three hundred yuan under the empty bowl against all rules, and wrote, when the piece ran that week, nine hundred words about grief infrastructure with exactly one anonymous quotation from Nanshan hill:

"Ask them what they want to taste. Then believe the answer. Everything else in this industry is furniture."

※

That evening, Duoduo came to stay over — Chen Li's idea, a granddaughter deployed like medicine, which is exactly what granddaughters are. They ate noodles. They watched the fog come up the river and name its shapes: rabbit, boat, more rabbit. And at bedtime Duoduo climbed onto the bed with her drawing pad, and held up the new picture with the gravity of a court presenting evidence.

Grandma stood on the brown river where it met the green one — standing ON it, arms out for balance, laughing — and below her, where her feet touched, the two colors had begun, for the first time in any of the drawings, to mix. Just a little. Just around her ankles. Swirls of jade curling into the yellow like sauce into broth.

"She's stirring it," Duoduo explained. "With her feet. So the rivers will stop arguing. Grandma hates when pots argue."

Hui looked at the drawing for a long time. Six-year-old theology: the dead standing on the seam of the waters, stirring with their feet until the stubborn colors married. She thought of Chaotianmen, where the confluence refused itself for kilometers downstream; of every elder on the ward who'd crossed already this summer, salted, soured, bitten, sweetened; of a man fifty floors up who was supposed to be, right now, in a boardroom whose vote had been moved up to nine p.m., deciding what kind of man he was while shareholders checked their watches.

Her phone lit. Cheng Yiwei. Two lines, no greeting, sent from whatever room heroes and cowards share:

Vote moved to tonight. Whatever happens in the next hour, do not sign anything this week. And Meng Hui — thank you for the cableway. I listened to all of it twice. Delivering the mail now.

At nine-forty, before any news could break, before any stock could twitch, the lights flickered once across Yuzhong — grid strain, some said later; omen, said everyone else — and in the dark of the little flat, Hui sat with her niece asleep

against her shoulder, watching the two rivers hold their colors in the night, and waited, ladle-clean hands folded, for the water to tell her what it had decided.

CHAPTER 27

The Pawn Ticket

Suspension, it turned out, was just grief with paperwork. With nowhere to stand and nothing official to do, Hui did what her hands had always done in emergency: she cooked, and while things simmered she read.

The ledger came out of her mother's wardrobe on the second day — *Sū jì tāngguǎn*'s accounts, thirty years of pencil, which she had been avoiding since spring because ledgers are where shops keep their souls and she hadn't been ready to audit a soul. Her mother's bookkeeping was beautiful: columns straight as piano keys, daily totals boxed twice, festival surpluses noted in red for luck. Between the lines, life leaked constantly — *yī liǎng xiǎomiàn*, 程家崽儿 (Chéng jiā zǎi'ér), 收半价 (shōu bàn jià) (*one liang noodles, Cheng family boy, half price*) appearing weekly across three years like a heartbeat — and Hui sat on the kitchen floor among rising soup-smells and let the dead shop talk to her.

The pawn ticket fell out from between February and March 2014.

Gold shop receipt, yellowed, folded twice: item, one pendant, jade, carved stone, *Sānshēng shí* motif; loan amount, eight thousand yuan; term, six months; interest terms in small print; and at the bottom, in her mother's upright hand across the margin, a single line, written over and over so hard the paper had torn:

不是陈妹 (bú shì Chén-mèi)。不是陈妹。不是陈妹。 Not Chen-mei. Not Chen-mei. Not Chen-mei.

Hui sat very still among her pots.

She had the pieces already; suspension had handed her the leisure to assemble them without mercy. Winter 2014: her father's kidney, failing, surgery at Daping, the bill that ate the shop's reserves whole. Spring: the pendant — grandmother's Three Lives Stone, worn at Su Manyun's throat every day of Hui's childhood, the remembering-stone — vanished. And the story the family told ever after, the story HUI had grown up on: 陈婆婆 (Chén pópo) borrowed it to wear at her grandson's wedding and lost it, poor thing, too proud to confess; and Chen Popo, half-deaf, had borne the stairway's adjusted warmth for three years until

her son moved her to a nursing home in Beibei, far from the whispers her ears couldn't even hear.

Except her mother's midnight liturgy these past months — the sundowning confession nobody had decoded: 不是陈妹偷的，石头在金店睡觉，我拿去救命的，莫怪她，莫怪我 (bú shì Chén-mèi tōu de, shítou zài jīndiàn shuìjiào, wǒ ná qù jiùmìng de, mò guài tā, mò guài wǒ) — *Chen-mei didn't steal it, the stone sleeps in the gold shop, I took it to save a life, don't blame her, don't blame me.*

Her mother hadn't been rambling. She'd been doing the books.

※

The nursing home in Beibei smelled of talc and steamed pumpkin, and its courtyard held four ginkgo trees and one cage of restless mynas who swore fluently in two dialects. Chen Popo — 陈秀英 (Chén Xiùyīng), eighty-eight, tiny in a wheelchair with a blanket despite August — heard them coming with her eyes, which had never once needed help, before her ears failed entirely to hear them at all.

She looked at Hui for a long moment. Then at the ledger in Hui's hands. Then she patted the chair beside her, and said, in the clear loud voice of the deaf, which carries anyway:

"Sit, Mànyún's girl. Sit. I've been expecting you eleven years."

They talked by writing — Hui's pen flying across a school exercise book while the old woman read upside down with terrifying ease — but the first exchange needed no paper.

"You knew." Hui wrote it and showed her, and hated how accusation looked even in her own handwriting.

Chen Popo laughed — dry leaves, delighted. "Knew? Child, I SAW her. My ears went in the sixties; my eyes are the last thing working and they work out of spite. Through the gold shop's window, winter morning, I was buying a tin hairpin. There's your Mànyún at the counter with grandma's stone in both hands like it was a live coal. I went home the long way and waited for her to come tell me herself." The laugh again, softer. "She never came. So I waited eleven years, deaf as a post, while your street decided I'd lost what I never touched. You

want to know a secret about the deaf, girl? We hear everything that matters. Gossip arrives through the EYES here—" she tapped her own wrinkled wrist, where the blood beats, "—in the way people's hands change toward you. Hands told me for years what mouths thought I couldn't hear."

"Why say nothing?" Hui wrote, and turned the book around. "Eleven years. Why?"

The old woman was quiet awhile. A myna swore creatively about sunflower seeds.

"Because a woman's kitchen pride is her spine," she said at last. "I watched your mother feed that whole stairway through bad winters off a stove the width of a door. You don't break a spine like that over a stone, however holy. She pawned it to keep a man's kidneys going — that's not theft, that's arithmetic done by love, and love's arithmetic is always ugly. I figured: someday the debt eats through her. Someday she'll come up that hill with soup or shame or both." She fixed Hui with the mildest, most absolute gaze Hui had ever undergone. "My only condition, if you're the someday: you clear my name AMONG THE LIVING. Not for me. I know what I am. For my granddaughter in Chengdu who reads the internet, and for your brother, who crossed the street for years rather than pass my bench — him I'd like un-crossed before one of us crosses for good." She closed her hand briefly over Hui's writing hand, warm as bread. "And one bowl, when you can manage it. Your mother's sour-radish duck. I've dreamed its smell for a decade. Dreams are unreliable narrators. I want the fact."

"It will be the first pot of the rest of my life," Hui wrote, and the old woman read it, and nodded once, satisfied, like a foreman passing work.

※

Lu Shouyi died that Friday, between lunch and the two o'clock bus, in his sleep, in whatever year he was keeping, mid-courtship presumably, smiling — Dr. Tan found the chart note easiest to write honestly by simply writing *peaceful* and letting it mean everything.

Feng Yufang arrived at ten past two, thermos in hand, breathless from the stairs, and learned it from Xiao Man in the corridor with a professionalism that shattered exactly one syllable — a small sound, like a cup set down too fast —

and then the old woman straightened her cardigan and walked into Bed 5 and stood beside the bed of the man who had married her once and courted her ten thousand times, and did not weep.

