魂魄城 (Hún Pò Chéng — City of Souls)

ZHEN AI

甄 艾

17 chapters
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CHAPTER 1

DAY ONE

He wakes at five-thirty because the body does not need an alarm anymore.

The alarm is for the body's sake, the way you leave a light on for a dead switch. He lies still and takes the inventory, the way he has taken it every morning for thirty years: lower back — stiff, will loosen by the second hour; right shoulder — the old ache, the one from the assembly line, the one that says rain; knees — they will hold, they always hold. The body is the only thing he has ever been able to rely on, and the body is the only thing he trusts, and the body does not lie, and the body says: get up.

He does not look at the other side of the bed. He does not need to look. Lihua is awake — she is always awake, she has been awake for a year, he knows this the way he knows the warehouse, the way you know a machine that is running when it should be off. He does not ask. Asking is how you open a door, and he has stopped opening doors.

He dresses in the dark. Work clothes. The same clothes. He stopped buying new clothes a year ago, and he does not think about it, because thinking about it is the same as saying it, and he does not say things.

In the kitchen, the soup is on the stove. Lihua made it in the dark — she makes it every morning now, in the dark, by feel, the way her mother used to cook — and he does not look at her and she does not look at him, and he eats his rice standing up, the way he has eaten for a year, and he leaves before anyone else is awake. He leaves the apartment the way a man leaves a mine: quickly, without looking back, grateful for the exit.

The warehouse. The gate. The time clock. The shift. The work is the work — boxes, pallets, the forklift's beep, the heat of the loading dock, the smell of cardboard and diesel. The work is the only place where he knows who he is. At work he is Liu Wei, reliable, strong, competent. He has done this work for twenty years, and the work has never once asked him how he feels, and that is the whole of what he loves about it.

His hands test things. That is what his hands do when they are not carrying — they test. A tap on a pallet. A knock on a wall. A shake of a joint. Is it sound. Will it hold. The men call it checking; it is older than the warehouse, older than the years, the habit of a man who learned early that the world tells you it is broken only after it breaks. He does not know he does it. His hands know. His hands have always known.

The break room at noon. The other men. The jokes about wives, the complaints about bosses, the boasting about children. He used to mention Yichen — the boy who was top ten, the boy whose teachers praised him, the boy he could mention to coworkers the way other men mention a good car. He does not mention him anymore. When they ask — and they ask less now, they have learned, men learn these things the way they learn a machine's noises — he says "The boy is studying at home" and changes the subject. The lie is a brick, and he has been laying bricks for a year, and the wall is high.

At seven he comes home. The apartment is dark except for the television — he turns it on the way other men breathe, and the noise fills the room, and the noise does not require him to speak, and the noise is the only friend he has. He eats fast, alone, at the table — Lihua is in the kitchen, at the window; Yinan is doing homework, talking to herself; Yichen's door is closed. The door.

He walks past the door ten times a day. He has counted. Ten times — the hallway, the bathroom, the kitchen, the door, the door, the door. He never knocks. He tells himself he is respecting his son's privacy. The truth is he is afraid of what he will find behind it, and afraid of what he will say, and the two fears are the same fear, and he does not name it.

At home his hands test the apartment the way they test the warehouse: the stair rail, the peeling paint by the door, the table before he sits. Everything he tests holds. Everything he does not test — his hands know the rest of the sentence. His hands have known for a year.

Two glasses of baijiu. Not enough to get drunk. Enough to lower the wall between what he feels and what he allows himself to know. In the two glasses he sometimes almost cries. He never does. He watches the television — a war drama, the same war drama, the same battles, the same men dying for the same reasons — and he does not care about it, and that is the point of it.

In bed, he does not sleep. He counts. The hospital week — one week, twelve months ago — the bill, the installments, the account he keeps separate, the account he thinks Lihua does not know about, the account he is not sure about, the way he is not sure about anything anymore. The electricity — Yichen's computer runs all night, the fan, the kilowatts, he has done the math, the math is not kind. The medicine — he does not know what it costs, Lihua handles it, the 门特 covers most of it, she said, and he did not ask, because asking is how you open a door.

He lies in the dark, and he remembers the parent-teacher conference. Yichen at twelve, thirteen, fourteen. The teacher's voice, praising his son's diligence. The feeling — the first time in his life — that he had done something right. That his back, his shoulders, his cracked hands had been worth it. That the Liu family was rising. That his son would not end up in a warehouse. That he, Liu Wei, had been a good father despite never knowing how to say so.

He does not remember ever telling Yichen he was proud. He remembers thinking it. He assumed Yichen knew. He assumed a lot of things.

He is not sure when the assuming became the first crack.

He closes his eyes. The alarm is set for five-thirty. The alarm is always set for five-thirty.

CHAPTER 2

DAY TWO

Saturday. He is home, and the home is a different kind of work.

He knows the apartment the way he knows the warehouse — every sound, every silence, every machine. The refrigerator. The television. The pencil moving in the dining room — Yinan, doing homework, talking to herself because no one answers. The fan behind the closed door — Yichen's door — the machine that runs and runs, and he does not know what it is making, and he does not know what it is destroying, and he does not ask.

Yichen comes out for dinner. This is something. Some days it is nothing, and this day it is something. He comes out, and he sits at the table, and he does not eat, and Lihua asks "Did you eat the soup?" and Yichen says "Yes," and Wei watches the exchange, and he knows — he knows the way he knows a machine is lying by the sound of it — that Yichen did not eat the soup. The boy's hands are on the table. The hands are shaking. Wei looks at the hands — the pale, soft hands, the indoor hands, the hands that have never carried a box, the hands of a boy who has spent a year in a dark room — and he looks at his own hands, the cracked knuckles, the calluses, and he feels the contempt, and underneath the contempt, the envy, and he does not name either.

He eats fast. He leaves the table. He does not look at the door. The television. The baijiu.

At eleven, Lihua comes into the kitchen. This is their hour. The only hour. He is there, waiting, the way he is always there, the way the kitchen is the only place they still meet, the way the refrigerator hums and the incense has burned out.

"He came out," Wei says. It is not a question.

"Yes."

"He didn't eat."

"No."

"He's never going to go back to school." The words come out flat, the way he speaks to machines, the way he speaks to everything now. "He's never going to get a job. He's going to sit in that room until he's thirty, and we're going to pay for it."

"He is sick, Liu Wei. Not lazy."

"He's not sick. He's weak. There's a difference."

He says it, and the words are out, and he does not take them back, because taking them back would mean admitting he is not sure, and he is not sure, and he will not admit it. He stands in the kitchen, and he does not look at her, and she does not look at him, and the refrigerator hums, and the television talks to no one, and the difference between them is the whole distance of the apartment, and neither of them knows how to close it.

