THE MAD ARHAT

ZHEN AI

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36 chapters · 4 interludes
101,297 words

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INTERLUDE 1

Fog Walks, Clip 047

Assembled from the caption track and comment section of a livestream posted by the channel Fog Walks (雾都夜行), account Yingtao-jiang (樱桃酱), at 01:12 on a Tuesday in January. Timestamps are the poster's. Punctuation and errors have not been corrected. The clip is four minutes and six seconds long and has, at the time of this writing, nine million and some views.

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00:00 camera comes up from wet pavement, tilted; rain on the lens

00:02 channel bug, bottom left: Fog Walks / Yingtao-jiang

00:04 ON-SCREEN Back alley off Jiefangbei · 23:47 · Someone cornered

00:07 CAPTION back alley off minquan road. four guys. one girl. i was going home for noodles. i am not going home for noodles.

00:11 four men in the frame now, one holding a phone up. the girl is against the wall, hands over her chest. one of the men is talking, low, cheerful, the way you talk to a dog you are about to sell.

00:19 CAPTION they keep saying "we're not doing anything." that's how you know.

00:24 a fifth figure enters frame from the left. yellow rider jacket. walking wrong. carrying nothing.

[00:26] CHAT: WTF [00:27] CHAT: who is that [00:28] CHAT: drunk guy??

00:31 the rider stops. he looks at the girl. he looks at the men. he looks at the girl. then he does something the camera does not expect: he laughs. a huge, cracked, stupid laugh, the laugh of a man who has been told the joke of his own life and has just now gotten it.

00:38 he starts to sing.

00:39 CAPTION he is singing the Ji Gong (济公) song. the 1985 one. off key. i am not making this up.

[00:42] CHAT: xie’er po [00:43] CHAT: hahahahahaha [00:43] CHAT: isn’t that the guy... [00:44] CHAT: sha zi o

00:47 one of the men tells him to get lost. the rider does not get lost. he bows to the man, deeply, like a servant, like a beggar, and then he keeps singing, louder, and the four men are now on camera laughing because a man is making a fool of himself and a phone is filming and this is, for them, a good night.

01:02 CAPTION the girl runs. nobody stops her. nobody is looking at her anymore. that’s the whole trick, i think, i only saw it later

[01:08] CHAT: is he a guawazi or what [01:09] CHAT: call the police [01:10] CHAT: what good would the police do

01:21 the rider falls over. he does not have to fall over. he falls over anyway, and takes a stack of plastic stools down with him, and the sound is enormous, and the four men are laughing so hard that one of them has to lean on the wall.

01:34 CAPTION he gets up. he bows again. he says something i can’t hear. then he walks away, still singing. the men let him. they’re still laughing.

01:48 the camera follows the rider down the alley for eleven seconds. he is limping. at the mouth of the alley he stops, and bends over, and is sick against the wall, and then straightens, and keeps walking.

[01:59] CHAT: face-changing opera? [02:00] CHAT: not a bad performance actually [02:01] CHAT: is this one of those accident-scam actors

02:11 cut. the camera has turned. the alley is empty. the stools are scattered. cigarette butts. a puddle. that’s all.

02:20 ON-SCREEN What do you think? See you in the comments.

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COMMENT SECTION — TOP, BY LIKES

> **@Shancheng Old Hotpot** · 32k Does anybody know who this is? Yellow jacket, Meituan, 0478. If you see this, message me. I want to buy him a meal. ↳ *@Xiaomian Extra Vinegar* Buy him a meal? You just want him to sing for you too. ↳ *@Shancheng Old Hotpot* I want to take him for hotpot.

> **@Jiangbei Auntie Zhang** · 28k I watched it three times. It doesn't look like acting. I know that laugh. My husband laughed like that the year his business went under. ↳ *@Anonymous* Niangniang, mo shuo le, I'm about to cry.

> **@Yuzhong Uncle Wang** · 21k Isn't this Ji Gong? The one people pray to at Luohan Temple? The "wine and meat pass through the gut" one. ↳ *@Law Student Xiao Li* He's just a drunk. Don't put a crown on a drunk. Do you know that if this "Ji Gong" hit someone he'd actually go to jail? ↳ *@Yuzhong Uncle Wang* Then tell me — should the four men collecting the debt go to jail?

> **@Fog Walks · Yingtao-jiang** (channel) · 19k I didn't post this for the traffic. I was going home for noodles. I keep thinking about the girl. If you have any information, message me. ↳ *@Skewer Lover* Sis, this account is about to blow up. ↳ *@Fog Walks · Yingtao-jiang* I don't want to blow up. I want to find her.

@One Tree on Nanshan · 16k Shancheng Ji Gong (山城济公) ↳ *@Shapingba Xiao Zhou* those three words. push it up. ↳ *@One Tree on Nanshan* Shancheng Ji Gong ↳ *@One Tree on Nanshan* Shancheng Ji Gong

@Chengdu Brother Li · 14k Is this really what Chongqing people are like? Four men bullying a girl and nobody helps, and a drunk shows up and everyone laughs. ↳ *@Banan Sister Chen* Don't blame the whole city. If you were here, would you help? ↳ *@Chengdu Brother Li* I would. ↳ *@Banan Sister Chen* Good. Then come.

@Anonymous · 13k Where's his bowl. ↳ *@Anonymous* What? ↳ *@Anonymous* Ji Gong. Where's his bowl. He's got a broken fan, I assumed he had a bowl. ↳ *@Anonymous* Don't. I can already see it.

@Jiefangbei Corner Store · 11k I've seen this rider. He comes in for the three-yuan pouches of gaoliang. The ones in the cardboard box by the door. Quiet man. Never owes money. ↳ *@A Netizen* "Never owes money." That's the line that got me.

@Renmin Road Brother Zhou · 9,800 Honestly, if this is real — those four men will be back out collecting tomorrow, and this rider will be back out delivering tomorrow, and you all know it. ↳ *@A Netizen* I know it. ↳ *@A Netizen* I know it.

> **@No Name** · 7,400 I'm begging you all, don't dig up his name. He drinks that much because he's carrying something. You put him on the fire and he won't survive it. ↳ *@No Name* Nobody liked this comment. It hurts me.

> **@A Tourist from Xi'an** · 5,100 I just got back from Chongqing last week. I climbed the Eighteen Stairs. I thought Chongqing was all slopes and hotpot. Turns out it has this too. Bashi. ↳ *@A Shancheng Kid* Chongqing has everything. What it doesn't have is idle people.

> **@A Lay Buddhist** · 3,900 Amitabha. Practice isn't only in the temple. It's in the back alley. ↳ *@A Netizen* Don't talk nonsense. ↳ *@A Lay Buddhist* I'm not. Wine and meat pass through the gut; the Buddha stays in the heart.

> **@Anonymous** · 2,200 Does anyone know what happened to the girl. Does nobody ask that. ↳ *@Anonymous* That question is the most important thing about this video. ↳ *@Anonymous* Nobody answers it.

> **@Late-Night Noodle Shop** · 1,100 I run a noodle shop, Nan'an, open at 3 a.m. If he sees this, come eat. No charge. ↳ *@A Netizen* Boss, your address? ↳ *@Late-Night Noodle Shop* I won't say. I'm afraid too many will come. I only want to make a bowl for that one man.

> **@Yuzhong Cyberspace Administration** (verified) · pinned Friendly reminder: the internet is not outside the law. Please do not believe or spread rumours. Please do not imitate dangerous behaviour. ↳ *@A Netizen* Noted. ↳ *@A Netizen* hilarious ↳ *@A Netizen* what behaviour is there to imitate? Falling over?

> **@Anonymous** · 876 Don’t laugh, everyone. I was there. When he got up I saw blood on his trousers. He sang very loud. ↳ *@Anonymous* Why didn’t you go help? ↳ *@Anonymous* … I was filming. ↳ *@Anonymous* Exactly.

> **@Xie from Tongnan** · 640 I think the scariest part isn’t the four men. It’s that there are other people laughing all through the video. Including me. ↳ *@A Netizen* Including you?

> **@Anonymous** · 305 What’s his name. ↳ *@Anonymous* Don’t know. ↳ *@Anonymous* Shancheng Ji Gong. ↳ *@Anonymous* That’s not a name. That’s what you gave him.

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— end of clip 047. reposts: 22,800. saves: 41,300. at 03:00 the clip is the eleventh most-watched video in the municipality. at 03:40 it is third. at 04:15 a man in a yellow jacket, asleep on a bench at Chaotianmen with his shoes off, becomes, without his knowledge, the most talked-about person in a city of thirty million.

CHAPTER 1

The Blamed Samaritan

The city tells the story of Old Feng as a joke, and I am going to tell it straight, because the details are the only part of it that is true.

On a Tuesday in November, on the footbridge over Xinhua Road, a boy on a battery scooter reached into a woman's coat pocket, took her phone, and went down the steps two at a time. Feng Daye was seventy-one. He had taught chemistry in a county middle school for forty years, which meant he had spent his whole life trying to make careless children care, and he did what his body had been trained to do. He shouted. He gave chase. He caught the boy by the collar of his down jacket at the bottom of the steps, and the boy went down hard on the wet stone.

That was the good part. It lasted about four seconds.