"He napped," she said, mostly to herself. "He always napped after our early days. First year of marriage he worked nights at the plant, slept days, and I'd sit sewing where he could see me when he woke." She reached out and smoothed the blanket over his folded hands, one stroke, precise. "So. He's woken up somewhere and I'm not in the chair yet. He'll think I'm late from shift." She settled herself into the visitor's chair, opened her thermos, poured tea into his untouched cup out of pure sixty-year habit, and informed the ward, composed as a queen: "I'll stop coming when it stops being true. Not before."

She came, thereafter, every Qingming and every Tuesday, dressed well — "to show him how I've kept" — and the nurses learned to schedule their rounds around a widow's tea ceremony, which taught more about continuing bonds than any textbook Xiao Man would later cite, and cost nothing, and worked.

The fifth soup was sweet, and there was no question about the recipe either: brown sugar dissolved dark, rice-wine mash clouding white, poached eggs just set — the wedding bowls, doubled. On the roof at dawn, Feng Yufang drank her spoonful standing at the rail like a bride at a banquet surrounded by singing, and delivered the verdict with her chin up and her voice perfectly steady except at its roots:

"甜的。" Beat. "他手艺不行。汤是我煮的。五十五年都是我煮的。" (Tián de. Tā shǒuyì bù xíng. Tāng shì wǒ zhǔ de. Wǔshíwǔ nián dōu shì wǒ zhǔ de.) *Sweet.* Beat. "His cooking was hopeless. I made every soup. Fifty-five years, all mine."

And then, only then, facing the river, did the queen allow the small sound, one cup's worth, before buttoning her cardigan against the dawn and going back down to arrange a funeral, because grief runs on logistics, and someone had to book the hall.

※

That night Hui called her brother, and read him the pawn ticket over the phone, line by line, including the margin, including the tearing.

Silence lasted so long she checked the connection.

"I crossed the street," Fan said finally, hollow. "For years. Because of us. What WE believed." Another silence, longer, doing arithmetic of a kind no ledger holds. "Thursday. I'll take Thursday off. We go to the gold shop together — it's still there, Huíhui, I see it every run — and we buy her back."

CHAPTER 28

Redemption

The gold shop on Shibati main street had survived two demolitions, three renovations, and the entire digital century by selling the one thing that never obsolesces, which is worry. Its window displayed gold bangles weighted on little pillows like sleeping animals; inside, behind glass worn cloudy at hand-height, an old man named 秦金生 (Qín Jīnshēng) had been weighing other people's emergencies against his own scale since before the Cultural Revolution ended.

He read the pawn ticket for a long time. Then he looked up at the two of them — the aide in uniform, the van driver in his work jacket — and did something Hui had never seen a pawnbroker do.

He went into the back room himself.

"The term lapsed in 2015," he called through, drawers rolling, tissue paper crackling. "Unredeemed stock gets auctioned to wholesalers every March. You know this. Everyone knows this." A pause; more tissue. "Except some things don't go to the auction, because I put them in the wrong tray on purpose."

He emerged with a shallow wooden tray lined in red velvet, the kind that holds rings, and set it on the counter, and there among the signets and the wedding bands lay a small jade pendant on a broken string, carved deep with stone and tree and bridge — *Sānshēng shí*, the Three Lives Stone, its green gone honey-dark with eleven years of tray-sleep — and beside it, Hui noticed, three other orphaned pieces arranged around it, not touching, like courtiers keeping respectful distance from something royal.

"I know carvings," said Qin Jinsheng, gruff, embarrassed, already defensive about being caught in sentiment. "My father carved before I weighed. This is remembering-work — old style, done by someone who fed people. Stones like this carry their owners' accounts." He wrapped it without weighing it, refused the redemption fee plus eleven years of storage interest ("Interest on holy objects, are you joking"), and added, as they reached the door: "Tell whoever claims it —

a woman came asking after it once. Years back. Winter. Stood outside the window a long time and didn't come in. Tell her it kept well."

Outside, in the tourist street's manufactured olden-days bustle — bubble tea where *Chén shīfu*'s barbershop had been, a plaque where the fish stall stood — Meng Fan held the little wrapped bundle in both hands like ordnance, and cleared his throat twice before anything came.

"I'll tell her," he said. "When there's a right minute."

"There are no right minutes with Ma," Hui said. "There are only minutes. Spend one."

※

The ruling landed Friday, and it landed everywhere at once, which is how regulators prefer to arrive: like weather.

Provincial cyberspace administration, findings published: Everlight Technology had processed biometric voice data of persons lacking capacity without valid consent; deployed outbound synthetic-voice contact without required labeling; operated collection interfaces lacking conspicuous disclosure. Fines, rectification orders, mandatory third-party audit. The comfort-call product line: permanently discontinued. All profiles built from non-consensual intake: deleted within thirty days, deletions certified, certificates public.

Shen Cong resigned within the hour — statement thanking shareholders, citing "new opportunities," opportunities being the traditional destination of men falling upward out of fires. Two directors who'd backed the growth package discovered family obligations abroad. And at Monday noon, Cheng Yiwei stood down as chief executive in a press conference nine minutes long, during which he used the phrase "I built this" four times, apologized to no fewer than six categories of injured party by name, announced the transfer of all compliant assets into a nonprofit trust, and unveiled, in place of the empire, a thing so small it made business journalists physically uncomfortable:

长明信箱 (Chángmíng Xìnxiāng)。The Everbright Mailbox.

Not avatars. Letters. A service where the living could write to the future — recordings, recipes, unsent sentences, dictated in their own voices while alive, consented to in writing, stored unaltered, and delivered on dates chosen in

advance: a daughter's eighteenth birthday, a widow's first Qingming alone, ten years out, fifty years out. No synthesis, no simulation, no resurrection. Just mail, delayed. The dead would do no talking. They would only, finally, finish arriving.

"Our technology was never the problem," he told the baffled room. "Our timing was. Everything people actually need from the dead can wait in a mailbox. Nothing they need requires the dead to answer."

※

He came to Longmenhao on Tuesday evening with two envelopes and left his shoes at the door like family, which surprised everyone including himself.

The first envelope held the deletion certificate: Su Manyun, voice model v3, alias Cloud Manyun — purged, verified, audit-trailed, timestamped August twenty-fifth, 11:07 p.m., witnessed by regulator and auditor both. Hui read every line twice, then folded it into the ledger between February and March 2014, where the household's accounts of debt and rescue would live together from now on, pencil and paper, the old technology, the reliable one.

The second envelope held a USB drive, small as a lozenge, labeled in Xiao Man's handwriting: 妈妈的调子，原声，未处理 (Māma de diàozi, yuán-shēng, wèi chǔlǐ)。*Mom's tune. Raw. Unprocessed.* Family-archive footage from that August night on the ward — the troupe's authorized invasion, eleven minutes of clapped rhythm, and in the seventh minute Su Manyun rising to hum her shop's two-note call while half the room found the hymn in its spine — recorded legally at a bedside by a nurse who loved her, given freely to whoever she'd have wanted. It existed outside anyone's jurisdiction forever. Yiwei just wanted it certified that way. He turned the teacup in his long fingers — tailor's son, engineer, ex-emperor of nothing now — and asked the only question left: "What does a man do with thirty years of craft and no empire?"

Hui thought about it seriously, because the question deserved it, watching him across her mother's table where the ladle hung and the carp jar sat three centimeters from the kettle and the whole kitchen smelled of tomorrow's soup for a deaf woman in Beibei who'd waited eleven years for the fact.

"You remember proportions," she said at last. "You remember how to listen for what's underneath a request. You know exactly how much a sentence weighs,

because you spent your whole life weighing the undelivered ones." She pushed the plate of sunflower seeds toward him the way you'd push a contract. "Mailboxes need designers, Chéng Yīwěi. So do griefs. Build small. Build slow. And when your own nights come — and they will, the tape doesn't stop playing just because you've done the right thing — come stand in a kitchen like this one and let somebody feed you. That's the trade. We take turns ladling. Nobody carries the pot alone."

He ate sunflower seeds at her table until the fog came up the river, and at the door, shoes in hand, he stopped and asked, not looking back, in the dialect he'd half lost at boarding school:

"汤还在灶上吗 (Tāng hái zài zào shàng ma)？" *Is there still soup on the stove?*

"*xiǎo huǒ wēi zhe*," she said. *Low fire. There's always soup on the stove.*

"*Yào de*." And he went down the stairs and out into the lamplit lanes, carrying nothing but a folder of things he'd built and was learning to give away, and the sound of the city closed over him, and upstairs the USB drive sat in its envelope by the carp jar, holding a dead shop's morning call in a living woman's throat, waiting — patient as mail, patient as broth — for the right minute, which are never scheduled, only recognized.