He leaves the kitchen. The baijiu. The television. He sits in the blue light, and he thinks about the pamphlet — the one Lihua left on the table, months ago, the one he read, the one with the words: mood swings, chemical imbalance, manageable with medication. He read the words. He understood the words. His body does not believe the words. His body believes in effort, in will, in the transformative power of hard work. His body believes that a man who works sixteen hours a day does not get to be tired, and a boy who does not work at all does not get to be sick.

The body is wrong. He knows the body is wrong, the way you know a machine is wrong by the sound. He does not say it. He drinks the baijiu, and he watches the television, and he does not sleep well.

In the dark, the memory comes, the way memories come — like a blow:

Yichen on the bicycle. Eight years old. The training wheels off. The wobble. The crash. The crying — Yichen crying, and Wei standing over him, and the words coming out of his mouth, the words his own father would have said: "Get up. Boys don't cry. Get up." And Yichen getting up. And Yichen learning to ride.

He remembers that he never said "good job." He remembers that he nodded.

He assumed Yichen knew.

He assumed wrong.

CHAPTER 3

DAY THREE

Sunday. He works the Sunday shift, because the Sunday shift pays time and a half, and time and a half is the only count that makes sense anymore.

He leaves at five-thirty. The fan is running behind the closed door — it has been running all night, all morning, he heard it when he got up, the machine that does not rest, the machine he pays for in kilowatts. He does not knock. He goes to work. The work is the work. The boxes. The pallets. The heat. The beep of the forklift, the only music he needs.

At seven in the evening he comes home, and the apartment is wrong.

He knows it the way he knows the warehouse when a machine is down — the quality of the air, the way the other machines change their sound. The television is not on. Lihua is standing in the doorway with her bag, frozen, her face doing something he has not seen in a year. And Yichen — Yichen is in the living room, standing in front of the peeling wall, talking.

Talking too much. Too fast. With too much eye contact. The words are coming out of him like water from a broken pipe — "the fog," "the whole city's fog," "change how people see Chengdu," "sell it to the government," "make this family —" — and Wei stands in the doorway, and he looks at his son, and he sees the brightness.

The brightness. He knows the brightness. He saw it at parent-teacher conferences — the brightness of a boy who had done well, who was waiting to be praised. But this is wrong. This is the brightness without the work. This is the brightness of a boy who has not left his room in days, who has not eaten, who is talking about selling fog to the government. This is the brightness of the night before — he does not think the words "the night before the hospital," he does not allow himself the words, but the brightness is the brightness, and his hands tighten.

"You're seventeen," he says. "Eat your rice."

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat your rice."

Yichen sits. Yichen eats. The rice goes into the boy's mouth the way rice goes into a machine — it goes in, and nothing comes back, and Wei watches, and the table is silent, and Yinan's pencil is stopped, and Lihua is standing in the doorway, and no one says anything, and the silence is the only thing in the room that is honest.

After dinner, Wei goes to the television. The baijiu. The blue light. The war drama. He sits, and he does not watch, and he listens to the fan through the wall — the machine running, the machine that has been running all night, all day, the machine that will not rest — and he reads the machine the way he reads a machine:

The voice his son used at the table was the sound of a motor running without load. He knows that sound. He has heard it a thousand times in the warehouse — a motor revving, free, burning fuel, going nowhere — and you do not argue with a motor running without load. You cut the power. You let it cool. He cut the power. *Eat your rice. Sit down. Stop talking.* And the motor quieted, and the quiet was worse than the revving, because a motor that stops on its own is a motor that has broken, and he does not know how to fix a motor that has stopped.

He counts, the way he counts, the way he has counted every night for a year:

The hospital bill. The installments. The hidden account. The electricity — the fan, the computer, the kilowatts, the yuan. The medicine — Lihua knows the numbers, she is the one who watches the phone; he knows only the shape of them, the way you know a box by its weight without opening it, and the weight is heavier every month.

He lies in bed. The fan runs. The fan is the sound of his son not sleeping. He does not sleep either. He lies in the dark, and he thinks about the boy in the living room, the boy who stood in front of them and talked about selling the fog to the government, and he thinks: I do not understand him. I have never understood him. I understood the boy who brought home perfect scores. I did not understand that boy either. I only understood the scores.

He gets up at five-thirty. He always gets up at five-thirty.

CHAPTER 4

DAY FOUR

Monday. Work. The work is the work.

He leaves at five-thirty. Lihua is taking Yichen to Huaxi today — she said, last week, "复诊, Monday" — the follow-up appointment, the checkup, the routine, the way they do it every month now, the way the routine is the only thing holding the family together, the way the routine is a machine and the machine is running. He does not ask what the doctor says. He has never asked what the doctor says. Asking is how you open a door.

The warehouse. The shift. The boxes. The heat. In the break room, one of the men is talking about his son — the boy got into a good school, the boy is going to university, the boy is going to be something. Wei nods. He says nothing. He has stopped mentioning his son, and the men have learned not to ask, and the silence around his son is a hole in the conversation, and the hole is the shape of his life.

At seven he comes home. The apartment smells of hóngshāo ròu — red-braised pork, the dark lacquer smell, the smell of his wife's mother's kitchen, the smell that has been coming out of his wife's wok more and more lately, the smell he does not mention. Lihua is at the stove, her back to him. She does not look at him. He does not look at her. The television. The baijiu.

On the table, next to the rice bowl, there is a paper.

An envelope. The Huaxi letterhead. He sees it the way he sees everything — first the shape, then the words, then the weight. He picks it up. He does not know why he picks it up — he never picks things up, Lihua handles the papers, the papers are her language, the way the warehouse is his — but he picks it up, and he reads.

The words are the doctor's words, typed, flat, the same flatness as the pamphlet:

...transfer to adult services upon the patient's eighteenth birthday... the disability registration... affects eligibility for a motor vehicle license... certain

categories of employment... housing applications... begin preparation for reintegration...

He reads the words twice. He understands some of them. Transfer. Adult services. Registration. He does not understand "reintegration." He does not need to understand it. He understands the shape of it, the way you understand the shape of a box by its weight: his son is eighteen in two months, and after that, the system changes, and the system that changes will cost money, and the money is his.

He puts the paper back. He puts it back exactly where it was, the way you put back a thing you are not supposed to have seen. He understands what the paper is now: the thing she has not told him. She has not opened her mouth. She has not opened the door. The paper is on the table because she is too tired to hide it yet, and he has seen it, and he will not say he has seen it, and the seeing is a secret he will carry the way she carries her secrets, the way he carries the account. He does not know when she decided to keep it from him. He knows the shape of the decision — the paper on the table, the paper not offered, the paper that will be hidden by morning. He sits in front of the television, and the baijiu is warm in his hand, and he counts, and the count is worse than it was yesterday — and he does not know the half of it, he does not know about the call, he does not know about the sentence she practiced on the bus, he only knows the paper, and the paper is enough, and the paper is more than enough.