By evening the boy's uncle was on the kind of news that lives inside a phone. He said the old man had pushed his nephew for no reason. He said the nephew had a cracked wrist, a mild concussion, and a livelihood interrupted. He said they were not greedy people; they only wanted what was fair, the medical bills and the lost wages and nothing more. He said the word pengci (碰瓷) into the camera the way you say a word you have learned to use as a wall. The woman whose phone was taken had gone home before the police arrived. She did not come back, and her name is on no document at all. Old Feng's name is on every one of them.

His pension was three thousand nine hundred yuan a month. The claim was eighty thousand, and then, because the family found a lawyer with patience, a hundred and twenty.

By the second week of January I was carrying noodles into his ward, because that is the work I do. He had a bed by the window and a good kidney that had stopped being good, which the doctors called unrelated. He had an oxygen line, a plastic bag of receipts under the pillow, and a daughter who had stopped sleeping. He did not look out the window. I noticed that. Noticing is the one skill I have never had to work at: I know what a person does with their eyes when they have decided not to see something.

Everyone in the city knows the joke by now. See, who told you to be a good man. You did good; good has a price; you could not pay it; now the ward has your name on the door.

I laughed at that joke in November. I want that on the record before I tell you anything else, because if I lie about this I will lie about the rest.

Then I carried the noodles up.

My name is Li Xiuyuan (李修缘). I am twenty-eight years old. On the platform I am not a name. I am Rider 0-4-7-8, and my rating is 4.62, and it is not a rating, it is an obituary with a decimal point. Here is what the rating measures: whether the food is still hot, whether the bag is upright, whether the customer has to walk more than a hundred meters, whether the customer is in a good mood when you hand it over, whether you smiled, whether the app recorded you smiling.

It does not measure that the customer lives on the eleventh floor of a building whose ground floor is on the seventh floor of the hill, or that the elevator has been broken since the demolition next door began, or that the customer ordered from a shop on the far side of the river and the bridge is stopped. The rating measures whether the world was kind to you. It is a very honest number.

Mine is falling.

I could write down the map I carry in my head. Nobody has ever asked me to, so I will do it here, once, and then leave it alone. Every building above the Jialing has a back stair. Every back stair has a blind spot. Every blind spot has a person in it who has decided not to see you, and if you look at them long enough to be noticed they will look at their phone. There are service elevators the guards will let you use for a smoke and a joke and a five-yuan red packet.

There are exhaust vents that come out on the roof of the next building, and roof bridges that cross whole blocks, and gates in the fence behind the vegetable market that only the sellers and the rats and I know about. There is a spot behind Liziba station where the signal dies for eleven seconds, and if you know it, the app believes you are still on the road. There are guards who change shift at 8:40 and guards who change shift at 8:10 and one who sleeps from two until three in a plastic chair with a phone on his chest, playing mahjong against nobody. I know all of it. I deliver their lunch.

That is more or less my whole inheritance, and I got it honestly. My father was a bangbang (棒棒), one of the pole-and-rope porters who carried this city on their shoulders back when nothing here could be reached by anything with wheels. He carried refrigerators up the stairs at Chaotianmen for el - even years. He was killed by one of them in 2003, on a flight of steps above the river; the refrigerator came loose on the turn and took him down, and I was six years old, and what I re - member is not the sound but the way the men were quiet af - terward. Not sad. Professional. Like men whose tool had broken.

My grandfather raised me. Li Shouzhuo (李守拙), a bangbang before my father, then the keeper of a teahouse in Huishuigou (回水沟), the old stilted alley that hung over the slope above Chaotianmen like washing left out to dry. He was a

Buddhist in the way of our part of the country, which means he believed in the Buddha and in tea and in the possibility of a good seat at the mahjong table in the next life. He named me after a monk.

The monk's name was Daoji, though nobody calls him that. He is Ji Gong, the mad monk, the saint who drank wine and ate meat and never kept a single rule and healed people anyway. My grandfather watched a television series about him in 1985 and never fully recovered.

There are men in this city who can still sing the theme song note for note; my grandfather was one, and he sang it to me while he stirred the congee pot, badly, at six in the morning, and the smell of that congee is the only thing I can still summon from before the year 2003. He told me the monk's most famous line, the first half of it, which everyone knows: Wine and meat pass through the gut, but the Buddha stays in the heart. He said it the way other grandfathers say be a good person. He never told me the second half.

He died in 2006, during the demolition of Huishuigou. He had a stroke on the second day of the standoff, in the teahouse, with the paper still pasted to the windows. I was nine. The neighborhood is gone now; the towers at Chaotianmen went up where the alley used to hang, and the fog comes down on them exactly the same.

So. Two men on the stairs, one after the other, and then me. The city took my whole family one step at a time. That is the thing I believe when I am being honest and not performing. Not that I am unlucky. That I am the sort of man things happen to, and that I am not a man who chooses.

I owe twenty-eight thousand yuan to a man named Ma-ge. He runs collections for half the small lenders in Yuzhong and a laundry machine that has never once been empty in the four years I have known him. It is not a large debt. It is a debt

shaped exactly like my life: every month I pay the interest, and every month the principal does not move, and every month he tells me not to worry about it in a voice that would sound warm if you had never met a man who wanted something. I do not know where his money comes from and I have never asked, because I have understood since I was six that some questions are a form of touching.

The rest of what I own fits in the bag on my back. A phone with a cracked corner. A power bank. Rain trousers. Two clean shirts in a plastic sleeve, because a rider who smells of the river gets a one-star review. A wedding invitation, lavender, good paper, from a girl named Tingting who is married now in Chengdu and whose name I say out loud in my only other language, the private one, which is silence.

And in the front pocket, beside the phone, a pouch of gaoliang, sorghum liquor, sixty degrees, sold from a cardboard box on the counter of every corner shop in the city for three yuan. Two ounces, plastic, with a spout like a sippy cup. I buy them the way other men buy cigarettes, by the handful, and I drink them on the river steps at Chaotianmen where the last of the old porters still gather to argue about who carried what in 1989. It is not a habit. It is a program. I drink so that I can do the next thing, and the next thing is whatever the day is, and the day is always the same.

The last bangbang is an old man named Uncle Tuo, which is not his name; it is what we call him because he carried a table once, on his head, through the flood of 1981, and never let anyone forget it. He has no teeth on the top and strong opin - ions about which noodle shop has betrayed the city, and a voice like a door. When I come down to the steps at night he saves me a place on the concrete and does not comment on how much I have drunk, which is the closest thing to tenderness I get all week.

The hospital was the Second People's, and the ward was on the ninth floor, which is the third floor from the back, if you follow me. The lift was full of relatives holding fruit and a wo‑man crying into a plastic bag of medicine. I took the stairs, because I always take the stairs, and because on the stairs you pass the smokers, and on the stairs you learn things.

Old Feng's daughter met me at the door. She was about forty, and her hair had been washed recently, which I could tell mattered to her, and she took the noodles and thanked me twice in a voice that had been sanded down. The ward smelled of disinfectant and orange peel and the particular sweetness of a body that is not winning. I set the bag on the table and stole a look at him.

I have said he did not look at the window. I should say more. He was propped up and very thin, and his hands on the blanket were the hands of someone who had once written on a blackboard: very clean, very still. His eyes were open. They were fixed on the foot of the bed, or a little past it, at a point in the middle distance where there was nothing at all to see. You could have set a camera there and filmed nothing for a month. He was not asleep. He was doing arithmetic. That is what I thought, and I think it still: he was adding up what it had cost him to try.

The daughter asked me to wait for the change. I said there was no change, and she said there always is, and we did the thing we do: I pretended not to hear and she pretended not to insist. On the table by the bed there was a cup of congee that had gone cold, a folded newspaper, and a small brass bell the family must have brought from a temple; it had a loop of red string through the handle. I looked at the bell for longer than I meant to.

That is when I went to the window. The ward was hot, and my jacket smelled of the street and the noodles, and I wanted the fog.

The hospital backs onto a construction site and a parking lot, and the lot is at street level, and the street is eleven floors down, so from the ninth-floor window you look straight down into it, like an ant farm with bad lighting. There was a girl.

She was maybe nineteen. She had a schoolbag, and she was backed against the wall of the lot, and there were four men around her and one of them had a phone up, filming. Not filming her face. Filming down, at the angle you use when the point is not the person but what the person is being shown. Her hands were over her chest, and her mouth was open in a shape I recognized, the shape of someone saying please to men who have already decided that please is a currency that does not spend.

I have seen collectors work. I have been collected. These four had the patient look of men paid by the hour, and the girl had the look of someone who has just understood the exchange rate of her own life, which is a look you do not forget, because the first time you see it you are usually looking at it from the inside.

Behind me the daughter was talking, about the noodles, about how kind it was, about the weather.

I did not answer. I put my hand flat on the cold glass and looked down at the girl in the lot and thought, with the clarity that comes only when you have nothing to lose and therefore no reason to be afraid: there. That is the thing I am. The thing things happen to.

The light in the lot was the flat grey of a Chongqing January, which is not weather so much as the lowering of the ceiling on the world. The phone stayed up. The girl's hands stayed where they were.

I went down the stairs.

CHAPTER 2

The Cost of Standing Up

I want to tell you that I went down the stairs to help her, and I want you to understand that this would be a lie, or not exactly a lie, a kind of costume over the truth. I went down the stairs because I was already drunk, and because I had spent the af - ternoon being a man things happen to, and because it had been a long time since anything had happened to anyone because of me.