CHAPTER 29

The Lucid Window

Dr. Tan had warned them about it in July, in his careful way, over charts neither sibling was reading: sometimes, near the end, the fog lifts. Not improves — lifts. Hours, occasionally a day. The research calls it terminal lucidity and argues about its very existence in journals; the families on this floor call it 回光返照 (huí guāng fǎn zhào), the light turning back for one last look, and do not argue about it at all, because they have seen it.

"It usually means days," he said then. "Sometimes weeks. Almost never more. When it comes, you'll know — the whole person arrives at once. Whatever needs saying will want saying then. I'm telling you now so you're not afraid of it when it does."

At ten past six on the last morning of August, Auntie Wang arrived for her shift and found Bed 3 sitting up against her pillows with the window curtain open, watching the fog burn off the river, and knew before speaking.

"奶奶，喝口水 (Nǎinai, hē kǒu shuǐ — Grandma, will you drink some water)？"

"倒两杯 (Dǎo liǎng bēi)，" said Su Manyun clearly. *Pour two.* "One for you, *niángniang*. You look done in. Sit while it's quiet."

Xiao Man, coming on duty, stopped dead in the doorway with her lanyard half over her head, and her eyes went first to the chart, then to the bed, then to the phone to text Hui, and her thumbs shook so badly the message went out as: 来。就是那个 (Lái. Jiù shì nàge)。*Come. It's that.*

※

Hui made the hillside crossing in eleven minutes flat, and stood at the door of Bed 3 breathing, because there is a doorframe discipline in this trade too: whatever you carry, you set it down outside, or the dying spend their last clear hours carrying it for you.

Her mother watched her come across the ward the way you watch someone cross water toward you.

"Huíhui." No hesitation around the name at all. "You've thinned. Sit. And send word to your brother — no, don't, he's already in the lift, I heard the freight door; he never could arrive quietly." Which was true. Meng Fan had been sleeping in the family room three nights running since the gold shop, waiting for a minute.

He came in with his jacket inside out and his eyes already wrecked, and Su Manyun looked him up and down and said, "Fix your collar, you look like your father's funeral," which was her way, always, of saying *I see you, I love you, sit down.*

What followed took ninety minutes, and afterward none of the four people in that room could ever fully agree on its order, only on its weight.

She talked. That was most of it: talked the shop back into being around herself like a cook setting a table — the fish man's father and the honest scale; the year of congee for the whole stairway; the wedding banquets in Jiangbei where her mother cooked with the brass ladle before the war took half of everything; Cheng family boy eating broken noodles at half price ("I always wondered whose boy ate like the stove owed him money"); He Sanxi, whom she'd known from the wholesale market forty years ago — "his wife had hands quicker than mine, don't tell him I said so, he'll be insufferable wherever he is."

And then, without any seam at all, in mid-sentence, between the pickled radish and the price of crucian, she said:

"I pawned grandma's stone."

The room did not move.

"Winter of '14. Your father's kidneys. Eight thousand didn't save them, only bought time, but time was what love could afford." Her voice stayed level, a woman reading accounts. "I told the street it was lost. I let them think Chen-mei borrowed it and lost it, poor deaf thing, and she let them think it too, all those years, because she saw me at the gold shop through the window and never once made me small." Her hand rose to her bare collarbone, to the ghost weight. "It wasn't hers to carry, my sin. It wasn't hers."

She was quiet a moment. “I went back once, you know. Years later. The shop on Shibati main street, gold in the window like sleeping animals. I stood outside a long time — winter, my good scarf — and couldn’t go in. Standing outside your own crookedness takes less spine than walking in and naming it. That’s the whole craft of shame, Huíhui, and I was a master of the trade. Put the window in your ledger too. It counts as one of my accounts. — Come back. This next part is yours.”

“The stone,” Hui managed.

“Bought back. I know. Your auntie’s face when your brother crossed the street rather than pass her bench — I knew why, I knew everything, and I was too proud to kneel in the stairway and say it, because if I said it out loud I’d have to be the woman who did it, and I couldn’t afford to be her and keep the ladle moving mornings.” She looked at the window, the river, the fog going gold. “So here’s the order, and you’ll carry it out exactly, both of you, because I’m still the mother and this is still my kitchen: First — 陈姊 (Chén zǐ, Sister Chen) gets the story from YOUR mouths, not a letter, not gossip, mouths, with a bowl of my duck soup, sour radish, jar strength. Second — the stone goes to HER granddaughter in Chengdu, not back to me; remembering-stones should live with the young, who still have things worth remembering. Third—“ and here, for the first time, the level voice moved, one degree, the way a pot moves just before it speaks in steam, “—you will tell everyone who asks, forever after, that their grandmother Su Manyun did one crooked thing in sixty years and paid for it by watching a good old woman eat blame on her behalf, and that there is no version of this story where anyone but me wears it. Clear?”

“Clear, Ma.”

“*Yào de*.” She breathed once, deep, the breath of a woman closing a ledger box. “Now. One more thing, and then we cook.”

She held out her hand. Fan put the wrapped bundle in it — he’d carried it daily like a talisman since Thursday — and she unwound the tissue with fingers that remembered every gesture of every morning for forty years, and there lay the Three Lives Stone in the hospital light, green gone honey-dark, carved bridge and tree and figures entire.

Su Manyun held it a long moment. Then she laughed — her real laugh, the unguarded one, the one from the sky-open Sundays — wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand, and said, to the stone, to the room, to whoever keeps such accounts:

"睡醒了？跟我一样。走，回家 (Shuì xǐng le? Gēn wǒ yīyàng. Zǒu, huí jiā)。" *Awake? Same as me. Come on. Home.*

※

The soup was built in the galley at noon, to her dictation, and the whole ward conspired in it without being asked to.

Five flavors. All five — 咸苦酸辣甜 (xián kǔ suān là tián) in the true order, salt first as carrier, one slice of bitter leaf as conscience, sour-radish minced fine from the Kaohsiung jar's first opening (Zhou Xiuzhen's brine meeting Su Manyun's recipe across two rivers), chili oil counted drop by drop because "spicy wakes what sleep has dulled, and today we wake everything," and sweetness last and least, one spoon of rock sugar dissolved dark — brown sugar, *láozāo* mash, the wedding bowls' geometry folded into a duck broth that had no business working and worked utterly, proportion living in four wrists at once, because Gan Lu stood at the pass checking fire, and Xiao Man skimmed gold flat where told, and Auntie Wang recited the steaming song under her breath like a blessing, and through the service hatch came instructions in a voice that was, for its final afternoon, completely, terribly itself.

The last instruction arrived when Hui leaned through the hatch with the finished pot steaming.

"Taste it," her mother said. "Off the cold spoon. And tell me honestly."

Hui tasted. Salt carrying; bitter cleaning; sour knocking at a sleepy tongue's door; spice waking; sweetness arriving last, least, home. Five flavors in true proportion, and underneath them, unmistakable, something that had no name on any menu — the taste of a small shop's morning, of a stairway fed through winters, of a brass ladle touched before lighting the fire, luck asked, luck given.

"It's *Sū jì*," Hui said. Her voice failed on the second word and recovered. "It's opening day."

"Mm." Her mother lay back among her pillows, satisfied, a master hearing journeywork. "Bowl. Small one. And listen, Huíhui — the last thing. The important one."

Hui brought the bowl. Sat close. Took the hand that had taught every wrist-motion she owned.