At nine, Yichen comes in. Wei hears the door. He sees the boy pass the living room — wet shoes, the fog in his hair, the river in his eyes, he does not know where his son has been, he does not ask — and he watches him go down the hall, and the door close, and the fan start.

He sits in the blue light. He drinks the baijiu. He thinks about the paper, and he thinks about the cost, and he thinks about the boy who was going to sell fog to the government, and he thinks: I do not know how to help him. I have never known how to help him. I know how to pay for things. I know how to carry things. I know how to get up at five-thirty. I do not know how to help him.

He gets up at five-thirty. He always gets up at five-thirty.

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PART II — THE BREAK

CHAPTER 5

DAY FIVE

In the morning, the envelope is not on the table.

He looks at the place where it was — the space between the rice bowl and the wall — and the space is empty, and he understands: she has hidden it. Filed it. Put it where he cannot find it, the way he has hidden the account where she cannot find it. They are a family of hidden papers now, and the papers are the only things they still share.

He does not ask. He does not say he saw it. He goes to work, and all day the paper is in him — transfer, registration, eighteen, reintegration — the words he half-understands, the weight he understands completely — and he thinks: his son has two months before the system changes. Two months. And after that, the door that is already closed will be closed with a lock, and a boy who cannot decide cannot afford a lock.

The words have been in him for a year, and tonight they come out.

He does not plan them. He has never planned anything in his life — the work comes, the days come, the words come, and tonight the words come, after dinner, when the plates are nearly empty and there is nothing left to do with the hands. Lihua is at the sink, washing the dishes, her back to the table. Yichen is at the table — he came out, he has been coming out more, the boy is emerging from the room, and the emerging is worse than the hiding, because when he emerges he talks, and when he talks it is the fog, the government, the city, the brightness.

His hand goes to the table and tests it — a tap, a listen. The table will hold. The words are coming, and the table will hold them.

"Yichen." The word comes out flat. The warehouse voice. The voice he uses with machines, because machines respond to flat, because machines do not need to be asked, because a machine that is told the truth does not argue. "You are seventeen. I was working at sixteen. Your grandfather was working at fourteen. You are a man. Act like one."

The words land. He watches them land — he watches his son's face, the brightness flickering behind the flatness, the way a flame flickers behind glass — and he keeps going, because once the words start they do not stop, they have been waiting for a year:

"Return to school. The vocational track. They have programs. You learn a trade. You come out at nineteen with a certificate, and you work, and you pay your own way, and this family —" He stops. He does not look at Yichen. He looks at the wall, at the peeling paint, the spot that has been peeling for three years, the spot no one fixes, the spot that is the family's real coat of arms. "Or you get a job. Any job. Delivery. Warehouse. Your mother's supermarket. Or you leave."

Leave. The word is out. He hears it, and the word is out, and he cannot take it back, and he does not want to take it back, and he wants to take it back, and the two things are both true, and the two things are the same thing.

"I'm not going back to school." Yichen's voice is too loud. The brightness is winning. "I'm building something. The fog — I told you about the fog. I'm going to render the whole city. I'm going to sell it to the municipal government."

"You bought a three-hundred-yuan plugin," Wei says. "On your mother's account. For a project you will delete."

The words land. He watches his son's face close, the way a door closes, and he presses, because the pressing is the only thing he knows how to do, because the pressing is how you shape metal, because a boy who is told the truth — the truth being that he costs money and produces nothing — will stop, the way a machine stops when you cut the power:

"You deleted the last one. And the one before that. And the one before that. I've watched you for a year, Yichen. I've watched you sit in that room. I've watched you cost this family money and sleep and hope, and I have not said anything, because your mother said you were sick, and I believed her, because I wanted to believe her. But this —" He gestures, a small movement, a hand that has carried boxes for twenty years gesturing at the apartment, at the closed door, at the boy who is not a boy anymore. "This is not sickness. This is giving up. A boy who was top ten in his year does not spend a year staring at a screen unless he

has decided to throw it away. You have decided. I am telling you: decide something else."

He says the words, and he watches his son, and his hands are shaking with the urge — the urge he has felt a hundred times this year, the urge his own father would have acted on — and he looks at his hands, the cracked hands, the hands that have never hit his son, not once, and he holds them still, and he watches the brightness die in his son's eyes, the way a light dies when the switch is thrown, and he thinks: that is what I wanted. That is what I wanted, and now that I have it I feel nothing but the shaking.

"You don't understand," Yichen says. "None of you understand. The city is a lung and I am the breath —"

Wei stands up. The chair scrapes. He does not shout — he has never shouted, shouting is for men who have lost control, and he is in control, he is always in control, the control is the only thing he has — and he walks to the door, and at the door he stops, and he does not turn around, and he says, to the door, to the peeling paint, to the hallway, to the son who will not see his face:

"I'll be back in an hour. Decide something."

The door closes behind him. He walks. He does not know where he is walking. He walks.

The city at night is a city of work. The construction sites, the cranes standing over the half-built towers, the men still working under the lights. The all-night convenience store, the fluorescent hum, the tired clerk. The delivery riders on their electric scooters, weaving through the traffic, carrying boxes of food to people who do not want to leave their homes. The city that never stops working, and his son, who cannot start.

He walks, and he sees them — the young men. His son's age. Carrying boxes out of a truck. Delivering food. Restocking shelves. Working the night shift, the way he worked the night shift when he was their age, the way a man learns that the world does not care about your feelings, the way a man learns to carry. He compares them to his son — the boy in the dark room, the boy who costs three hundred yuan for a plugin he will delete — and the comparison is a fire, and the fire scorches him, and the hatred he feels is pure, and it is not for the young men, and he does not know who it is for, and he does not name it.

Then he sees the young man crying on the street corner.

A boy — eighteen, nineteen, he cannot tell — sitting on the curb outside the convenience store, his head in his hands, crying the way you cry when you think no one is watching. And across the street, an old woman in a ragged coat, muttering to herself, pushing a cart of bottles, talking to someone who is not there.

Wei stops walking. He stands in the dark, and he looks at the crying boy, and he looks at the woman with the bottles, and the terror comes up in him like gorge — the terror that his son could end up there, on the curb, in the cart, muttering to a world that has stopped listening — and the terror is worse than the hatred, because the hatred is hot and the terror is cold, and the cold is the cold of the body knowing something the mind will not admit: his son is one bad week from that curb. His son has already had the bad week. The only thing between his son and that curb is a door, and a door is not a wall.

He walks until his feet hurt more than his heart. He walks for an hour. He comes back.