On the second landing I took the pouch out of my pocket and drank what was left. It was not courage. It was the part of me that could not bear to be present for my own life, hiring itself out to stand in for me. The liquid went down like a lit match and spread through my chest, and by the time I reached the street I was warm and clear and someone else.

The lot was at the bottom of the slope, behind a wall of construction hoarding with a gate cut into it, and the gate was open. There were four men in the lot and one girl; the girl was where I had seen her through the glass, still against the west wall, but now one of the men was holding her student card up to the light of his phone and reading it out loud in the voice people use to read out the names of the dead. The other three were arranged around her the way furniture is arranged, not touching her, not needing to. The one with the phone was the one who mattered. He had a good jacket and a bad haircut and the calm of a man who had done this on commission for years.

I know that calm, because I have been on the other side of it in the little office above the laundry, listening to Ma-ge explain the difference between interest and principal: one of them is a living thing and the other one is a wall.

"Miss Wen," the man with the phone was saying. "Nine - teen. Department of finance. Nice photo. You look tired in this one." He turned the card so the others could see it. "The photos on the phone are prettier, though, and we saw them, and nobody forced you to take them. You took them yourself, for the loan, so the loan is a contract and the contract is the law."

"Hey," I said.

Three of them looked up, and the fourth, the one with the phone, did not, which told me which one I would have to handle if I were someone who could handle anyone.

"Hey yourself," one of them said. He was about my age, wearing a leather jacket, with the face of a person who enjoyed the first five minutes of a fight and then went home. "What do you want, delivery boy?"

"I want to talk to you," I said, in my best and worst dia - lect, the one I use when I am trying to sound like a man with a plan. "Business. A proposition. You and me, outside, two minutes."

They laughed, and I thought: good, I have that part. In the movies the laughing comes before the fight, and the man who laughs is the man who loses, and I have spent my whole life being the man who laughs, so maybe the trick was to make them laugh first and then hit them while they were doing it.

That is what I told myself later, in the clinic, when I was counting my teeth. I have had time to examine the operation, and it was not a plan but a sentence I said out loud to a man with no reason to listen, and what happened next happened because the universe does not have a plan either.

What happened next is this: the girl looked at me, and I looked at her, and in that second I did the one thing I had told myself I would never do, which is I let her see that I was drunk, because I thought it would reassure her that I was on

her side. It did not reassure her; it did the opposite, and her whole body went small.

The man with the phone looked up then, and studied me for a moment, and I watched him price me: twenty-eight years, a yellow jacket, no watch, no ring, a pouch of liquor in my pocket that I had forgotten to put away, and the eyes of a man who would not be believed. He did not even bother to be angry.

"Go home," he said, in the kind voice a man uses on a drunk he is paid to move. "You're drunk. If you're still here in ten seconds we'll have to hurt you, and then you'll cry, and I hate the crying part."

I have spent a great deal of time since then thinking about what else I could have done, and none of it is any use. I could have gone for the police, or found the girl's family, or waited at the gate and filmed them the way they were filming her, and any of those would have been the act of a composed man. But I was not composed. I was thirty years of nothing and a warm chest and a girl going small, and the ten seconds were already passing, so I did the stupidest thing currently available, which was to reach out and take the phone out of his hand.

He was faster than he looked, and they all were, because it is not a movie: a man who works with his body for money moves at a speed someone who carries soup for money cannot imagine. By the time my fingers closed on the phone his knee was already in my thigh and his elbow was already coming around, and the phone went up and came down and the lot went sideways.

What I remember of the next minute is not pictures but a collection of sounds and costs. Someone's fist on my ribs, low on the left, a dull enormous crack like a chair leg giving way. Someone's shoe on my hand, deliberate, twice, and my index finger going out of its socket with a small wet pop I felt in my stomach. My head against the concrete, which is quieter than

people expect. My own voice saying something in dialect that I am not proud of and will not write down. And under all of it the man with the phone, not touching me at all, standing back and narrating into the camera in a low cheerful voice like a man doing a cooking video: "See? See? He attacked us. Everybody saw, he attacked us."

And then, while I was still on the concrete, his phone rang, and he answered it in the voice of a man arranging an ordinary evening, and said, "I'm coming, I'm coming, order the fish," and he walked out of the lot still talking about the fish. That is the thing I have never been able to put down: that he had somewhere to be, and that he was going to get there, and that he was going to eat fish, and that none of it had anything to do with me.

He did not say it to me. He said it to the phone, and I understood then, with a clarity that arrived too late to be useful, that the phone had been the point all night and I had been the thing it was pointed at.

Then the girl was gone. I do not know when she left. There is a hole in the recording, and I have looked for it, and it is not there: at one point she is against the wall and at the next she is not, and nobody in the lot turns to watch her go, because by then the four of them had something better, which was a man on the ground, a man to be sorry for and to film, which are the same activity.

The police came about nine minutes later, and nine minutes is not an accusation, it is just what it was. Two officers, and then a third in a plain jacket, a woman, who stood at the edge of the light with her hands in her pockets and looked at everything before she said anything, which is the first professional habit I have ever respected in a police officer.

The man with the phone told the story first, and he was very good, and he did not exaggerate. He said, in the flat reasonable

voice of a taxpayer, that they had been in the lot on lawful business, collecting a lawful debt, and a drunk stranger had attacked them without provocation. Then he gave them the clip, and the clip showed me, clearly, committing the only assault that could be proven with a camera, which is the assault of a fool.

One of the officers breathalysed me. I blew, and the machine made its small satisfied sound, and the officer read the number aloud without emotion, the way a nurse reads your weight. The number was high, higher than I expected, because apparently I had bought more pouches than I remembered, which is a phrase that has followed me through my life like a dog.

"She's the one being extorted," I said. "She's nineteen, there are photos, they have her ID."

The officer in the plain jacket, whose name I would learn later was Tian Tian, held my eyes for a time. "What's your name?" she said.

"Li Xiuyuan."

"Mr. Li, you're bleeding from the mouth. Do you want an ambulance?"

"Her name is Wen Xiaoyu (温小雨)," I said. "She was carrying a schoolbag, blue, she's a student."

"Where is she now?"

I looked around the lot, which was empty except for the four men, the police, and me. You could have asked me to draw her from memory and I could have, easily, but a drawing is not a witness.

"I don't know," I said.

"No," Officer Tian said. "You don't."

They could not charge me with much. My injuries were worse than his, and there was no complaint of serious harm, and the man with the phone did not want a trial, because a

trial is a room where someone reads out the shape of your business. But he wanted something, so at the station, in a small room that smelled of disinfectant and instant coffee, a young officer filled out a form and slid it across the table, and the form said that Li Xiuyuan, of no fixed employer address that mattered, had engaged in a dispute with citizens conducting lawful affairs, and had been drunk in public, and would be released with a warning, and that a complaint would be forwarded.

"Forwarded where?" I asked.

"To whoever needs to know," the officer said, which is the most honest answer I have ever received from any institution in this city.

I walked out of the station at two in the morning with two ribs cracked, one tooth broken and one loosened, my index finger swollen the colour of mulberries, and my phone buzzing in my pocket. The buzz was the platform.

It is a very polite message, and it thanks me for my service. It says that a customer complaint, in this case flagged as a safety incident, has placed my account under review, and that pending review my access to orders is suspended, and that I may submit an appeal within seven days with supporting documentation. It says that my rating has been adjusted. It does not say that I am fired, because it does not need to, because in this city suspension is a slower kind of fired, and if you appeal and win they are so sorry, and if you appeal and lose they are so sorry.

I have to explain what a suspension costs, because a rider's money is not like other money and the loss of it does not happen the way the city thinks it does.

A rider is paid per order, and the order is a small number, four yuan or five after the platform's cut, and the number is small on purpose, because the platform has learned that a

man will run ten hours for forty small numbers and will not notice that they do not add up to a life. I had been running sixty to ninety orders a day in the season before the suspension, which is neither the best nor the worst in the district, and the money went out as fast as it came in: the bike's battery swap, the phone's data, the rent for the room with the wall, the interest to Ma-ge, the pouches.

A suspension is not a raise withheld; it is the whole floor taken out from under the arithmetic at once, and the floor does not come back when the account is restored, because the rent did not pause and Ma-ge did not pause and the battery company did not pause. So for nine days I did cash runs, and cash runs are the shadow economy of this city: no rating, no insurance, no name, and a man who is hurt on a cash run is a man who fell off his own scooter on his own time, and that is what the platform says and what the law agrees.

Nine days of cash runs paid the interest and the rent and left nothing. I want that in the record, because the book has a debt in it and debts are boring and debts are the actual texture of most lives in this city. Twenty-eight thousand yuan is not a number a man like me can pay down. It is a number a man like me can only service, month after month, like a body servicing a bad tooth, until something else goes wrong and the servicing stops. That is what the suspension did. It did not ruin me. It took the margin, and the margin was the whole difference between a man who is servicing a debt and a man who is being consumed by one.