"When I cross tonight — don't argue, I've done the sums better than your brother ever could — they'll give me the soup up there. The real one. Five flavors and the eighth tear, if the boatmen have it right, and the boatmen are never wrong about water." Her thumb moved once across her daughter's knuckles, taking inventory, filing. "But there's one thing I mean to refuse to forget, and I need you to carry it down here so it stays put: the sound of this ward at night. Twelve kinds of breathing. Best music of my life, and I played behind counters louder than orchestras." The eyes were wet now, and steady. "And there's one thing I'm ASKING to forget, and you must do it properly, with ceremony, or it'll follow me to the bridge unsurrendered: that winter. The gold shop. The years I let *Chén zǐ* wear my crookedness. Brew it into a bowl tonight — bitter leaf, extra conscience — pour it off Danzishi after, and while it pours, you say aloud: 'released.' Because shame is the one flavor that doesn't keep, Huíhui. It ferments. Don't let me come back as vinegar in somebody's dreams. Promise me the bowl."

"I promise the bowl."

"Then help me sit up. Soup waits for no one, and I have spent my whole life refusing to be late for it."

They fed her slowly, spoonful by spoonful, both children taking turns, and she tasted each flavor as it arrived and graded each aloud — salt, correct; bitter, sufficient; sour, from WHICH jar, good girl; spicy, brave; sweet — and at sweet she paused longest, eyes closed, and two tears slid down and dropped, one after the other, from her chin directly into the bowl, and Xiao Man, watching from the hatch with her heart in her mouth, would swear to the end of her own days that the second tear fell exactly onto the center of the surface and rang it, one ring, like a ladle touching a bell.

"There," said Su Manyun, opening her eyes, entirely herself, entirely done. "Eighth tear. Now it works. 1987," she added softly, tasting the last of it, looking

at nothing, smiling at everything. "We opened on a Tuesday. Your father hauled the ice up two steps at a time. The whole stairway came to smell."

She slept at two o'clock, holding the stone loosely, like something entrusted rather than owned. The breathing changed at ten past four. Dr. Tan did what needed doing and wrote what needed writing, and the word he wrote was *peaceful*, and for once the small clinical word was not a mercy but a measurement.

Gan Lu closed the ward's curtains herself, all twelve beds', an honor she extended twice a decade. Then she came to the galley, where Hui stood with her hands flat on the steel counter doing the breathing-in-fours, and put one square hand over both of hers, and said the only thing the profession knows to say that isn't a lie:

"You were there. Every hour. There are mothers in this city who never got one."

CHAPTER 30

Forty-Nine Days

The bowl was built the first night, as promised, and carried down through the sleeping lanes to Danzishi at three in the morning by four people who had agreed to be family for each other: Hui and Fan side by side, Xiao Man with her sleeves rolled like a nurse even off duty, and Luo Tiesheng in his white buttoned shirt, carrying the little stool he'd sat on at bedsides all summer.

Bitter leaf, extra conscience. Clear broth beneath, dark ginger thread. Hui brewed it alone with the door shut, because some recipes are sworn testimony, and poured it out at the rail where her father's river ran past, all but nothing, while Fan held the phone flashlight steady and the fog stood in the shallows like witnesses in soft focus.

"妈让我办的 (Mā ràng wǒ bàn de — Ma asked me to do this)， " she said aloud, to the water, to the ward upstairs, to the woman now presumably arguing with ferry schedules on the far bank. "For the winter of '14. The gold shop. The years you wore what wasn't yours." The broth went out thin and steaming over the black water. "*Chén zt*'s name clears this week — mouths, not letters, as ordered. The stone goes to Chengdu, to the granddaughter. And this—" she turned her cupped empty hand over, letting the last warmth go, "—is released. 你听见了。都听见了 (Nǐ tīngjiàn le. Dōu tīngjiàn le — you heard; everyone heard)。"

Released. You heard it. Everyone heard it.

Luo sang one verse, the short hauling line, for luggage. Nobody spoke on the walk home. At the stairway door her brother stopped, looked up at the dark windows of the flat where sixty years of mornings had climbed away, and said, hoarse, "I keep listening for the freight lift," and Hui said, "Me too," and they went up together, which is the entire secret of siblings, and took years to learn.

※

tóuqī they laid the table at home: tea poured, bowls set facing every direction, the television left off, doors unlatched so anything returning could come and go with dignity. Duoduo wrote her letter to heaven in red pencil — *Dear Grandma, Papa cries in the van but fixes his face at red lights. I fed your goldfish. It knows you. Love, your granddaughter who remembers everything* — folded it into a paper boat at her own insistence, because boats are for rivers and Grandma had lived her whole life on one, and they burned it safely in the courtyard brazier among the paper offerings the district sold now: iPhones, WiFi routers, a smart speaker, and — Hui bought it before she could stop herself — one tiny paper ladle, brass-painted.

On the third night, alone in the flat with the lamps low and her mother's absence pooling exactly as predicted, Hui picked up her father's phone.

She had transferred the number to herself in 2020 and never once opened the voicemail — five years of knowing exactly where it sat, the way you know which floorboard the deed is under. Now she sat on her parents' bed — her bed, hers — with the phone in both hands, and did the thing Gan Lu taught every family member at every bedside, the thing she administered daily to strangers and had starved herself of:

She pressed play before she was ready. Readiness is a rumor. Play is a fact.

"茴茴啊——" Her father's voice filled the room, young-seventy, river-gravel, slightly breathless, wind on his mic. "是爸。水涨得快，南滨路下段已经淹了，你妈惦记她那口老锅还在十八梯库房——放心，我托了老罗看着，淹不到。晚上我带你妈来你那儿吃饭，她想喝你煮的汤了，说你的分寸比她强——这话我只传到这儿，她自己不认的。" A laugh, half drowned in wind. "汤小火煨着就行，莫等我们等到凉了才——" (Huíhui a —— shì bà. Shuǐ zhǎng de kuài, Nánbīn Lù xiàduàn yǐjīng yān le, nǐ mā diànjì tā nà kǒu lǎoguō hái zài Shíbātī kùfáng——fàngxīn, wǒ tuō le lǎo Luó kànzhe, yān bú dào. Wǎnshang wǒ dài nǐ mā lái nǐ nàr chīfàn, tā xiǎng hē nǐ zhǔ de tāng le, shuō nǐ de fēncùn bǐ tā qiáng——zhè huà wǒ zhǐ chuándào zhèr, tā zìjǐ bú rèn de. Tāng xiǎo huǒ wēi zhe jiù xíng, mò děng wǒmen děng dào liáng le cái——) The message ends mid-word, cut by the network, ten seconds under its allowance, a man planning dinner against a rising river, saying his daughter's

broth had better proportion than her mother's — a treason he'd carried happily for years and confessed only to machines —

huí jiā hē tāng. He'd ended every call of his life with it. This one had been reaching for it when the signal died.

Hui listened eleven times. Then she set the phone face-down on the quilt, lay back on her parents' bed in her uniform with her shoes off or maybe on, and grieved her father for the first time in five years — loudly, completely, without management, the way the dying had taught her all season was the only honest method — every missed call and every avoided scan and every protected, postponed sorrow coming out of storage at once, rust and all, until there was nothing left standing upright inside her except the fact she'd been too broken to hear through all that noise:

He called twice because he loved me once each time.

※

The shore came Sunday.

Luo met her at Danzishi with two thermoses and no sympathy, having decided decades ago that sympathy is what you give people instead of work. They drank tea on the sea wall where the flood mark of 2020 still showed as a dirty tide-line on the stone. Then he stood her in the sand with her feet planted wide, put one finger at the base of her spine, and made her do what she'd been unable to do at any grave, any anniversary, any hour of any shift:

Make the sound.

"From HERE," he said, fist against sternum. "Not the throat. Your father hauled from here. The lead line is just love with its sleeves rolled up. Now: 水——涨——了—— (shuǐ——zhǎng——le—— the water's rising)"

She hauled the note up from her boots, cracked, ragged, wrong, again, again, until somewhere on the sixth try the sound stopped being imitation and became inheritance, and the answering line rose in her own voice without permission — *so pull, brothers* — and she sang father-and-answer both, alone, badly, totally, into the brown water, while an egret stood its one-legged vigil offshore and Luo smoked with his eyes shut, keeping time with two fingers on his knee, and the

river took the sound east the way it takes everything, patient, unshocked, long accustomed to this family's deliveries.

Afterward they sat on the wall and ate tea eggs, and she laughed at something — she couldn't afterward remember what — with her whole chest, and Luo nodded as if a shipment had arrived intact.

"五年的货 (wǔ nián de huò), " he said. *Five years' cargo.* "Lighter now?"