The apartment. He stops outside Yichen's door. He hears nothing — the fan, the silence, the fan — and he stands there, and he does not knock, and he tells himself it is respect, and the truth is the truth, and he goes to the living room, and the television, and the baijiu.

At eleven, the kitchen. Lihua is there. The refrigerator hums. The incense is out. They whisper.

"He's not sick. He's weak."

"He was top ten in his year. He was the class monitor —"

"A weak boy breaks," Wei says. "Your son broke. My son broke. And you —" He stops. The word hangs. He looks at his hands, folded on the table, the knuckles white. "You and your mother. You made him soft. You told him he had heaven's eyes. You told him the test was stupid when he failed it. You told him the world would always take his side. And now the world has stopped taking his side, and he doesn't know what to do, because you never taught him that the world doesn't take anyone's side."

He says it. He has never said it — the mother-in-law, the dead woman, the woman who fed his son superstition and unconditional praise, the woman who

made his authority a joke — and the words are out, and they are unfair, he knows they are unfair, the woman is dead, the woman was a good grandmother, and he says them anyway, because saying them is easier than the other thing, the thing he does not have words for: I am afraid. I am afraid I am the reason. I am afraid my silence did this. I am afraid I looked at my son and saw a machine that would keep running, and it stopped, and I do not know how to fix it, and I am the one who cannot fix anything.

Lihua does not shout. She says, quietly, precisely, the way you put a needle in the exact place: "You have not touched your son in a year, Liu Wei. You have not asked him a single question. You have not told him you were proud of him — not once, not ever, not even when he was top ten, not even when the teachers praised him in front of you. You think I made him soft. You think my mother made him soft. But the only thing you ever gave him was silence, and he spent seventeen years trying to earn a word from you, and he wore himself out trying, and now you stand in my kitchen and tell me he is weak."

The needle finds the place. He sits in the dark kitchen, and the needle finds the place, and the place has been there for seventeen years, and he has been carrying the needle in him without knowing it, and she has pulled it out, and the silence after is worse than shouting.

He leaves the kitchen. The television. The baijiu. He sits in the blue light, and the needle is in him, and he thinks about his own father — the harder man, the poorer man, the man who beat him, who called it love, who never once said "I love you," the man Wei still mourns, the man Wei swore he would not become — and he thinks: I did not beat him. I did not become that. I became the other thing. I became the silence. And the silence is worse. The silence is what I gave him, and it is the same silence, the same inheritance, the same hunger.

He pours a third glass. He stops himself. Two glasses. He goes to bed.

Later he hears the shower run long, the pipes groaning, and he does not get up, and he does not ask. The not-asking is another brick.

The alarm is set for five-thirty.

CHAPTER 6

DAY SIX

He wakes at five-thirty. He gets up. He goes to work. The work is the work.

At noon he calls home. He does not know why he calls home — he never calls home, the phone is for emergencies, and this is not an emergency, this is a Tuesday, this is a Wednesday — he does not know what day it is, the days have become the same day, the same boxes, the same heat, the same break room — and Lihua answers, and he says, "Did he eat?" and she says, "He didn't come out," and he says "好" — good, which is what 好 means, and which is not what he means — and he hangs up, and he stands in the break room with the phone in his hand, and the men are watching a football match on the small TV, and nobody looks at him, and he puts the phone away, and he goes back to the boxes.

At seven he comes home. The apartment. The door. The television. The baijiu.

Lihua is in the bedroom. Yinan is asleep. Yichen's door is closed. The fan is off. The silence from behind the door is the loudest thing in the apartment.

He sits in the darkened living room, and he allows himself, for ten minutes, to remember.

He does not allow himself this often. The remembering is a door, and he has spent a lifetime learning not to open it, and tonight the door is open, and he is standing in it:

Yichen as a baby. The weight of him. The smallness. The way he fit in the crook of Wei's arm, and Wei, twenty-three years old, a factory worker with a bent back and no idea what he was doing, holding his son, thinking: this is mine. This is mine, and I will never let anything happen to it.

The bicycle. Eight years old. The training wheels. The crash. "Get up. Boys don't cry. Get up."

The first perfect score. Yichen, eleven — no, twelve — holding the test paper, waiting at the door, the way he always waited at the door, and Wei looking at the paper, the red 100, and nodding, and saying "Good," and wanting to weep with

pride, and not weeping, because men do not weep, because the weeping would have been a door, and he kept the door closed.

He wonders where that boy went. He has been wondering for a year. The boy who waited at the door. The boy who wanted a word from him. The boy who wore himself out trying to earn it.

He pours a third glass. He stops himself. He puts the glass down. He goes to bed.

He lies in the dark, and he thinks: I taught him to ride a bicycle. I taught him that the world does not care. I never taught him that I cared. I assumed he knew. He wore himself out trying to earn a word I never said, and now he is in there, in the dark, and the fan is off, and I am out here, and the silence is the only thing I ever gave him.

He gets up at five-thirty. He always gets up at five-thirty.

CHAPTER 7

DAY SEVEN

He takes the overtime. He does not want the overtime — his back wants the bed, his shoulder wants the heat pack, his knees want the years back — but the overtime is the only count that makes sense, and he takes it.

The night shift is a different warehouse. The lights are lower. The men are fewer. The work is the same work — the boxes, the pallets, the forklift's beep — and the quiet is the quiet he needs, the quiet that does not ask questions. He works until ten, and the work is the only thing that holds, the only thing that does not change, the only thing that does not look at him the way his son's door looks at him.

On the way home he passes the night market. The young men are there — his son's age, steaming dumplings, selling phone cases, loading a truck. He walks past them the way he walks past everything now: without looking, because looking is how the comparison starts, and the comparison is a fire.

He buys the baijiu. He comes home. The apartment is dark — Lihua is in bed, or pretending to be in bed; Yinan is asleep; the door is closed; the fan is off. He sits in the blue light of the television, and he drinks the two glasses, and he does not allow himself the remembering tonight. The remembering is a luxury, and he cannot afford it, and he goes to bed.

He lies in the dark, and he listens — the way Lihua listens, though he would never call it that, would never say the word — and the silence from behind the door is the loudest thing in the apartment, and he thinks: the fan is off. The fan has been off for days. I do not know if that is better. I do not know if that is worse. I only know the silence.

He gets up at five-thirty.

CHAPTER 8

DAY EIGHT

Friday. Work. The work is the work.