I sat down on the curb in the fog and read the message three times. My hand hurt too much to hold the phone properly, so I read it through a veil of tears that I would like to describe as pain, and it was not pain but arithmetic, the same arithmetic Old Feng had been doing in his ward, and I had now been given my own small portion of it. Here is the sum: no work, no

money; no money, Ma-ge; and Ma-ge is patient in the way wa - ter is patient. Twenty-eight thousand, and the interest is a living thing, and the principal is a wall.

And underneath the arithmetic, the other thing. The girl. She had gone small when she saw me. She had looked at me and decided, in a quarter of a second, that the drunk man was one more thing she would have to survive, and she had been right. I was supposed to be the thing that happened to her that was different. Instead I was the thing that happened to her that was the same.

A few feet away, in the gutter by the hoarding, something white caught the light. I crawled over and picked it up. It was her student card, the one the man had been reading from, dropped in the confusion or thrown away after its use was finished: a small square of laminate, a blue background, a photograph of a girl with a mouth that had not yet learned to be careful. Wen Xiaoyu. Department of Finance. Nineteen years old.

I put it in my jacket, in the pocket next to the empty pouch, and I sat back down on the curb with my broken ribs and my living interest and my wall, and I began, in the fog, to laugh, because that was the joke, and now I had gotten it, and there was no one in the whole city I could tell.

CHAPTER 3

Nobody Helps

The clinic opened at seven and I was there when the shutter went up, because I could not sleep and because I did not want to go home. The home I had was a rented room of eleven square meters above a fish market, with a shared toilet and a window that looked at a wall, and getting to it required me to climb a stair I did not want to climb while holding my ribs together. So I sat on a plastic chair outside the clinic, in the fog, and waited.

The doctor was young and tired and did not ask me what had happened, which I appreciated. He put his fingers along my ribs, and I made a sound, and he told me matter-of-factly that two were cracked and one was probably not, and that there was nothing to do but breathe shallowly and wait six weeks. He looked at my teeth, and the broken one he could smooth and the loose one he could splint, but the replacement would cost three thousand and take two visits, and I should think about it.

He looked at my finger and pushed the joint back into place with one quick motion, and the room went white, and when it came back he was taping the finger to its neighbour and telling me to keep it dry. The bill was four hundred and sixty yuan, and I paid it, because a man with a living interest understands that he must pay for the smaller things immediately.

I came out into the morning and she was sitting on the low wall across the road, waiting for me.

I knew her at once, because of the blue schoolbag and the puffer jacket that was too big for her. Her hair was badly washed, and she had been crying at some point in the last

twelve hours and had reached the stage past crying, the stage where the face is the face of someone who has signed some - thing. She stood up when she saw me and did not come closer. She looked at my face, and I could only imagine what my face looked like, and she flinched, and I realised that she had seen me before and was seeing me again and that both times I had been a piece of bad news.

"You're Li Xiuyuan," she said.

"Yes."

"Please don't say you were helping me."

We were on a city street in January, in the fog, with the shutters going up one by one and a woman boiling soy milk at a cart, and the sentence she had just said was so clean and so complete that for a moment I could not think of a single thing to put next to it.

"What?" I said.

"If you say you were helping me," she said, fast, like a lesson she had memorized on the way over, "then there's a record, and then there's a case, and then the school knows and my mother knows. And if my mother knows about the photos, she will have the heart attack she has been saving up for since my father left." She took a breath. "And my brother already took money from the station to pay them, and if there's a case he will go to them again, and that is what they want, and that is what they have wanted all along. So please, just say it was a fight. Just say you were drunk and it was about nothing. Everyone believes that. Nobody questions that."

I sat down on the wall, slowly, because of the ribs.

"Nobody questions that," I agreed.

"I'm sorry," she said, and then she said it again. "I know what you did, I saw it, I saw you take the phone, and nobody has ever done anything like that for me in my whole life. But it doesn't help me, because it helps you, and I can't

be the case. I can't be the case. Do you understand? I have three semesters left."

And there it was, the whole thing, in the mouth of a nineteen-year-old girl with a finance textbook in her bag, and she had stated it so plainly that I have never needed anyone to explain it to me since. She was not ungrateful and she was not a coward. She was doing arithmetic, and she had been doing it since the day her father borrowed money he could not repay, and she was better at it than I was, because she was sober and I was me.

"If I don't say it," I said, "then they keep doing it, to the next girl."

"I know," she said. "But I can't be the case."

I looked at her for an instant. Somewhere behind us a man was arguing with a customer about five mao, and the soy milk cart was sending up a column of steam that the fog ate immediately, the way the fog ate everything that tried to rise. I thought about my grandfather, who used to say that the reason the people of this city are so kind is that they know the fog will get them anyway, so there is no point in being careful.

"Okay," I said. "I was drunk. It was about nothing. I didn't see any girl."

She blinked at me, and for a second she looked younger than nineteen, and then she whispered, "Thank you," and turned to go.

"Where's your brother?" I said. "The one who took the money from the station. What's his name?"

She stopped, and I watched her decide whether to give me a name or to keep it. Then she did the small fast thing that people do when they have learned that names are a thing that can be taken from you: she shook her head once and walked away into the fog. The fog took her in about eight steps, and that was the last I saw of Wen Xiaoyu for eleven months.

I sat on the wall for a time. The thing I need to record here is not that I was angry, because I was not angry, not even then. What I felt was the thing I always feel when a machine works exactly as designed, which is a kind of terrible calm, the calm of a man who has been shown the shape of the box he is living in and can now, at last, stop straining against the sides. She was right, and that was the part that sat in me like a swallowed stone. She was right, and I would have done exactly the same, and so would you, and everybody knows the arithmetic, and that is the arithmetic that keeps this city standing.

The stone sat in me all day. I walked, because walking does not require any work and because I did not want to sit still with the arithmetic. I walked down through Yuzhong with my taped finger and my shallow breathing, past the escalator that goes up the hill for two yuan, past the old women selling shoes on the steps, past the tourist funicular with its queue of people in matching ponchos. None of it did the thing it usually did, which was to open in me a small door of pleasure at the sheer impossible wrongness of the city. The city was not wrong that day. The city was working, the city was eating a girl, and the city was moving on.

By evening I was at Chaotianmen, on the river steps, where the old porters gather and where I have gone every bad night of my adult life. The water was the colour of the sky and smelled of diesel and mud and something older that I have never been able to name.

The old porters on the river steps had a rule that I turned over for a year: they did not ask each other what had happened.

Uncle Tuo’ s generation had carried the city on their shoulders before the vehicles came, and they had all been broken by it in one place or another, and they had a way of sitting together that was almost entirely made of silences. A

man would arrive, and sit down on the concrete, and take a pouch out of his pocket, and hold it up, and another man would nod, and the drink would go around, and nobody would say a word about the limp or the hand or the way the man was carrying his ribs.

I did not understand it as a boy and I understand it now: they had learned that a question is a claim on another person's pain, and that in a city where everybody is damaged the only real courtesy is to let a man sit down without being asked to explain himself. That is why I went to the river to come apart. The river steps were the one place in Chongqing where I could be ruined and not be a story. The water did the talking, and the old men did the not-talking, and both of them together were the closest thing to a church that I have ever had.

Uncle Tuo was in his usual place, on a square of cardboard with his back to the railing and his feet on the next step down, watching a television. The television is not a television; it is a phone, held in a plastic mount and propped on his knee, and on the phone, always, is a recording of a recording, so blurred by transfer from phone to phone to phone that the faces have become suggestions. Tonight it was the old series, the 1985 one, and on the small screen a man in a ragged hat and a ragged robe was walking through a town square while children ran after him, singing.

"You look like someone who lost a fight," Uncle Tuo said, without looking up.

"I won it," I said. "That's the joke."

He grunted, which is his laugh, and when I sat down beside him on the concrete he passed me a pouch of gaoliang without being asked. I looked at it for a beat. I did not remember buying it, and I did not remember buying the one before it, and the truth is that the gaoliang had for some years been purchasing itself, by a process I declined to examine. I drank it

anyway, and the warmth came and did not help, which was fine, because warmth was no longer the point. The point was the set of hands it gave me to live in.

We watched the monk, and on the phone the ragged man was doing something disreputable and the town was laughing at him, and then the town was saved, or something of the town was saved, and nobody in the town understood that the saving and the disrepute were the same act.

"That man," Uncle Tuo said, "is the one your grandpa worshipped."

"He didn't worship him. He liked him."

"Same thing," Uncle Tuo said. He had been a bangbang for forty years. He had carried a table through the flood of 1981 on his head and never let anyone forget it, and he could not read a word, and he had buried a wife and two sons, and he was the wisest person I had left. "You know what the monk says in the next line, the one nobody knows?"

"Next line of what?"

"The rhyme. The famous rhyme." He spat into the water. "Everybody knows the first half: wine and meat go through the gut, and the Buddha stays in the heart. Nobody knows the second half, and I don't know it either, because I never got that far. But I will tell you something for free: a man who tells you only the easy half of a thing is a man who is selling you something."

I looked down at the river, where a barge was coming up empty and riding high, the water dark and patient around its hull. I thought about my father, who had gone into the river's economy at fifteen and had been carried out of it at forty-one. I thought about his father, who had carried other men's furniture up the same hills my whole life and had been carried down them once, at the end. This is the river that ate them, I thought, and I am sitting at its mouth drinking liquor I cannot

afford, and I have no work and no money and no girl and no god and no plan, and last night I tried to be something and the city answered me with a receipt.