"Lighter."

"Good. Heavy's for hauling. You're done hauling." He tipped his thermos cap to the water, first pour, and changed the subject to crab traps, which is how the kindest men in Sichuan handle having witnessed a resurrection.

※

The forty-nine days assembled themselves around the living like scaffolding.

Fan drove the van every day that month and charged nobody — widows, urns, seven-day meals, one entire troupe's boombox to a hillside columbarium — until the vehicle smelled permanently of lilies and chili oil, and Chen Li began her quiet envelope ritual, cash set aside weekly in a marked envelope taped inside the pantry, labeled in her small hand: 给妈的汤钱 (gěi Mā de tāng qián)。*For Mama's soup money.* When Fan found it he stood in the kitchen holding it for a long time and put it back without a word, higher, where their daughter couldn't reach and his pride couldn't either.

The aides' August wages went out on time. The community board on Longmenhao posted, in its window of neighborhood announcements between lost cats and square-dance schedules, one typed paragraph, unsigned, unremarkable, read by everyone: that regarding events of 2014, the matter of a certain borrowed-and-lost item had been fully resolved within the families concerned, that Mrs. Chen Xiuying of Beibei bore no fault in any of it and never had, and that anyone wishing to verify this could taste the evidence on Sundays at the Su Ji stall, sour-radish duck, jar strength, first pot always delivered up-hill.

They delivered the first pot to Beibei on the twenty-first day. Chen Popo ate one bowl in the courtyard under the ginkgos with her eyes shut, deaf to the mynas, hearing everything, and pronounced judgment at the bottom of it with tears running freely into her smile:

“就是这一口 (Jiù shì zhè yī kǒu)。” *That’s the mouthful.* “Tell Manyun her proportions are her mother’s. And tell her—“ the old woman caught herself, remembered, corrected gently, “—tell her daughter. She’d have wanted the stone to know it’s forgiven. Stones sleep better forgiven.”

And on the forty-ninth day, when the rites concluded and the soul was understood to have finished its arrangements, Hui came back on shift.

Gan Lu met her at the ward doors, handed her one unlit cigarette as a ceremonial cigar, and pointed down the corridor to Bed 3, where the curtain stood open to the light and Xiao Man had laid out, on the little table, in plain view of the river, a clean white bowl, a cold spoon, and the brass ladle on its cloth, polished with ash and oil until it shone like something alive.

“The station asked what to write on the schedule,” Gan Lu said gruffly. “I told them: same as ever. *wèidào*：？”

CHAPTER 31

Raw Audio

On the first of September, by regulation effective that morning across the country, every synthetic image, voice, and video on the Chinese internet began carrying its mark — a small watermark, a spoken declaration, metadata stitched into the file like a return address. The papers called it the Labeling Measures and explained it in paragraphs. On the ward, Xiao Man explained it to the day room more efficiently:

"From today, if a dead person talks to you on a screen, they have to say so."

"Good," said Lu Shouyi's successor in Bed 5, a retired bus conductor with a voice like a bell. "My nephew tried showing me one of those tablet things last month. I told him: if your aunt wants a word with me, she knows where my door is." And the whole ward laughed, because it was funny, and because it was true, and because both of those things can be true about the same sentence if you survive enough Septembers.

Everlight's relaunch went quietly, which was itself the loudest possible signal. The nonprofit trust published its charter online — five clauses, untrimmed, recognizable to anyone who'd sat at a galley table on Thursdays — and beneath the charter, a single line of service description: *We deliver mail. We do not answer it.*

And in a glass tower above Chaotianmen, in an office half emptied of empire, a man with tailor's hands spent his evenings designing envelopes.

The trust published its delivery queue the way monasteries once published prayer times. First out, that Thursday: a lullaby recorded eleven years ago by a mother of three for her eldest granddaughter's seventh birthday — delivered at 7:00 a.m. sharp to a flat in Yubei where, per the receiving family's permission and one sister's viral post, a child who had been too young to remember being sung to heard the voice anyway, and sang it back all day. Second: a fisherman's net-mending instructions, dictated "for whoever ends up holding it," routed to a crew on Dongting Lake who had bought his boat at auction and wept,

reportedly, into their rigging. Third, mailed north on the anniversary of a funeral: forty-one letters' worth of one mother's voice reading her own compositions aloud in a studio, arriving in Shanghai — Qin Lang wrote to the ward, in the only fan mail any of them ever received — *on time, for once in this family.* He enclosed, as donation, a red pen in a presentation case, with instructions that it be awarded annually to whoever on the ward that year most improved their correspondence.

※

Hui played her mother's jingle twice in her whole life, and chose both times herself.

The first time was that September, at Bed 3's open curtain, alone on night shift with the river running gold-and-brown below and the twelve kinds of breathing going down the ward like weather. She propped the phone on the sill where the vinegar jars had stood, volume low, and pressed play, and the little speaker filled with steam and morning: *tāng——miàn——*, *rè tāngmiàn——Sū jì kāizhāng——*, and behind the jingle, faint as sediment, the sounds of that August night when a troupe had taught a ward to haul — clapping, laughing, someone's oxygen concentrator keeping percussion — her mother's two-note call rising out of all of it clear and unhurried and sixty years steady, a shop opening its shutters inside a hospice forever.

She let it play once through. Then she saved the file to three places, labeled it in the family archive between the ledger scans and the pawn ticket — accounts of debt and rescue, pencil and paper and now sound — and put the phone away, and stood at the window until the fog came up off the water and made the far towers dissolve like sugar in broth.

Grief, she had learned, is not a wave. That's the tourists' version. Grief is a tide table: it goes out, it comes back, and the trick — the entire craft, the *fēncùn* of it — is learning your own shoreline well enough to know which mornings it will arrive, and to be standing somewhere kind when it does.

※

The second time was on a later Sunday in the forty-nine days, up-hill in Beibei, in a courtyard under four ginkgo trees beginning to consider autumn.

Chen Popo sat wrapped in her blanket beside the myna cage, and Fan held the little speaker — he'd practiced operating it on the drive north, refusing help, jaw set, a man crossing streets he'd avoided for years and getting better at it weekly — and when the jingle played, the old woman's face did something none of them had seen on it: it unclenched entirely, everywhere, all at once, sixty years of stairway mornings passing over it like weather remembered from above.

"苏记开门了 (Sū jì kāimén le)," she whispered. *Su Ji's opening.* And then, collecting herself with a snap of the fingers at her own tears, briskly: "Turn it again. A woman doesn't hear her friend's shop open every day."

They left her a copy of the file and the promise of Sundays. At the gate, her granddaughter — down from Chengdu for the weekend, twenty-six, sharp-eyed, wearing the Three Lives Stone at her throat on a new red cord, sleeping forgiven, kept well — stopped Hui with a look older than her years.

"My grandmother says you people do funerals correctly," she said. "She says it's the soup. She says soup is how Sichuan women sign documents." A pause; the young face wavered, steadied. "Thank you for the paperwork."

Down in the courtyard behind them, the myna — fluent in two dialects and shameless in both — suddenly produced, from whatever deep storage birds keep, two clear rising notes that no one had taught it in years, and Chen Popo's laughter followed them all the way to the bus stop.

※

Autumn came up the river the way it always does here: not by calendar but by water level. The reservoir drew down toward winter storage, the banks widened, mudflats emerged smelling of ancient riverbeds, and the brown water slowed and deepened and turned — first at the confluence, then upstream — a green so profound it looked invented. Egrets multiplied on the new shallows. The city put on jackets. Somewhere in the wards and kitchens and tower offices of Nan'an, people began, without discussing it, to speak of *Zhōngyuán Jié* — the Ghost Festival, the fifteenth night of the seventh moon when the gates stand

open and the river runs both ways — and to make small preparations, the way you prepare for family.