At noon, in the break room, he finds the pamphlet in his coat pocket. He does not know when he put it there — he must have picked it up from the table, weeks ago, without thinking, the way you pick up a thing without knowing why — and he sits in the break room with the other men eating their rice, and he reads it, the way you read a thing you have read before and did not understand:

双相情感障碍. *Bipolar disorder. Mood swings. Chemical imbalance. Manageable with medication.*

He reads the words. He understands the words. The words are true, the way the numbers on a box are true. And his body does not believe them, the way his body does not believe a box that is lighter than it should be. His body believes in effort. His body believes that a man who works sixteen hours does not get to be tired, and a boy who does not work at all does not get to be sick. His body believes that if you get up at five-thirty every morning for thirty years, the world owes you, and his son has not gotten up at five-thirty a single morning in a year, and the world owes him nothing, and the count does not balance. The medicine — Lihua handles it, the 门特 — the subsidy — covers most of it, she said, and he did not ask what it does not cover, because asking is how you open a door.

He closes the pamphlet. He puts it back in his pocket. He does not throw it away — he does not know why he does not throw it away, he will not think about why, he keeps it, the way he keeps everything he does not understand.

He comes home at seven. The apartment. The television. The baijiu. Lihua is in the kitchen — she is always in the kitchen, at the window, the incense — and he does not look at her, and she does not look at him, and he knows something is different, the way he knows a machine has changed its sound: the quality of her silence, the way she does not turn around, the way the apartment is holding its breath. He does not ask. Asking is how you open a door.

The fan is on. It has been off for days — the silence has been the loudest thing — and now the fan is on, and the sound is the sound of a machine waking, and he sits in the blue light, and he listens to the fan, and he thinks: he is back at the computer. I do not know what he is making. I do not know what he is deleting. I only know the sound, and the sound costs electricity, and the electricity costs money, and the money is the only language I have.

He drinks the two glasses. He goes to bed. The fan runs all night. He lies in the dark, and he listens, and he does not sleep, and the alarm is set for five-thirty, and the alarm is always set for five-thirty.

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PART III — THE WEIGHT

CHAPTER 9

DAY NINE

Saturday. He works the Saturday shift. He comes home at seven. The television. The baijiu. The door.

At night he goes to the kitchen for water, and he hears her voice in the stairwell.

The stairwell door is open a crack — she closes it when she talks, the door is her door, the stairwell is her room, and tonight the door is open a crack, and the voice comes through, low, the voice she uses when she does not want the apartment to hear, and Wei stands in the dark kitchen with the glass in his hand, and he does not move, and he hears:

"...the neighbor said there's a temple. In Qingchéng Shān. They do a ritual — 安魂. Settle the wandering soul. I don't know if it's real. I don't know."

The words land in the dark kitchen. A temple. Qingchéng Shān. Settle the wandering soul. He stands with the glass in his hand, and the words land, and he understands them the way he understands a box by its weight: his wife is on the phone, in the stairwell, in the dark, asking about a temple. His wife — the woman who says the illness words out loud, the woman who knows the medicine names, the woman who has been to Huaxi more times than he has — is asking about a temple that can settle a wandering soul.

The words are her mother's words. He knows them without knowing them — the mother-in-law's language, the language of heaven's eyes and seven animals and unconditional love, the language that made his son soft, the language he has been resenting for seventeen years — and his wife is speaking it, in the stairwell, at night, to her sister, to anyone, to a temple.

"...I just want to do something. I can't just sit here and watch him —"

Her voice breaks. The break is the first sound he has heard from her in a year that was not the sound of the apartment holding its breath.

"My mother would know what to do. My mother would —"

She stops. The stairwell is quiet. Wei stands in the dark kitchen, and the glass is in his hand, and he does not move, and he does not go to her, and he does not call out, and he stands there, and the water is warm in his hand, and he thinks: she is asking a temple to fix him. She has done everything the doctors said — she has done more than everything — and now she is in the stairwell, at night, asking a temple, and I am standing here with a glass of water, and I do not know how to be the thing she needs, I have never known how to be the thing she needs, the way I have never known how to be the thing my son needs, and the only thing I know how to do is work, and the work cannot fix this, and the money cannot fix this, and I am standing here with a glass of water.

He goes back to the bedroom. He does not drink the water. He lies in the dark, and he hears her come back into the apartment, and he hears her go to the kitchen window, and he smells the incense — the sandalwood, the red packets, the temple smell, her mother's smell — and he lies in the dark, and he thinks: she is burning the incense. She is talking to her mother. She has been talking to her mother all year, and I have been calling it superstition, and I still call it superstition, not because I do not believe in spirits — he does not know what he believes — but because I need to believe that hard work is the only real thing, and anything else is a dangerous lie, and if the temple is real, if the incense is real, if the dead can hear — then the world is not a machine, and the machine is the only thing I ever understood.

He does not know what a temple does. He does not know what 安魂 does. There is no manual for a wandering soul, no gauge to read, no part to replace. A broken machine tells you where it is broken — the sound comes from a place, and you open the place, and you find the part, and you replace the part, and the machine runs. A son is not a machine. This is the thing he has been refusing to know for a year, and he refuses it again tonight, standing in the dark with a glass of warm water, because the alternative is to be a man standing in the dark who cannot fix the only thing that matters.

He does not sleep well. He gets up at five-thirty. He always gets up at five-thirty.

CHAPTER 10

DAY TEN

Sunday. Overtime. He takes it because the Sunday shift pays time and a half, and time and a half is the only count that makes sense, and because the warehouse is easier than the apartment, because the warehouse does not hold its breath.

He comes home at ten at night, and the apartment is wrong.

He knows it before he opens the door — the way he knows the warehouse when a machine is down, the quality of the air on the other side of the door — and he opens the door, and the apartment is dark, and the television is off, and Lihua is standing in the kitchen, at the window, her back to him, and she does not turn around, and the tablet is on the dining table, the screen dark, and Yinan's door is closed, and Yinan's door is never closed, and Yichen's door is closed, and the fan is running.

He stands in the doorway. He does not know what has happened. He reads the room the way he reads a machine: the tablet on the table — the tablet is always put away, the tablet being on the table is a sign; Yinan's door closed — Yinan's door is never closed; Lihua at the window without the incense — she is always at the window with the incense; the fan running — the fan is always running now.

He does not ask. He knows better than to ask. He goes to the living room and he sits in front of the television, and he does not turn it on — he sits in the dark, and he hears the shower running down the hall — the long shower, the pipes groaning, the water running and running — and he sits in the dark, and he listens to the water, and he thinks: something happened today. Something happened in this apartment today, and I was not here, and I will never know what it was, because I will not ask, and they will not tell me, and the not-knowing is the heaviest thing I carry, and I carry it the way I carry the boxes, one at a time, without complaint.

The water stops. The door closes. The fan runs.