I took out my phone and looked at my mother's name in the contact list: a generic photo, a Guangdong number, and a message thread in which the last five messages are all hers. How are you. Have you eaten. The weather here is cold too. Send a photo. What are you doing with your life. I pressed the call button, and the phone made its little connecting sound, and I looked at the river, and I killed the call before the first ring.

I have never been able to say why, exactly. It has something to do with the way she says my name, and something to do with the way I would have to be a person in order to answer the question she would ask, which is not are you all right but the other one, the real one, the one with no good answer: will you be all right.

The barge passed. Uncle Tuo drank. On the small blurred screen the mad monk said something I could not hear and the town laughed at him.

"They'll make a saint out of him," Uncle Tuo said. "A thousand years from now some rich man will put a gold statue of him in a mall and sell tea next to it. Mark my words."

"No," I said. "Nobody's going to do that."

He grunted, and the river went on. I drank what was in the pouch and dropped the plastic in my pocket, because I am not a litterer. I sat with the old man and watched the water until it was too dark to see, and then I got up, and my ribs reminded me I was alive, and I started walking up the hill. I did not de-cide where I was going, because deciding is a luxury and I had spent everything.

CHAPTER 4

Congee and Arhats

I woke on the floor of a hall full of arhats, and the first thing I understood was that I was not dead, which was a disappoint - ment, and the second thing I understood was that I was warm, which was a surprise.

The floor was stone and very old and worn smooth in the middle from a century of feet. I was lying on a thin mat that did not belong to me, under a blanket the colour of weak tea, and the air was close and sweet and full of smoke, and all around me, in the half-light, sat the five hundred. They are larger than people expect and less solemn. Some are laughing. Some are weeping. Some are doing things with their hands that no holy man should do.

There is one with a snake, one with a child on his shoulders, one with a belly like a wine jar, one whose face is so kind and so tired that you would trust him with your money. I lay on the floor and looked up at them and they looked back at me with their painted eyes, and none of them was surprised to see me there, which is more than I can say for any human being in my life.

I did not know how I had gotten in. I have turned it over for years and I still do not know. The temple gate is locked at night. The wall is high. I remember walking up the hill from the river with my ribs and my taped finger and my empty pouch, and I remember the fog getting thicker until the streetlights were only stains, and I remember the smell of in - cense, and it is not a smell you find on the street, and then I remember this.

I could have climbed the wall. I have climbed worse. I could have been let in by one of the old men who sleep in the court‐yard in summer. I could have simply walked in through a door that someone left open, and lain down, and been found. All of those are possible. I have never been able to choose between them, and I have stopped needing to. The city keeps its ledgers in different ink.

I was still lying there, trying to decide whether I had the strength to stand, when an old man came in with a bowl.

He was small and straight and entirely bald, and he wore the plain grey robe and the cloth shoes, and he walked the way people walk who have spent sixty years walking on stone in cloth shoes, that is to say like water finding a level. He watched me for a moment. He did not look shocked, or pleased, or pitying. He looked the way a man looks at a sparrow that has come into his kitchen.

"Sit up," he said. "If you can."

I sat up. My ribs argued, and I made a noise, and he waited without impatience while I got the noise finished. Then he handed me the bowl. It was congee, plain rice congee, no sugar, no meat, no pickles, thin and white and steaming, and I have eaten in most of the cheap kitchens of this city and I have never been given anything as good. I ate it too fast and burned my tongue, and he watched me do it without comment.

"You're the one from the video," he said.

"I don't know about any video," I said.

"Of course you don't." He folded his hands inside his sleeves. "You were singing on the radio this morning. My caretaker is deaf and even she heard it. The whole city is playing it. You are famous, Xiao Li."

"My name isn't Xiao Li."

"You look like a Xiao Li," he said, and that was when I learned his one small laugh, which he used the way a surgeon

uses a scalpel: once, and precisely, and then away. "Eat. Then sweep. The east courtyard is filthy and the novice who was supposed to do it has gone home to see his mother. You can pay for the mat with your hands."

"I don't have any money."

"I didn't ask for money." He was already turning to go. "Money is the thing this city understands. It is not the only thing. Sweep the east courtyard. Do not steal the incense. The donor box is watched."

He left. I ate the rest of the congee. Then I stood up, slowly, holding the wall, and I found the broom where he had left it, propped against the great wooden door, and I went out into the courtyard and swept.

If you have never swept an old temple courtyard in winter, I recommend it. It is not a metaphor and it is not a punishment. It is simply a set of movements that fill the whole body and leave no room for arithmetic. The broom is bound with wire and worn down on one side and the stone under it is uneven, so you learn immediately which strokes are useful and which are decoration.

The air was cold and wet and smelled of camphor and old paper and the particular dust that comes off crumbling plaster. Above me, the roofs of the temple were green-black with age, and beyond the roofs, in every direction, the towers of Jiefangbei stood in the fog like a family that had lost interest in the conversation, and the contrast was so complete that it was almost funny, and I swept, and the sweeping was the first thing in weeks that had asked nothing of me but my arm.

I do not know how long I swept. Somewhere in it, the hall bell, and two old women with matching grey hair and matching plastic baskets coming to make their rounds of the statues, touching each one on the hand; and a temple cat that watched me with the contempt of an official; and a caretaker, very old,

entirely deaf, who passed me twice and looked at my broom and corrected my grip with two gnarled fingers and no words at all, and went on. That is Chen Popo (陈婆婆). She was eighty-three then, and she had been in that temple since before the Republic, and she had decided long ago that the world was too loud and had stopped listening to it, which made her, in my opinion, the most sensible person in Chongqing.

And while I swept, the thing I had been holding down with both hands began to come up, the way it always does when the body is quiet, and I went away from the courtyard, in my head, down the stairs of the city, into the year 2006.

I was nine. The teahouse was called Shouzhuo, which means to keep to one's foolishness, which my grandfather had chosen on purpose because he thought it was funny. It was up three flights of stone steps in Huishuigou, at the top of the alley, where the stilt houses leaned out over the drop and the fog came up at night like the breath of the river. There were six tables and a kettle that had been repaired at least twice and a brass bell over the door that my grandfather rang when someone he liked came in. He had a television above the counter, a boxy grey thing with an antenna made of wire and a coathanger, and on that television, every afternoon, the mad monk.

He loved that show the way some men love liquor. He would stop in the middle of pouring tea and stand with the pot in the air and watch, and the customers would watch too, because the whole alley watched, and when the monk did something disreputable the alley would roar, and when the monk healed a blind man by blowing on his eyes the alley would go quiet, and my grandfather would look over at me and say, without ever looking directly at me, which was how he said everything that mattered: "See? The rule is for keeping the rule. Not for keeping the men."

The demolition came in the winter of 2006. The notice went up on the wall of the neighborhood office, and then the men went up with white paint and painted numbers on the doors, and the numbers were the numbers of the order in which the houses would die. Huishuigou resisted. Not like a riot; like a stubbornness. The old women sat in the mouth of the alley on plastic stools and would not move.

My grandfather pasted paper over the windows and put out a stool of his own and kept pouring tea, as if the alley could be defended with tea. On the second day of the standoff he was in the teahouse at the counter, and the television was on, and the door was open, and the paper was still on the windows, and the fog came in through the door because there was no longer anyone to keep it out, and he put down the pot, and he put his hand on the counter, and he went down.

I was not there. This is the part I have to write honestly. I was not there. My mother had taken me to her sister's that week, because she had a premonition, or a plan, or a head-ache, and so I did not watch my grandfather fall. I heard it. My aunt's telephone, and her face, and the drive back up through the fog, and the alley full of people and the teahouse full of women and the television still on over the counter with the monk on it, doing something disreputable, and the whole alley that used to roar going quiet instead. They carried him out on a door. The paper was still on the windows. It still had the characters for tea on it.

I have never grieved him. I want to write that down. I was nine, and then I was ten, and I was a boy in a city that was being taken apart and sold piece by piece, and nobody sat me down and said, your grandfather is dead and here is how you should feel. So I did what you do when nobody tells you how to feel: I put him in a bottle, and I put the bottle in my chest, and I have been drinking from it, slowly, for nineteen years, which

is a way of saying that I never learned to grieve him at all. I only learned to carry him.

I came back to myself in the courtyard with my hands on the broom, and the light had changed, and I had been standing still for a while, and my face was wet, and the deaf caretaker was standing ten feet away watching me with her head on one side, and when she saw that I had come back she nodded, once, and went away, which is the kindest thing anyone has ever done for me in a temple.

That night I was allowed to sleep in the hall again. The abbot said nothing about it. He gave me another bowl of congee and a piece of steamed bread and asked me, in passing, whether I had a job, and I said I was between orders, and he said, "Between orders. That is a good way to say unemployed. I will remember it for the funeral."

At about three in the morning I woke with a fever.

I know it was a fever, because it came with the sweats and the deep cold and the shaking, and because I had slept on stone in January with cracked ribs and a body full of gaoliang and no food since the congee. There is no mystery in it. I am putting that down first, before anything else, the way a witness is supposed to. And in the fever, among the five hundred, I saw the beggar.