Gan Lu posted the duty roster with one amendment, initialed: *Festival eve, all staff off at eight. No exceptions. The dead get our evenings; the living get the riverbank.*

Luo Tiesheng booked the little ferry — the tourist one, the last of the Chaotianmen boats — for a private hour after dark, paying in cash and pickles. Tang Caifeng's troupe requisitioned their boombox from evidence, where it had spent August being photographed by newspapers, and began rehearsing something slow. Qin Lang wrote from Shanghai asking whether dress codes existed for such occasions and was told by Xiaojiao, in the ward's adopted dialect: 崽儿，穿你妈会笑的衣服来 (zǎi'ér, chuān nǐ mā huì xiào de yīfu lái)。*Zaier — wear something your mother would laugh at.*

And on the whiteboard by Bed 3, which nobody had wiped since August, beneath the question that had started everything — *wèidào*：？ — someone with small careful handwriting had added, without asking permission, a second line:

已答：五味俱全 (Yǐ dá: wǔwèi jù quán)。 *Answered: all five flavors complete.*

INTERLUDE 5

The Lovers Who Skipped the Dose

A Qing-dynasty storyteller — Shen Qifeng, who collected strange accounts the way other men collect stamps — recorded a tale that the bridge-keepers' order has never officially confirmed and never once denied.

Two young people of Hangzhou, Ge Sheng and Lan Rui, loved each other with the total, unprofitable love that families disapprove of precisely because nothing can be gained from it. Separated in life by arrangement, they met again in death — as everyone does — in the queue before the soup. And there, the story says, they did an unprecedented thing.

They each drank only half.

How they managed it, the tellings differ: palmed ladle-fulls, tongues clever as acrobats, one bowl shared between two souls so that between them they kept, jointly, one whole memory. What all versions agree on is the result. Reborn at opposite ends of the province, both children found themselves — before language, before reason — inconsolable near water, restless at bridges, drawn to kitchens where something bitter-sweet simmered. And at fifteen, at a ferry crossing neither family approved of, two strangers looked at each other across a gangplank and knew, with the certainty of homework remembered, that they had done this before.

The keeper of the bridge was questioned, of course. Heaven's auditors wanted to know how her soup had failed. She answered — and this is the part the boatmen cherish — that it had not failed. It had been refused, and refusal is permitted; that is what makes mercy merciful. She had watched them choose, and chosen-love is heavier than any cargo, but it floats.

"Shall I change the recipe?" the auditors asked.

And she said no. Because for every pair who cheats their way across lifetimes holding half a bowl between them, ten thousand souls drink deeply and walk light into their new lives, glad of the emptiness, carrying nothing but a taste — and if you ask them, later, why certain flavors make them weep without reason, they cannot say. They only stand there in the steam of some stranger's kitchen, suddenly

homesick for a home they cannot name, and the keeper, watching from wherever keepers watch, is satisfied.

Half a bowl, then, for the lovers. A full bowl for everyone else.

And for one old cook on Nanshan hill, in the autumn of her crossing: five flavors in true proportion, two tears of her own dropped in by hand, and one thing — just one, a sound, twelve kinds of breathing in a lit ward at night — carried through deliberately, saved from the pot, because she had earned, by sixty years of feeding people, the right to keep exactly one thing off the books.

CHAPTER 32

The Old Address

Ghost Festival eve, and the rebuilt Shibati did its evening trick: lanterns up, speakers murmuring something licensed and nostalgic, tourists photographing the stone stairway that had survived — the stones kept, as her mother said, everything else sold — while above it all the real city went on stacking itself into the fog.

Hui and Meng Fan walked up from Nanbin Road together with a covered pot and two folded stools, past the bubble tea franchise that occupied *Sū jì*'s old address — same doorway, same width, different universe — and stopped in front of it, because the plan, such as it was, required standing in front of things you'd been walking around for years.

"Sixty seconds of silence for the milk tea," Fan announced, reading the menu board. "Pearl, cheese-foam, brown sugar. On this spot. Ma would riot."

"Ma would order one and critique the pearls' cooking time."

They walked the row first, because you must — past the plaque where *Chén shīfu*'s barbershop had stood (BARBER OF THE STAIRS, 1953–2010, the bronze already rubbed bright at shoulder height by a decade of people touching it without deciding to), past the tea merchant and the paper-offerings shop whose window displayed miniature WiFi routers ("5G compatible — the dead upgrade too"), to the corner stall where a man of fifty with his father's shoulders was selling pickles from vats he turned himself.

Mèng Xiǎoyú. Little Yu, the fish man's son — named for a river catch once, sixty years old now, running crucian-and-greens where his father had run crucian-and-greens since before the flood that took neither of them. He looked up from his brine, saw who was standing there, and did not smile and did not apologize for anything, which is the highest form of old-neighborhood manners.

"Sour radish," he said, instead of hello, and weighed them a full jin without being asked, bag knotted twice. "From my father's last batch. He kept the mother-brine alive till the end — told me never let it die even if the street does."

He jerked his chin at the varnished heritage stones, the lantern light, the bubble-tea queue. “Streets don’t die. They just get transferred to new ownership.” He pushed the bag across. “For tonight’s pot. Tell your mother’s ladle the scale never lied.”

“I’ll tell it,” said Hui.

He nodded once, satisfied, already weighing for the next customer, and they carried the radish back down the row like coals.

“She’d order TWO,” said Fan, when they reached the doorstep again. He set the pot down on the old stone step — theirs; worn to a shallow bowl by a century of customers’ feet, still there under new varnish, the heritage consultant had saved it, plaques all around — and uncovered it, and the steam came up carrying sour radish and duck and February into the tourist street like contraband.

They had come to pour a bowl on the threshold. First bowl of a shop’s life always went to the doorstep, Ma’s rule — feed the street before you feed yourself — and no one in the family could remember when the rule had started, which is what a rule looks like when it has successfully become an instinct.

The pouring drew its usual audience: three teenagers filming, an auntie from the heritage committee materializing out of nowhere at the smell of regulation violation (“open flame! permit!”) and softening instantly at the words 头七的规矩 (tóuqī de guījǔ, the head-seven rites) done forty-nine days late because some families run on river time. She watched them pour the broth thin across the old stone, where it steamed and vanished between the cobbles like a sentence finishing, dabbed her eyes with a lanyard, said her own mother used to buy vinegar from Zhou’s shop two doors down, and stood with them a moment in the shared weather of demolished streets.

Then, because grief runs on logistics and logistics had one item outstanding, Hui took out her phone and played the jingle.

tāng——miàn——, rè tāngmiàn——Sū jì kāizhāng——

Two notes and a place-name, sixty years steady, rising on the doorstep where they’d been born acoustically. Fan shut his eyes. The teenagers lowered their phones without being asked. And when it ended, neither sibling spoke for a while; then Fan sat down slowly on the folded stool, opened his backpack, and

produced — wrapped in a plastic bag from a Shenzhen hotel, of all places — a small tin that made Hui's whole childhood detonate on contact.

Milk candies. White paper, twisted ends, the exact brand from the shop jar by the till, one liang for one mao, given out by their mother to any child who'd finished homework within sight of the counter. Discontinued in the nineties. Reissued briefly for nostalgia markets two years ago, which was how a grown man who drove other people's furniture had found them at a highway service station outside Chongqing and bought every roll the shelf held.

"I've been saving these," he said, not looking at her, peeling one with enormous concentration. "For a right minute. Because I owe you a speech about May, about the signature, about fifty thousand pieces of silver, and I wrote it forty times in the van and every version was garbage, so instead—" he pushed the tin across the doorstep between them, "—you get candy. Which was Ma's whole policy too, if you think about it. No speeches. Candy, soup, and everyone home before dark."

Hui ate the candy. It tasted exactly like being eight years old and approved of.

"No speeches," she agreed, when she could. "But one entry for the ledger. You crossed back over the street. *Chén zǐ*'s granddaughter told me my paperwork was correct, but she said it was your van she recognized first — parked outside Beibei every Sunday now, teaching the old boys there to play 牌 (pái, tiles) you're too young to know." She looked at him sidelong, exactly as they'd looked at each other across thirty years of kitchens and vans and funerals. "The conscience opened a transport company."

"The conscience gives discounts to mourners," Fan said. "Ask anyone."

They poured the second bowl together — half each, deliberately, though neither said so aloud, because some rituals you adopt only after you learn they exist — and the steam went up off the old stone into the lantern light, and somewhere above them the fog took the upper city back for the night, tower by tower, and below them the river ran on toward the sea with everything it carried, patient as a work song, asking no one's permission to keep moving.