He sits in the dark, and he thinks about the night before the hospital — the night he slept through. He does not think about it often. He has trained himself not to think about it. But the dark apartment, the closed doors, the fan — the fan is the sound of the night before — and the memory comes, the way memories come, like a blow:

He woke at four in the morning. The apartment was lit. Lihua was standing in the hallway — he does not remember her face, he remembers her back, the way she stood, the way she was standing between him and the room — and she said "He's not answering. He's been awake for four days." And Wei got up, and he went to the door, and he saw — the glow of the monitor, the boy at the desk, talking, the boy who did not turn around — and Lihua called the ambulance, and Wei stood in the hallway, and he did not know what to do, and the only thing he could do was stand there, and the standing was the whole of his helplessness, and he has never forgiven himself for the standing.

He does not sleep. He gets up at five-thirty. He goes to work. The work is the work.

CHAPTER 11

DAY ELEVEN

The video comes to him in the break room, at lunch, on a phone.

It is not his phone. It is the temp worker's phone, the young man who is always on his phone, and the young man is laughing, and the other men are laughing, and they are gathered around the small screen the way men gather around a machine that has thrown its belt — and Wei does not look, because he does not look at phones, the phone is for emergencies — and then he hears it.

His son's voice.

He knows it the way you know a machine by its sound — wrong. Too fast. Too bright. The pitch of a motor running without load, revving, free, burning fuel — the same sound he heard at the dinner table on Sunday, the same fault — and he looks, the way you look at a fire, and the small screen shows the balcony, the fog, the building he has been paying rent on for twenty years, and his son's face, talking, too bright, the brightness — and the words are words he has never heard his son say: "the breathing algorithm of Chengdu." The words mean nothing to him. The sound of them means everything. And the men are laughing.

He does not read the words under the video. He does not need to. The sound of the men is the same sound as the words — the sound of laughing at a machine, not with it. He watches twenty seconds. That is all he needs. He has read the fault: the boy does not know he is running hot. A machine that runs hot does not know it is burning, and a man who performs for strangers does not know he is performing, and his son is on the small screen, bright as the night before the hospital, and the strangers are laughing.

He hands the phone back. He says nothing. He goes to the bathroom, and he splashes water on his face, and he looks at himself in the mirror — the man in the mirror, the cracked hands, the tired eyes, the man who paid for the hospital, the man who never said "Good" until it was too late, the man whose son is running hot in front of strangers, and he cannot say anything, and he cannot stop it, and

he does not even know what his son was saying, and the not-knowing is the heaviest thing.

Back in the break room, his hand tests the bench before he sits. The bench holds. That is something. That is all there is.

He does not tell anyone. He does not tell Lihua. He does not tell Yichen. He carries it the way he carries everything: alone, without complaint, the way a man carries a box that is too heavy.

He comes home at seven. He walks past the door. The television. The baijiu. He sits in the blue light, and he sees his son's face on the small screen whenever he closes his eyes — the face of the boy who waited at the door with the perfect score, the face the whole internet is laughing at — and the laughing is the sound of the world taking his son's side, which is the one thing his son never learned to live without, because Wei never taught him.

At night he hears the crying.

Not Yichen — Yinan. The quiet crying, the muffled kind, the kind pressed into a pillow. He gets up. He stands in the hallway. He hears Lihua's voice in Yinan's room — she is already there, she is always already there, she is the one who goes, she is the one who has been going for a year — and he stands in the hallway, outside the door, and he does not go in, because what would he say, what has he ever said, and he stands there, and the crying stops, and he goes back to bed.

He lies in the dark, and he thinks about the video, and he thinks about the crying, and he thinks: I do not know how to help any of them. I know how to pay for things. I know how to carry things. I know how to get up at five-thirty. I do not know how to help any of them.

He gets up at five-thirty.

CHAPTER 12

DAY TWELVE

Tuesday. Work. The work is the work.

He comes home at seven. Dinner. The table. Lihua is at the stove. Yichen's door is closed — he has not come out today, the boy is hiding again, the hiding and the emerging alternate like the seasons, and Wei does not know which is worse. Yinan is at the table, doing homework, and she looks up, and she asks:

"Dad. Why don't you talk to gege?"

The question lands. He sits at the table with the chopsticks in his hand, and the question lands, and he does not have an answer, and he has never had an answer, and the question is the question he has been avoiding for a year, and it comes out of the mouth of his nine-year-old daughter, at the dinner table, the way questions come out of children: simply, without malice, the way a knife is simple.

"Eat your rice," he says.

She eats her rice. She does not look at him again. She has learned, the way children learn, that the question has no answer, that the man at the table has nothing to give her but rice and silence and snacks bought at the corner store, that the corner store is the whole of his fathering, and she does not ask again, and the not-asking is worse than the asking.

He sits in the blue light. The baijiu. He drinks the two glasses, and he thinks about her question, and he thinks about the answer he does not have, and he thinks about his own father — the man who never answered questions, the man who answered with the belt, the man who answered with silence, the man Wei has spent his whole life not becoming — and he thinks: I did not become him. I became the silence instead. And the silence is the same thing, wearing different clothes.

He goes to bed. He lies in the dark. The fan is running. He listens.

He gets up at five-thirty.

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PART IV — THE DOOR

CHAPTER 13

DAY THIRTEEN

Wednesday. He does not go home for dinner.

It is not a decision. It is the opposite of a decision — it is what the body does when the table has become a machine it cannot face — and he stays at the warehouse, and he takes the overtime he does not want, and he works until ten, and the work is the work, and the work does not ask questions, and the work does not look at him the way his daughter looked at him.

At ten he comes home. The dinner is over. The apartment is dark. Lihua is in the bedroom. Yichen's door is closed. Yinan is asleep. He heats the leftovers and he eats alone in front of the television, and the apartment smells of hóngshāo ròu — the smell, the dark lacquer smell, the smell that has been coming out of his wife's wok more and more lately, the smell he does not mention, the smell that is her mother's kitchen, her mother's recipe, the smell of the woman who made his son soft.

He eats, and the smell brings the memory, the way smells do, the way memories come like a blow:

The old apartment. Yichen at six, at seven. The grandmother at the stove — his wife's mother, the village woman with the loud voice and the unconditional love — and she is feeding Yichen, she is always feeding Yichen, and Wei stands in the doorway, and she looks at him, and she says, "He has heaven's eyes. He sees what other people don't see." And Wei says, "He has homework." And she says, "He has homework tomorrow. Tonight he has heaven's eyes."

He remembers the resentment. He has never examined it — he has never allowed himself to examine it — but he remembers it: the way she undermined him, the way she made his rules a joke, the way she fed the boy superstition and unconditional praise, the way she looked at Wei, the factory man, the man who never finished school, the man who did not have heaven's eyes, the man who had only his back and his hands and his five-thirty alarm. He remembers thinking: she is making him soft. She is teaching him the world will love him without

effort. And now his son believes he can sell the fog to the government, and the world is laughing at him on the internet, and Wei does not know if the grandmother did this, or if the school did this, or if he did this, or if it was always going to happen, the way a machine wears out, the way a body wears out, and the not-knowing is the heaviest thing.