He was sitting between two arhats at the far end of the hall, cross-legged, with his back against the red pillar, and he was laughing — not at me, and not at anything I could see, but at something a long way off, some joke that had been going on for a thousand years and that he had decided was finally funny. He wore a ragged robe and a ragged hat and he was barefoot, though the floor was stone and cold. He had a wine gourd in his left hand and a broken fan in his right, and his face was filthy, and the laugh was the most beautiful thing in the room. He studied me for a time. Then he said something,

and I could not hear it, because in the fever I was very far away, and I have never been able to recover the words.

I have turned that night over more than any other night of my life, and here is my honest position, which I offer you so that you can decide for yourself, because I have no way to prove it and no one ever filmed it. A man with a fever sees things. The abbot's congee was thin and I had not eaten in two days. The incense in that hall is strong, and the five hundred arhats are painted to look like they are moving when the lamplight is low, and it was the anniversary of my grandfather's fall, a date the body remembers even when the mind will not, and I had spent the whole day digging him up out of the place where I had buried him.

So: the beggar was a fever, and a memory, and an ache, and a statue that happened to have a face that looked merry. That is one reading. I am not going to tell you it is the wrong one. I have told you that I was drunk, and that I was sick, and that I was grieving, and if that is enough to explain a laughing man in a temple, then let it explain him.

I woke at dawn, cold and clear and extraordinarily awake. The hall was empty except for the statues and a novice sweeping at the far end. My fever was gone. And lying on the mat beside my head, where it had not been when I went to sleep, was a fan.

It was a palm-leaf fan, the old kind, the kind you see in the hands of statues and street vendors and nobody else. It had been broken once across the middle and mended badly with a strip of cloth, and then broken again, and the handle was smooth from hands that were not mine. It was exactly the kind of thing that ends up in a temple's donation pile, with the other offerings, the old spectacles and the single gloves and the photographs of people who did not come back. I looked at it for a long moment.

I did not ask the novice about it. I did not ask the abbot. I have never asked anyone. I picked it up, and I put it in the inside pocket of my jacket, next to Wen Xiaoyu's student card and the empty pouch, and I went out to sweep the courtyard, and the deaf caretaker watched me from the doorway, and nodded, once, as if I had agreed to something.

I would like to tell you that I knew, that morning, what it meant, that the spirit of the mad monk had come to me in the arhat hall and handed me a broken fan. But if I told you that you should put this book down, because I would be lying to you, and I have promised not to. What I knew was simpler and stranger.

I knew that I had no job, no money, no plan, and no god, that I owed a man twenty-eight thousand yuan and a girl had told me to keep quiet, and that a broken fan is not a weapon and not a sign. It is only a thing you can hold. But it fit my hand, and it was the first thing in a long time that had been left for me on purpose, by someone, somewhere, for reasons I could not check.

Outside the gate, Jiefangbei was going to work. The fog was up, and men in ties were hurrying past the temple wall with their phones out, and the noodle shops were loud, and no one looked at me, which was what I wanted, and also, I was beginning to understand, not what I wanted at all.

CHAPTER 5

The First Stumble

The suspension lasted nine days, and I did not spend them well.

There is a whole economy in this city that runs underneath the app, and I had been a part of it for years without ever having to depend on it. It works like this. Every restaurant that has ever been delisted, fined, or refused a contract still has customers, and the platform will not carry a shop it does not control, so the shop keeps a list of riders it trusts and the rider keeps a list of shops that pay in cash, and the whole thing runs on WeChat and memory and a red envelope at the end of the night. There is no rating and no insurance and no record, and the riders who live in it are the ones the platform has already chewed and spat out: the ones with a bad rating, the ones with a suspension, the ones who got old, the ones who made an enemy of a customer. We were invisible in exactly the way the city prefers. A man with no account is a man who does not exist, and a man who does not exist can be paid less and can be hurt more and will never once appear in a platform's quarterly report, and that is not a bug. It is the design.

Nobody at the platform ever met me. That is not a complaint; it is a description of the job. The app knew my rating, my speed, my acceptance rate, and the exact minute I went offline, and it did not know my name, and it did not need to, because a name is a thing that has to be paid for and a number is free. I had been a number for four years. I was about to become a story, and the story was also, in the end, a kind of number, and I did not know that yet.

For nine days I did cash runs for a noodle shop on the lower road, eighteen yuan a trip. It was not enough to live on and it was not enough to pay Ma-ge, but it kept me on the street, and the street was the only place I was able to breathe, because the room with the wall had begun to feel like a place I was being held.

I was still broken. The ribs were healing the way cracked ribs heal, that is to say slowly and with complaints, and I had developed a way of getting on and off the scooter that involved no twisting of the torso at all. My finger stayed taped. My mouth tasted of the broken tooth, a small permanent bitter‐ness, like a coin under the tongue. I had stopped looking at my own face in the phone screen when I checked the orders, and that is a thing you do without noticing, and which I would recommend to no one.

The girl's student card was still in my jacket. I had not decided what to do with it, and I had not thrown it away. Some nights I took it out and looked at the photograph. The girl in it was still nineteen and still did not know that her mouth would have to learn to be careful. Then I would put it back in the pocket next to the empty pouch and lie on the bed and do arithmetic.

On the fourth day of the suspension I was at the battery-swap station on the lower road when a rider I had known for years pulled in beside me. His name was Zhou. He had a face like a friendly shovel and six hundred yuan of my money in his pocket from an old hospital bill, and he looked at my hand and then at my face and said nothing about either.

"You're the one from the video," he said.

"Everybody's the one from the video."

"No," he said. "You're the one. I've watched it nine times. My wife watches it. My mother-in-law watches it and cries, and she never cries, and my wife says it's because

she's from over the river and remembers the old days." He unplugged his battery and stood there with it in his hand. "Why'd you do it?"

"I was drunk."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the answer I have."

Zhou looked at me for a moment, and then he did the thing that riders do, which is he pulled out his phone and showed me the clip. I watched myself bow to four men in a back yard while the caption underneath called me a saint. The sound was tinny and the laughing in it was louder than I remembered. "The thing I can't figure out," Zhou said, "is what you thought you were doing. You're a terrible fighter. Anybody who's ever been in a fight can see that in the first second. So either you're the bravest man in Chongqing, or you're an idiot, and I've known you four years, so I know which one it is."

"Maybe both."

"Maybe." He put the battery in his bike and swung a leg over it. "Either way, be careful. Yesterday a man I didn't know asked me where you live. I told him I didn't know, because I don't. But you should be careful."

He rode away before I could ask what the man looked like.

On the ninth day I saw her again.

It was late afternoon and I was cutting through the back of a residential compound on a cash run, down the lane behind the vegetable market where the old men play cards on a board balanced on two stools. The lane comes out at the side of a building that used to be a factory office and is now a training school. There is a small paved yard in front of it with a broken basketball hoop, and in that yard the same four men had Wen Xiaoyu against the wall.

I want to be honest about what I felt when I saw them, because it was not the thing a better man would have felt. The first thing was fear, pure and animal, the memory of the shoe on my hand. The second thing was shame, because the first thing had been fear. And the third thing, arriving after the other two had finished, was something I had not felt in a long time and did not have a name for. It was the feeling of someone who has been handed a second copy of an examination he has already failed.

I stood at the mouth of the lane and watched for a time. The man with the good jacket was not there, but the leather-jacket one was, and there was a new one, and they had the girl's bag open on the ground and were going through it. One of them was reading from her phone with the same cheerful patience as before. She was not crying. That was the thing that changed everything. She was not crying, and she was not small, and she was looking at them the way you look at a dog you have decided you will not run from.

And I realised, standing there with my ribs and my taped finger and her student card in my pocket, that if I walked into that yard and tried to be a fellow who fights, they would put me on the ground in fifteen seconds. It would cost her, not me, because they would remember her as the girl with the man who came. I had already learned that lesson at the price of two ribs and a tooth, and I was not going to pay it twice.

So I did something else. I do not know whether I decided it, exactly, or whether my body, which had been drinking gaoliang for eleven years, simply recognized the one weapon it had. I took out the pouch and drank what was in it, standing in the mouth of the lane. Then I took out the broken palm-leaf fan, and I opened it, and I walked into the yard singing.

The song is not really a song. It is a piece of a song, the four words everyone in this city knows from the old television

series, the words that are almost a joke by now because everybody's grandfather sang them badly. I sang them very loudly and very badly. I bowed to the men, one after the other, the deep bow of a servant, and then I stumbled over nothing and went down on one knee, and got up, and bowed again.

They did not know what to do with me, and that was the entire operation, if it can be called an operation. A man who fights you, you know how to fight. Someone who is already beaten, you know how to beat. But a person who bows to you and sings, in a fan and a yellow jacket, is not a problem you have a procedure for. The leather-jacket one told me to get lost, and I bowed to him. The new one laughed, and I bowed to him too, and then I sang louder, and by then two of them had their phones out, filming, because this was funny, and a funny thing that happens to someone else is the best thing in the world.

The girl picked up her bag and walked out of the yard. Nobody stopped her. That is the part I want you to keep if you keep nothing else. The men did not stop her, not because they were good, but because they had something better to film. I had made myself the object, and the object was me, and she walked past me on her way out and looked at me for one second, and I have never been able to decide what was in that look, and I have decided that I do not get to decide.