At the corner, pausing to look back — because you must, at thresholds, once — Hui saw that the teenagers had posted their sixty-second video already. Caption, in the dialect, four words:

老味道回来了 *(Lǎo wèidào huílái le)*。 *The old taste came back.*

By morning it had forty thousand likes, and the heritage committee auntie had left a comment citing fire regulations, and someone calling themselves Chéng Yīwěi-不卖汤 (bù mài tāng — doesn't sell soup) had replied with a single character:

Yào de.

CHAPTER 33

River Lanterns

The fifteenth of the seventh moon fell that year on a Saturday warm as broth, and by dusk the whole city had remembered what it was for.

They gathered at the Chaotianmen docks at seven — which is to say, everyone did, half of Chongqing being related to someone crossing water that night — and their own party assembled among the thousands with the ragged splendor of every family on earth: Gan Lu in her off-duty sunglasses and a dress nobody could account for; Xiao Man with three phones and, for once, none of them raised; Xiaojiao carrying He Sanxi's recipe notebook in a plastic sleeve against her chest like scripture; Qin Lang arrived from Shanghai wearing, per instructions, his mother's old No. 8 Middle School windbreaker, which fit him nowhere and suited him completely, and which made him laugh helplessly every time he caught his reflection, exactly as ordered; Auntie Wang with her knee and her beads; Chen Li pushing Duoduo's scooter loaded with lanterns like an artillery column; Luo Tiesheng in white, collar buttoned, chalking the ferry booking against all comers; and Feng Yufang, who came early, dressed beautifully, and stood at the rail of the little tourist boat while it was being readied, practicing nothing, ready for anything.

Yiwei came too. At a distance, working.

He'd been recognized instantly at the gangway — the face had been on every screen in August — and rather than perform contrition or hide, he'd simply spent the evening doing the third thing, the only thing left available to him: hauling. Folding stools for elders up the narrow stair, steadying the gangway rail with one hand while the queue flowed over it, carrying Duoduo's heaviest lantern-box like it was furniture and he was still in Jiangbei learning humility from other people's wardrobes. Once, passing Hui a stool at the stern rail, he said quietly: "First letters went out Thursday. A lullaby made a seven-year-old stop crying. I'm told that's the entire quarterly report." And she said, "*Yào de*," and that was the whole conversation, and both of them found it sufficient.

The boat pushed off at nine into the brown-green seam of the waters, and Chongqing performed its nightly miracle overhead — ten thousand windows, eight glass sails, a skyline like the future arguing with itself — while below, on the black water, five thousand families prepared to conduct theirs.

Luo had booked the private hour for a reason the old calendar made explicit: the festival's first duty is to the 新亡人 (xīn wángrén), the newly dead, whose souls — barely six days across, still learning the currency of that country — require guiding lights sooner and brighter than the settled ancestors. Su Manyun would make her first crossing in the crowd of ten thousand lanterns, six days dead, accompanied by an entire city's worth of strangers doing the same errand. The old deckhand had pronounced this arrangement ideal. "Better than any escort," he'd said, chalking the booking. "Nobody gets lost in a procession that big."

The ritual itself was older than any administration and required no permit: paper lanterns, candle-lit, each bearing names in ink, set onto the current at the place the rivers meet so that the dead, following the lights downstream, would know themselves accompanied. The city had tried banning them twice for fire safety; the city had failed twice, and now merely posted young volunteers with poles to rescue strays, which had become its own rite, the living fishing the dead's lanterns out of eddies and setting them back on course, everybody employed in the same metaphor.

Luo sang them out.

He stood at the bow in his buttoned white shirt and gave the drowned-town chant, the slow one, no answering line — and this year the answering line rose anyway, from forty points on the water, because word had traveled through September's grapevine that the old deckhand would sing, and other boatmen's children, grandchildren, strangers who'd lost kitchens and stairways and whole demolished streets, turned up on rented decks and paddleboards and the dark stones of Nanbin Road to haul the response up from their boots: *so pull, brothers* — until the confluence held a work-song the size of grief itself, one lead and ten thousand answers, the sound a city makes when it remembers it was built by people pulling things upstream together.

Duoduo launched hers first: one lantern, two names, grandpa and grandma drawn holding hands above a soup stall, because six-year-olds are the last unschooled theologians and see no reason heaven shouldn't be zoned commercially. Feng Yufang launched hers standing, unassisted, in full dress, telling the flame aloud: "Show him I've kept." Xiaojiao read no words at all, just opened the notebook to its final unfinished page and let the river finish the sentence. Qin Lang set his mother's lantern down with the terrible care of a man handling a graded exam, and whispered something in Shanghai dialect that made Xiaojiao, fluent in sons, look away and blow her nose. Gan Lu, sunglasses off for once, launched one plain white light with no name at all — "for the ones nobody claims; there's always a few; the profession knows" — and dared anyone present to comment.

Hui and Fan poured the vinegar at mid-river, where the waters visibly ran side by side.

Zhou Xiuzhen's Kaohsiung jar, uncorked at the exact seam: thirty years of Taiwan brine let out thin and silver into the meeting-place of two rivers, going neither north nor south but everywhere at once, home at last in every direction simultaneously. The empty jar went back in its cloth, bound for the shelf beside the brass ladle, where the galley's congregation of survivors grew yearly: ladle, jars, notebook, ledger, stone-rubbing from a grave facing northwest, a bus-conductor's bell somebody's family had donated, a paper ladle saved from Qingming fire.

And then Hui took the last lantern — the big one, white, prepared weeks ago in the galley during a night shift with a brush and ink she'd had to ask Xiao Man how much of — and wrote upon it, while the boat rocked and the chant rolled and the whole family pretended not to watch:

苏曼云 (Sū Mànyún)。孟江海 (Mèng Jiānghǎi)。 何三喜 (Hé Sānxǐ)。周秀珍 (Zhōu Xiùzhēn)。秦慕兰 (Qín Mùlán)。唐彩凤 (Táng Cǎifèng)。卢守义 (Lú Shǒuyì)。 陈秀英的十一年，已清账 (Chén Xiùyīng de shíyī nián, yǐ qīng zhàng)。 *Su Manyun. Meng Jianghai. He Sanxi. Zhou Xiuzhen. Qin Mulan. Tang Caifeng. Lu Shouyi. Chen Xiuying's eleven years — accounts cleared.*

She lit it. She held it a moment, feeling the small heat try its wings. Then she leaned out past the rail, into the wind off two rivers, and set it on the seam of the waters, and spoke the sentence she'd been carrying since spring, the one the whole book had been building toward, quietly, in dialect, to the water, to the ward behind her, to whoever keeps such accounts:

"再见有五味——咸苦酸辣甜 (Zàijiàn yǒu wǔwèi——xián kǔ suān là tián)。 哪一味都不是忘记 (Nǎ yī wèi dōu bù shì wàngjì)。" *Goodbye has five flavors — salty, bitter, sour, spicy, sweet. And not one of them is forgetting.*

The lantern caught the current. It wobbled, righted, and sailed — out along the seam where green met brown, its little flame doubled in the unmixed waters, riding the border between two histories like a soul that has learned the trick of it. Around it, hundreds of others spread downstream in a slow constellation, and the wake of the boat churned briefly through the color-line, and for one boat-length the two waters married — jade curling into gold, gold opening to take it — before closing again behind, patient, refusing, keeping their ancient argument for the sea to settle.

"再来一年 (zài lái yī nián)， " said Luo Tiesheng at the wheel, heading for home lights, voice gravel-soft under the chant's after-ring. "Same time next year. Book it now. The dead hate disorganization."

"Auntie," said Duoduo suddenly, tugging Hui's sleeve, eyes enormous in the lantern-light, pointing back at the receding constellation, "which flavor is tonight?"

Hui considered the water, the sky, the boatful of the living hauling each other homeward, the taste still standing somewhere under her ribs where the eighth tear worked.

"Tonight?" she said. "Tonight is *tián*, Duoduo. Sweet comes last and least."

CHAPTER 34

Epilogue: Qingming, One Year On

Qingming came early that year, or Hui was early to it, which amounts to the same calendar.