He finishes the leftovers. He washes the bowl. He washes it carefully, the way you wash a thing you are trying not to think about. He goes to bed. He lies in the dark, and the apartment smells of her mother's kitchen, and he does not sleep well, and the alarm is set for five-thirty.

He gets up at five-thirty.

CHAPTER 14

DAY FOURTEEN

Thursday. Work. The work is the work.

He comes home at seven. He goes to the living room. He sees the drawing on the dining table.

It is Yinan's. He knows it is Yinan's the way he knows her knock — the careful lines, the bright colors, the family, everyone smiling, everyone together, the way children draw families before they learn that the world is gray. He picks it up to put it away, the way you pick up a thing your daughter left out, and he looks at it, and he sees:

The family. Lihua, in the middle. Yichen, tall, next to her — Yichen is in the drawing, that is the first thing, the boy is in the drawing, the boy she still puts in the drawing. Yinan, small, next to her mother. And in the corner — separate, apart, small — a figure. Him. He is in the corner of his daughter's drawing, separate from everyone else, the way he has been separate from everyone else, the way he has been separate for years, and he did not know she saw it, and he did not know she saw him, and she has drawn the truth of the family, the truth he has been carrying, the truth a nine-year-old has drawn in crayon on the dining table.

He stands at the dining table with the drawing in his hands. He stares at it for a long time. He does not throw it away. He does not put it back. He folds it carefully — the way you fold a thing you are keeping — and he puts it in his wallet, where he will keep it until it falls apart, and he says nothing, and he goes to the television, and the baijiu, and the blue light.

He does not watch the television. He sits in the blue light, and he thinks about the figure in the corner, and he thinks about his own father's wallet — did his father keep anything? He kept nothing. He said nothing. He was the corner, and Wei does not remember his father ever being anywhere else, and Wei has spent his whole life not becoming his father, and he has become his father, and his daughter has drawn it, and the drawing is in his wallet, and the wallet is

against his heart, and the paper is the only thing his daughter has ever given him that he will keep.

The forklift's beep is still in his ears. The boxes are still in his arms — the ones he will carry again at five-thirty, the alarm already set, the same alarm — and the door at the end of the hall is closed, and the fan behind it runs, and he counts: one wallet, one drawing, one son behind one door. That is the inventory. That is all there is.

He goes to bed. He lies in the dark. The wallet is on the nightstand — the drawing is in the wallet, and he can feel it from the bed, the way you feel a weight, and the weight is not heavy, and the weight is everything.

He gets up at five-thirty.

CHAPTER 15

DAY FIFTEEN

Friday. Work. The work is the work.

He comes home at seven. The television. The baijiu. The door. The pattern. The pattern is the pattern, and the pattern is the only thing holding the family together, and the pattern is the thing that is breaking the family apart, and both are true, and he does not examine either.

He is sitting in front of the television — the war drama, the same war drama — when he hears the door.

Not the front door. The other door. Yichen's door. It opens — he hears it open, the sound he has not heard at this hour in a year — and footsteps, and the footsteps stop, and he does not turn around, because turning around is how you open a door, and then the voice comes, from the living room doorway, quiet, careful, not the bright voice, not the prophet voice, a voice he has not heard in a year, a voice he barely recognizes:

"Dad. I took my medicine today. I've been taking it. I reinstalled Blender. I'm working on —"

The voice stops. The pause is long. The television talks. Wei sits in the blue light, and he does not turn around, and his hands are on his knees, and the hands are still, and the voice says:

"I'm not giving up."

The words land. He sits in the blue light, and the words land, and he feels them the way you feel a weight you have been carrying for a year being set down on the table in front of you, and he does not know what to do with them, and he does not know if they are true, and he does not know if the boy who said them is the boy who will take his medicine tomorrow or the boy who will sell fog to the government, and the not-knowing is the heaviest thing, and he opens his mouth, and the word that comes out is not the word he planned, he did not plan any word, the word comes out the way the words always come out, flat, to the television, to the wall, to the peeling paint:

"Good."

One word. The word lands. He does not know if it will hold. His hands can test a table, a rail, a wall — he has never known how to test a word. The word is out of him, and it cannot be taken back, and it is the first word he has given his son in a year that was not a wound, and that is the only test that matters. His hand goes to the arm of the chair. A tap. The chair holds. That is something. That is all there is.

The voice says: "I'm going to walk Yinan to the store this weekend. She wants ice cream."

Wei does not answer. He sits in the blue light, and the footsteps go back down the hall, and the door closes, and the fan starts, and he sits, and the word *good* is in the room, and he does not know what to do with it, and he drinks the baijiu, and he goes to bed, and the wallet is on the nightstand, and the drawing is in the wallet, and he lies in the dark, and he thinks: he said he is not giving up. He said he took his medicine. I do not know if it is true. I want it to be true. I do not know if wanting makes it true.

The television talks to no one. The fan runs. Somewhere in the walls the pipes tick as they cool, the building settling the way buildings settle, one small sound at a time, and the alarm is set, and the boxes will be there at five-thirty, and the word *good* will be there too — in the room, where he put it.

He gets up at five-thirty. He always gets up at five-thirty.

CHAPTER 16

DAY SIXTEEN

Saturday. Work. The Saturday shift.

He comes home in the late afternoon, and the apartment is different — the quality of the air, the way the machines have changed their sound — and he stands in the hallway, and he hears voices. Yinan's voice, careful, formal, the voice of a child doing a thing properly: "Gege. What is your job?"

The interview. The school assignment. He has heard about it — the fragments, the way he hears about everything now, through the wall, through the door, through the not-asking — and he stands in the hallway, and he does not move, and he hears his son's voice:

"I'm trying to make art. I'm not very good at it yet. And I'm sick — I have a sickness in my mind, and it makes the art hard. But I'm trying."

The words land. He stands in the hallway, outside the door of the dining room, and the words land, and he hears his son say the word — *sick* — the word Wei has never said, the word Wei has been refusing for a year, the word his body does not believe, the word his son is saying out loud, to his sister, into a recorder, at the dining table — and Wei stands in the hallway, and he does not enter, and he does not move, and the word is in him, and it is heavier than the boxes, heavier than the baijiu, heavier than the wallet.