When they were bored of me they told me again to get lost, and this time I went, still singing, bowing backward out of the yard like a courtier leaving an emperor. I made it to the lane behind the market and about thirty meters down it before my body stopped cooperating. I leaned against the wall and was sick. Then I stood there in the cold, in the smell of the vegetable market and my own stomach, and I felt a warmth running down my leg, and I realized, with a distant, almost professional interest, that I had wet myself. I could not tell whether it was from the drinking or the fear. It did not matter, because

either way I was a grown man standing in a wet trouser leg behind a market at the age of twenty-eight.

I went home and washed and slept. I did not tell anyone. I did not know that anything had happened at all, in the way that matters. As far as I was concerned, I had made a fool of myself in front of four men in order to let a girl walk away, and the ledger of my life was unchanged, and the next day I would do cash runs and eat noodles and owe Ma-ge twenty-eight thousand yuan, and that would be Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday forever.

The next morning I went to the temple, because the temple was the only place I could sit without being looked at, and be - cause I wanted to sweep something that was not my own floor. The abbot was in the east courtyard with the congee pot. He had a phone in his sleeve, which I had never seen before, and he was watching the video with the sound off.

"You've seen it," I said.

"The whole city has seen it. The novice saw it and laughed until he cried. The caretaker saw it and did not hear it, it is the only sensible way to watch anything." He put the phone away. "You are famous for falling down."

"I was helping a girl."

"You were helping a girl by falling down." He ladled the congee and handed me a bowl. "That is not nothing. Most people would rather keep their feet than help a girl. But do not confuse the fall with the help."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is who it belongs to," he said. "The fall belongs to the crowd. The help belongs to the girl. If you spend the rest of your life trying to own the crowd, you will lose the girl and the crowd both."

Then he told me to sweep, and I swept.

It was Yingtao-jiang who told me the rest, though she did not tell me; she told the city, and the city told me, which is how these things work now.

I was in a convenience store two nights later, buying a pouch of gaoliang and a packet of instant noodles, and a young couple were at the counter watching a phone together with the sound up. I did not pay attention at first, because people watch phones everywhere. Then I heard four words of a song, sung badly, and I looked up. On the small screen a man in a yellow jacket was bowing to four men in a back yard, and falling down, and getting up, and the caption underneath said some - thing about a drunk and a collection and the phrase Shancheng Ji Gong, which I had heard all my life in reference to an old monk and had never once heard in reference to a living person.

I paid for the noodles and the pouch and went outside. It had begun, the way winter rain begins in this city, not as weather but as a lowering, and the fog was full of the lights of the road, and every person on the pavement had a phone, and each phone had a small bright square in it. I stood there for a minute, in the rain, holding a bag with my dinner in it, and I came to see that something had happened to me.

The couple came out of the store a minute later, and the girl was still laughing. She said to the boy, "Come on, let's go, it's just some drunk," and they went past me into the fog without looking at me, and I stood exactly where I was, in the middle of the pavement, and no one in the whole crowd looked at me at all.

CHAPTER 6

Famous for Nothing

For about two weeks I was the most famous person in a city of thirty million, and I need to describe what that is actually like, because it is not what anyone imagines and because I would not wish it on an enemy.

Zhou found me again in the third week, at the battery station, and he had changed his mind about something.

"You're not an idiot," he said.

"Thanks."

"I've been thinking about it. An idiot doesn't last four years on the platform. So you're something else." He plugged in his battery. "The thing is, my wife wants to know what you are. She's been watching the videos. She thinks you're a saint. I told her, I know this guy, he's not a saint, he eats noodles standing up. And she said, that's what a saint is. Then she made me bring you this."

He produced a plastic container, and in the container was a bowl of soup, still warm, because he had driven it across the district in an insulated bag.

"Who made it?"

"She did. I don't cook." He looked embarrassed. "She wants to know if you saved the girl."

I looked at the soup. "I don't know if I saved her."

"So she's not saved."

"I don't know if she's saved. I don't know where she is. I don't even know if she's alive." I said it flatly, because it was the truth, and because he had driven the soup across the district and I did not want to pay for it with a lie. "I made

some men laugh for two minutes so that a girl could walk out of a yard. That's all I did. Nobody's saved."

Zhou was quiet for a moment. Then he put the lid back on the soup and said, "Okay. Then I won't tell my wife."

"Tell her the soup was good."

"It's not for you anymore."

"Tell her it was good anyway."

He rode off, and I did not eat the soup, because he had taken it with him, and I have turned over that exchange for a year. It was the first time anyone in this city had offered me a kindness and then been honest about not wanting the story back. That is the price of being a folk hero. Everyone brings you soup. Everyone wants to know whether you saved her. The answer is always the same, and nobody wants it.

Let me describe how the fame worked mechanically, because the mechanics are the moral of the chapter.

By the third week there was a rider in Chenjiagang dressed as me and charging tourists for photographs, and a hotpot restaurant in Jiefangbei selling a "Ji Gong set" (cabbage, tofu, free congee), and a barber in Shapingba offering a "Ji Gong cut," which was, as far as I could tell, a bowl cut with a razor nick.

I went to the barber as a joke. I want that on the record. I sat down and asked for the Ji Gong cut, and the boy looked at me for a long time and said, "You don't want the Ji Gong cut."

"Why not?"

"Because you have the face for it," he said, "and that's the problem. People will think you're serious."

I did not get the haircut. It was the only piece of good advice I got all year.

A clip does not spread because it is good. A clip spreads because it fits a slot that the city has been holding open without knowing it. That year the slot was the slot marked

good man, and the city had been starving for it, because the year had produced nothing but stories about people who did not help: the old man who was sued for chasing a thief, the woman who was blamed for a fall, the crowd that filmed a murder. So when a drunk in a yellow jacket fell down in an al - ley, the clip did not need to be edited into a hero, because the slot did the editing. The platforms did the rest.

The algorithm does not know what a hero is; it only knows what holds a view, and what holds a view is a thing that con - firms what a person already feels. So the clip went out to the people who felt that the city had gotten cruel, and the people who felt that the city had gotten cruel shared it, and the shar - ing made more people feel that the city had gotten cruel, and the feeling and the sharing fed each other for two weeks and made a folk saint out of a man who could not keep a job. That is the machine. It is not a lie and it is not a truth. It is a mirror with an engine, and the engine runs on whatever the city is missing, and that year the city was missing the idea that anyone would ever help.

The first thing is that nothing changes. You wake up in the same room and the wall is still there and the fish market still smells the same at five in the morning, and the water is still cold, and you still owe the same money. The second thing is that everything changes, because now the wall has a picture of you on it. The noodle shop on the lower road put my face on a laminated sign and hung it by the door, and under the face the sign said Shancheng Ji Gong is a regular here. The owner, who had paid me eighteen yuan a run for nine days and had never once asked my name, began introducing me to customers as his oldest friend.

A hotpot restaurant near Jiefangbei started selling something called the Ji Gong set. It was the cheapest veget - ables and a bowl of free congee. The waiter would tell tourists

the story of the drunk monk who saved a girl, and most of the story was wrong, and one detail of it was true, and I could never decide which was worse.

People filmed me, and that was the real change. I would be waiting at a light with a bag of noodles in the box, and I would feel the small cold eye of a phone on the side of my face. I would turn, and there would be a stranger, a student or an auntie or a man in an office jacket, not even pretending to hide it, filming me the way you film a monument. Some of them asked me to sing. Some asked me to do the bow. A group of students at Chaotianmen asked me to sing and then tipped me fifty yuan between them, and I took it, because I owed Ma-ge and because refusing would have been a kind of performance too. I have turned that fifty yuan over more than almost anything else that happened that winter.

The platform reinstated me in the second week. The message was warmer than the suspension message and just as airtight. It said that my account had been reviewed and restored, that a customer complaint had been resolved with no further action, and that I was valued. It did not mention the video, and it did not have to, because the video was the reason. I understood, with a clarity that I found almost restful, that the platform had suspended me for being a liability and restored me for being an asset, and that the difference between the two was not anything I had done or refrained from doing. The difference was whether the city had decided to like me yet.

The rating went from 4.62 to 4.71 in four days, which I had spent four years failing to achieve.

On the fifth day a woman from the platform called me. She was very pleasant and very fast, and she used the word empowerment the way other people use the word and.

"Mr. Li," she said, "I'm calling because your account has been flagged as a high-visibility asset, and we have partners who would be interested in a collaboration."

"What does that mean?"

"It means your story has value," she said, and I could hear her smiling. "There's a cultural company that's made an inquiry. Something to do with a charitable brand and a holiday campaign. They'd like to meet you, and they asked specifically for you."

"Who are they?"

"I'd rather not put the name in a message. They're very serious people, very respectable." A pause, the sound of a keyboard. "Would you be open to a meeting? It could change things for you, Mr. Li. It could change a lot of things."

I was standing outside a mall in the rain with a bag of cold noodles and a hole in my tooth. I said I would think about it, which in my mouth means no. I did not ask the name of the company. I have since learned the name, and I have since learned what the meeting would have been, and I need to record here that on that day I had a door held open for me and I did not walk through it, and that I did it out of nothing better than suspicion, and that it is the closest I ever came to being saved in a way that would have cost me everything.

Ma-ge came to see me the next evening, which was not a coincidence.