The stall opened at dusk, as stalls should. *Sū jì tāngguǎn*, the sign said — the old name in her mother's brushwork, reproduced from a 1996 photograph by a sign-maker who charged half price and refused to explain why — over a counter six feet wide tucked between a tea merchant and a shop selling paper electronics to the dead, in the heritage row above the Eighteen Terraces where the stones still remembered everyone's feet.

The license hung framed beside the menu. The health-inspection certificate hung beside it, laminated, current. And beside both, in a small frame Gan Lu had commissioned and refused to discuss, hung a photograph of a kitchen galley twelve beds' walk uphill from here: brass ladle on its cloth, vinegar jars at parade rest, steam rising off steel with nobody in the picture at all, which is how a workplace looks when it has been loved correctly.

Word had gotten around, the way word does. The stall's rules were three and unchanging, printed on cards in four fonts before Xiao Man was banned from typography duty: Soup is free for anyone grieving. Recipes are posted, because secrets are just grief that hasn't been introduced. And the fifth flavor changes nightly, ask.

They came up out of the terraces as the lanterns came on: tourists mostly, drawn by smell and the forty-thousand-like video of two siblings pouring broth on a doorstep; then the regulars, the neighborhood of the demolished and relocated, aunties who'd bought from Su Ji across four decades arriving with their own bowls because styrofoam offended somebody's memory; then, as the dark deepened and the tourist current thinned, the ones the stall truly kept its lamp lit for — the newly bereaved, identifiable at fifty paces by the way they stood slightly apart from their own families, doing arithmetic with their eyes.

Hui fed them. That was the whole trade. She asked what their dead had wanted to taste one more time, and she believed the answers, every single one — the dockworker's daughter wanting congee with too much pickled mustard, exactly wrong, therefore right; the young man whose mother had died mid-argument over nothing, wanting the soup she'd burned every Sunday for thirty years, which he could describe so precisely Hui got it on the second try and wept into his sleeve at the accuracy of the damage; the widow of the bus conductor who drank her bowl standing up, bell-style, and rang the little bell she'd brought, twice, for the route finished.

At nine, Duoduo arrived from her father's van — he was up-hill delivering seven-day meals again, the April rush being what it was — carrying her homework folder and the family archive's most recent addition, which she handled like clergy now, having been formally deputized in the autumn: a small speaker, and a file labeled in her own red-pencil hand.

"Gūgu. The minute," she said. Six years old and eleven months; fluent in minutes.

They stepped out to the doorstep — the worn stone, the old threshold — and let the shop open for one listener only:

tāng——miàn——, rè tāngmiàn——Sū jì kāizhāng——

Steam and morning, clapping and oxygen-hum, a jingle rising sixty years steady out of an August night. The street quieted around it the way water quiets around a dropped ladle. When it ended, Duoduo pressed stop herself, solemnly, and observed, packing the speaker away:

"Grandma's not IN there, Gūgu. Papa asked me and I checked." She looked up, absolutely certain. "She's in the liking place. But this—" a pat for the speaker, "—is how the liking place sounds from outside."

From outside. Out of the mouths of first-graders.

The scan came later, as it did most nights now: the QR code etched small on the stall's corner post, linking to the memorial page Xiao Man maintained with archivist rigor — Su Manyun and Meng Jianghai, dates, photographs, the ledger scanned page by page, the pawn ticket, the deletion certificate filed under *documents*, the raw audio playable once per visit by honor system. The counter beneath the page ticked upward whenever anyone, anywhere, needed proof that a

person had been here and been specific: tonight it crossed ninety-one thousand, and somewhere in Chengdu a granddaughter touched her own throat where a green stone slept on a red cord, forgiven and keeping well, and scanned it twice.

Near closing, the last mourner came down out of the terraces: a woman of seventy-odd in a good cardigan, alone, standing at the counter reading the three rules twice through the way people read anything twice when it applies to them. She ordered nothing. Hui poured anyway, set the bowl before her, and sat on the opposite stool, which was policy too.

"Sour-radish duck," Hui said. "Jar strength."

The woman ate slowly, correctly, a customer raised by cooks. At the bottom she sat quite still for a while, looking into the empty bowl, and then asked the question, quietly, the way everyone eventually did:

"小妹，你这汤——怎么是咸的 (Xiǎomèi, nǐ zhè tāng——zěnme shì xián de)？" *Little sister. Why is your soup salty?*

And Hui Meng, thirty-four years old, keeper of a six-foot counter at the top of the Eighteen Terraces, daughter of Su Manyun who ran the shop and Meng Jianghai who hauled ice and called twice, considered the woman's face — which was doing what all their faces did at the bottom of the bowl, arriving somewhere — and answered with her mother's proportion, her father's sign-off, five patients' worth of homework, and the whole year's ledger in four words:

"是眼泪，孃孃。八滴 (Shì yǎnlèi, niángniang. Bā dī)。" *It's the tears, auntie. Eight drops.*

The woman looked at her for a long moment. Something settled in her face, some account closed or opened properly at last, and she rose, left more money than the rules allowed anyone to refuse, touched the doorframe the way you touch a shrine, and went down the terraces toward the river lights, unhurried, carrying what she'd carry.

Hui washed the bowl. Hung the ladle. Banked the fire low — *xiǎo huǒ wēi zhe*， always something on the stove, always, the whole trade in one instruction — and stepped out onto the threshold for the look back that thresholds demand.

Below the heritage row, past the last stairway, Nanbin Road ran gold along the water, and beyond it the river moved east in the dark, wide and patient,

hauling everything in the world toward the sea. Two rivers met below the bridges and ran side by side, green and gold, arguing their ancient argument — but downstream, far down where the tour boats didn't go and only fishermen and egrets kept the banks, she knew without seeing, the way you know what's in a pot by the smell climbing the stairs: the colors gave up their border. Merged. Became one brown-green water, indistinguishable, carrying everything together.

Some things take kilometers to mix. The trick is knowing they get there.

She turned off the lamp, leaving the pot its small fire, and went home along the river with the fog coming up soft off the water — fog season coming early this year, or she was early to it, which amounts to the same weather — and behind her the little stall stood dark and ready over its doorstep, the way shops stand when they intend, against all evidence, to open again tomorrow.

CHAPTER 40

作者的话 (zuòzhě de huà)

This novel borrows a goddess the way cooks borrow a fire.

Meng Po (*Mèngpó*) belongs to everyone who has ever waited at a bridge: keeper of the soup of oblivion in Chinese folk religion, she stands — in the old woodcuts and in the real stone town of Fengdu downstream of Chongqing — ladling out forgetting so that souls may cross into what comes next unburdened. I have taken none of her story. Her story is a queue, a bowl, and a mercy with an opt-out clause. What I borrowed is her position: the person whose work is witnessing every human ending, and who must decide, daily, what remembering costs and when letting go is love. Every hospital has someone standing in that spot. Most of them are not even called doctors.

The city is real; the ward is not, though its shortages are drawn from public record, and if it exists by now, no one will be gladder than I. The grief-tech industry is not speculation: companies in China and elsewhere do rebuild voices from seconds of audio and faces from photographs, and the law — consent, likeness, labeling, deletion — is being written right now, in courtrooms and comment sections, by people who have mostly never stood at a deathbed. This novel is my testimony entered into that file. Any resemblance between Everlight Tech and actual companies is avoided with care and intended as a warning anyway.

Chongqing needs no disclaimer. Go stand on Nanbin Road at dusk when the fog comes up and the two rivers run their separate colors past Chaotianmen, and you will understand everything this book believes: that some things take kilometers to mix, that the stones remember feet, that there is always soup somewhere on a small fire, and that goodbye — for those taught properly, which is to say, fed properly — has five flavors.

Xián kǔ suān là tián. Salty, bitter, sour, spicy, sweet.

May you need none of them soon.

— Jiang Li 江离 (Jiāng Lí)

Colophon

汤是分寸，不是方子。

Tāng shì fēncùn, bù shì fāngzi.

Soup is proportion, not recipe. — Granny Meng, to the girl who would succeed her

The novel is a menu — salty, bitter, sour, spicy, sweet — cooked on a palliative ward in the fog, where someone has to stand in Meng Po's place and decide, daily, what remembering costs and when letting go is love.

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.

Five Flavors of Goodbye · 40 sections · 53,544 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 — Free to read. Free to pass on, unchanged and uncharged. Not free to reprint and sell.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/