He hears more — fragments, through the door: "I'm not going anywhere, and it hurts... sometimes I delete it, because I'm afraid it's not good enough, and I'm afraid I'll never be good enough." He hears his son say "I have two hundred followers, and most of them are bots." He does not understand the words. He understands the shape of them, the way he understands the shape of a box: his son is telling his daughter the truth, and the truth is the truth Wei has been refusing to hear, and his daughter is asking the questions Wei has been afraid to ask, and his son is answering them, and the answers are breaking something in Wei's chest, the thing he has been carrying for a year, the thing he calls nothing.

The fan behind the closed door runs, and the count runs with it: one word he has never said, one word his son said, one wallet, one drawing, one door.

He goes to the living room. He does not turn on the television. He sits in the dark, and the voices come through the wall — Yinan's small voice, "Gege. I'm glad you're my brother" — and then silence, and he sits in the dark, and he does not know what to do with any of it, and he drinks the baijiu, and the two glasses are not enough, and he does not pour a third, because the third glass is the door, and he has spent a lifetime not opening the door.

He goes to bed. The wallet on the nightstand. The drawing in the wallet. He lies in the dark, and he thinks about the word his son said — *sick* — and he thinks: he said it. He said the word. He said it out loud, to his sister, and I have never said it, not once, not even to myself, and my son is braver than I am, and I do not know what to do with that, and I do not know if I can say the word, and I do not know if saying it would help, and I do not know anything.

He gets up at five-thirty.

CHAPTER 17

DAY SEVENTEEN

Sunday.

He is home. He does not work Sundays — he has been working Sundays for a year, the overtime, the time and a half, the count — but this Sunday he does not work, he does not know why he does not work, he did not decide, the body decided, the body that has been carrying the boxes and the silence and the wallet, and he is home, and the apartment is quiet, and he hears the front door open.

He is in the living room. He does not move. He hears Yichen's voice, and Yinan's voice, and the door, and the footsteps going out — and he does not look, and then he does look, and he sees them through the window: his son and his daughter, walking down the street, toward the corner store. Yinan is skipping the cracks in the pavement. Yichen is walking beside her. They are going to the store. For ice cream. He said he would walk her to the store this weekend, and he is walking her to the store, and Wei stands at the window, and he watches them go, and he does not know what he feels, and the not-knowing is the heaviest thing, and he watches until the fog eats them.

They come back with the ice cream. Strawberry. He sees them from the window — Yinan eating hers, laughing at something, Yichen eating his — and they come in, and the apartment is full of the sound of them, and he is in the living room, and the television is off, and he does not know what to do with his hands.

Dinner. The table. The hóngshāo ròu — the smell, the mother-in-law's smell, the smell he does not mention. Lihua serves. Yinan talks about the interview — "I'm going to tell my teacher everything on Monday. It's going to be the most interesting report in the whole class." Yichen is at the table. He is eating. He is eating the hóngshāo ròu — Wei watches the rice go in, the meat go in, the food going in and staying in, and he does not know when he last saw his son eat — and he eats fast, the way he always eats fast, the way he has always eaten fast, and

then the thing happens. The thing he did not plan. The word comes out the way the words come out, flat, to the table, to the rice, to the wall:

"Did you eat?"

He does not know why he asks. He has not asked in a year. He has not asked because asking is how you open a door, and he has spent a lifetime not opening doors, and the question is out, and it is a door, and he watches his son look at him — the long look, the look between two people who have not looked at each other in a year — and his son says:

"Yes. I ate."

Wei nods. He stands. He leaves the table. He stops at the doorway, and he does not turn around — he has never turned around, turning around is how you open a door — and he says, to the door, to the hallway, to the son who will not see his face:

"Tomorrow. Eat with us."

The words are out. He does not know why he said them. He wants to take them back — taking them back would be easier, taking them back would mean the door could close again, and the closed door is the only thing he understands — and he does not take them back, and he hears his son's voice, small, from the table:

"Okay."

The word lands. Wei walks to the living room. The television. The baijiu. He sits in the blue light, and he does not watch the war drama, and he drinks the two glasses, and the word *okay* is in the room, and the word *tomorrow* is in the room, and he does not know what to do with them, and he does not pour a third glass.

That night, he goes to bed. The alarm is set for five-thirty — it is always set for five-thirty — and he lies in the dark, and he listens, the way he has listened every night for a year, and the fan is running, and the fan is the sound of his son not sleeping, and the wallet is on the nightstand, and the drawing is in the wallet, and he allows himself, for ten minutes, the remembering:

The bicycle. The training wheels. The crash. "Get up. Boys don't cry. Get up." The boy getting up. The boy learning to ride.

He does not know if the boy will get up again. He does not know if the word *good* meant anything. He does not know if the door will open tomorrow, or the

next day, or ever. He does not know if his son will take his medicine, or hide it, or spit it out. He does not know if the family in his daughter's drawing will ever be the family in the drawing. He does not know any of the things a father is supposed to know.

He knows the alarm is set for five-thirty. He knows he will get up. He knows he will go to work, and come home, and walk past the door — the door, the door, the door, ten times a day, never knocking — and he knows the door will be there, and he will be there, and the not-knowing will be there, and he will carry it the way he carries everything: with his back, with his hands, without complaint.

He has never said "I love you." He will not say it tonight. He does not know if he will ever say it. He knows the drawing is in the wallet, and the wallet is against his heart, and the paper will stay there until it falls apart.

He gets out of bed.

He does not know why he gets out of bed. The body decides. The body has been deciding all year, and tonight it decides something new: he walks down the hall, past the bathroom, past the kitchen, to the door. Yichen's door. He stands in front of it, and his hand comes up — the hand that tests everything, the hand that has tested the rail and the table and the peeling paint for a year, the hand that has never once tested this door — and he taps it. Once. Twice. A tap, a listen.

Is it sound. Will it hold.

The door holds. It is the first time in a year he has let his hand ask the question of the one surface he was afraid to ask.

He does not knock. He does not speak. He stands there, and the fan runs behind the door, and the machine is running, and the door holds, and he walks back to bed.

The body does not need an alarm anymore.

He closes his eyes. He gets up at five-thirty.

He always gets up at five-thirty.

End of Part Three.

Colophon

魂兮归来！反故居些。

Hun xi gui lai! Fan gu ju xie.

Soul, come home! Return to your old house. — the Summons of the Soul · 楚辞·招魂 — a man who has never once called anyone home says the only version of it he has: eat with us.

Tāiguāng 胎光 is the first of the three Hun — the fetal light, the soul that connects to heaven, the one that is almost always obscured. In this volume it is a father's pride, which he carried for years without once putting into words and now cannot put into anything. Liu Wei works a warehouse, tests what he loves by tapping it, drinks exactly two glasses, and walks past a closed door ten times a day. His seventeen days are the same seventeen days as his son's — the year told in the language of work, which has no word for what is happening at home.

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.

魂魄城 (Hún Pò Chéng — City of Souls) · 17 sections · 12,966 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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