He does not usually come himself, because he has men for the small accounts, and for four years I had been a small account. But that night he was waiting outside my building in the fish-market lane with a plastic bag of oranges, which is his way of saying that this is a friendly visit, and if you believe that, you have never been friendly with Ma-ge. He is a soft man with a soft face and a gold ring on one finger, and he has never in his life raised his hand to me. I am more afraid of him than of

any of the men with knives, because he is patient and because he keeps a book.

"You're famous," he said, and offered me an orange.

"No."

"You're on my mother's phone. My mother is eighty-one and she thinks you're a saint." He peeled his own orange with his thumbnail. "Do you know what happens to a man who becomes public, Xiao Li?"

"I don't."

"His debts become public," he said, and ate a segment. "Not the amount, the existence. Right now you owe me twenty-eight thousand, and that is between us and my book. But if you become a thing people look at, then people start looking at you. Somebody asks how a saint owes a man like me twenty-eight thousand. Somebody asks what else he owes. Then it stops being between us." He watched me with his soft eyes. "I have no problem with you being a saint. I have a problem with you being a saint that I cannot find."

I said nothing, and he ate another segment and said the thing he had come to say, which was the only real sentence of the visit.

"Stay out of other people's business. Whatever you're doing. The collection world has men in it who are above both of us, and they have noticed you. I am asking you, for the sake of a small debt I have carried for four years, to go back to delivering noodles."

He left me the oranges. I ate one on the stairs and could not taste it.

The next week I tried to find Wen Xiaoyu. I told myself I did it out of courage. The truth is that I did it because a name on a card in my pocket had begun to feel like a stone in a shoe, and because I had been given a small, undeserved crowd, and I

thought, in the way of someone who has begun to believe his own advertisement, that a crowd might be useful.

So I went to her campus and stood at the gate in my yellow jacket like a man delivering something, and I asked at the department office for a student named Wen Xiaoyu. The woman behind the glass looked at me the way you look at a stain.

"She's not here," she said.

"Where is she?"

"Withdrawn."

"Can you tell me when?"

"End of last term." She had already turned back to her screen. "Her file went to the district. I can't tell you anything else. It's not permitted."

"Who would know?"

"Her family. Her teacher. The district. Not me." She glanced up once more, and something in my face must have moved her, because she lowered her voice and said, "Look, I remember her. She was quiet, and she was always in the library. And then one day she wasn't, and the paperwork just said withdrawn. That's all I have, and that's all anyone here has."

I went to the address on the card. It was a rented room above a hardware shop in Jiulongpo, and the door was answered by a woman of about fifty who had the girl's eyes and no interest in me at all. When I said her daughter's name she told me to leave. When I said I was the one from the video she studied me for a time, and then she closed the door in my face, which I have come to understand was the only honest answer available to her.

I should have stopped there, and I did not.

One of the girls who shared a major with Wen Xiaoyu spoke to me in the corridor of the canteen. She had the flat casualness of a student talking about a peer who had done well.

"She went southeast for a job," she said. "Some company. The salary was good. She was going to pay off her father's debt in a year."

"Which company?"

"I don't know. She posted a photo from a high-rise. Nice apartment. And then she stopped posting." The girl shrugged and said, "That's normal, though. People go quiet when they start working."

"What was the company called?"

She thought about it and said a name I did not recognize, and I am ashamed to tell you that I did not write it down, because at the time it sounded like every other company name in this country, a string of good words strung together to sound like a future, and because I did not yet understand that I was holding a thread.

Her brother worked the night shift at a delivery station on the west side. His name was Wen Xiaoyang, and he was twenty-two, and he had done what she had done, which was to take the family's debt onto himself, and he was known at the station as a hard worker and a bad sleeper. I did not go to the station. I stood at the gate of my own life for a minute, on the pavement in the fog, with a name and a card and no plan, and the crowd that had made me famous walked past me on both sides without looking. That is the other thing about being famous. The more people know you, the fewer people see you.

That night I did a run out to Nan'an, and on the way back I passed a hotpot restaurant in the neon. There in the window was a poster of a man in a yellow jacket with a broken fan, holding a piece of tofu, smiling for a photograph I had never posed for. Underneath the picture was a price. I stood in the street and looked at it for a while, and I had become a set menu. The city had taken the worst night of my life and turned it into a thing you could order with a side of beer, and the

money went somewhere that was not me, and the only person who had been saved was the girl, and I did not even know whether she was alive.

CHAPTER 7

The Broken Finger

The lesson came on a Saturday, in the room above the laundry, and it was not Ma-ge who gave it.

Ma-ge's office is above his laundry, on the third floor of a building with a stairwell that smells permanently of steam and bleach. There is a desk and a sofa with a rip in the seat and a wall calendar from a bank and a safe whose door does not close flush. There is a laundry machine that has been running at every hour of every day I have ever visited, since the first time I borrowed from him four years ago, and I have come to believe the machine is not washing anything; it is the sound of Ma-ge thinking. On the desk there is a ledger, and the ledger is a school exercise book, the same kind of book the girl carried, and inside it are the names of about two hundred people who owe Ma-ge money, in the same neat hand, with the same small notes in the margin: promised Friday, wife works at the hospital, has a scooter, can sell, talk to mother.

Two hundred of my neighbors, in a schoolbook, with their lives reduced to one point of leverage each. I had never seen the whole book before that day, and what it taught me is that cruelty in this city is not a passion; it is a filing system. A man does not need to hate you to put you in a school exercise book and write down what you love. He only needs a column for it.

I had been expecting it for a week, the way you expect weather. I had not paid the interest in January, because I had been suspended, and I had not paid it in February either, be - cause I had been famous and famous does not pay interest. So when the two men came for me at the noodle shop and said that Ma-ge wanted to see me, I put down the bowl and went,

because there is no version of not going that ends well for a man who owes what I owed.

He was not alone, because there was a third man, sitting on the sofa with his hands between his knees. I had never seen him before and I have not seen him since. He had the flat face and the patient hands of a man who does one thing. Ma-ge did not introduce him, but sat behind the desk and peeled an or - ange.

"Xiao Li," he said. "Sit down."

I sat down.

"I asked you a favor," he said. "I asked you to keep a small profile. Did I ask you that?"

"You asked me."

"And what did you do?"

"I kept looking."

"You kept looking." He put a segment of orange in his mouth and chewed it slowly. "I am disappointed. I want you to know that. This is not business. This is disappointment. The men above me asked for something, and I could not refuse them, and I am sorry."

"I know you are."

"That is the worst part," Ma-ge said. "That you know I am sorry. Someone who is sorry and does it anyway is the whole city in one person."

The flat-faced man stood up and took my left hand and turned it over. I realised what was going to happen about a second before it happened. I did not resist, and I want to be very clear about that. There was no one holding my shoulders. I could have pulled my hand away. I could have run down the three flights of stairs into a street full of people, and I did not, because some part of me had decided years ago that I was a man these things happened to, and a man these things

happened to does not run from the thing that was always going to happen.

He put my index finger across the edge of the desk and broke it with the heel of his hand. It was the same finger that had been dislocated in January, and the joint had not finished healing, and the sound was small and wet, and the pain came up my arm like a white light and stayed there. I made a noise and sat down on the floor. Ma-ge watched me from behind the desk with the orange in his hand, and the laundry machine went on turning.

"Be careful with your hands," he said. "A rider needs his hands."

He gave me two hundred yuan for a taxi and the name of a bonesetter in the old town, and I took the money and the name and went down the stairs.

I did not go to the bonesetter. I have never gone back to a bonesetter in my life. I went to a public clinic, and when my turn came the doctor looked at the finger and then at me.

"How did you do this?"

"Door."

"A door." He turned the finger gently, and I made another noise. "Doors don't break an index finger at the middle joint in a straight line. A hammer does that. Or a desk."

"I caught it in a machine."

"Sure." He wrote something on a pad. "I can splint it. It will heal crooked. In cold weather it will ache for the rest of your life. If you want it straight, it's surgery, it's four thousand yuan, and you'll lose work for a month."

"I'll take the splint."

"That's what I thought." He watched me for a moment, the way doctors look at men who lie to them, without judgment, because they have heard worse. "Whoever did it, they wanted you to remember it. That's the only reason to break

that finger and not another one. They wanted you to see it every day."

I waited four hours, and I got the splint and a lecture, and the finger has never been straight since. It sits at an angle now, bent slightly toward the middle finger, like a man standing in a doorway. In cold weather the joint aches, and I am telling you this not because it is dramatic, but because of what it did to the score I keep with the world.

Before the finger, I was a man who had been hurt by strangers. After the finger, I was a man who had allowed him‐self to be hurt, in a room, with his eyes open, by arrangement, and there is no comparison between those two things. The strangers were weather; Ma-ge was a choice. I had made it, and I would make it again, and I knew it.

The finger cost me three weeks of work and some part of my ability to hold the scooter bar in the rain. It cost me something else I have not been able to name until I write it here, which is the last of my belief that the city was doing things to me. After the finger I could no longer tell myself that I was the kind of man things happen to. I was the kind of man who walks to the room and puts his hand on the desk.

I did not go to the temple for nine days. When I finally went back it was because I had nowhere else to sit that was warm and honest, and because the abbot's congee was the only thing I had eaten in a while that did not taste of the coin under my tongue.

He was in the east courtyard, pruning something that was not a bonsai and not a shrub but some third thing that had survived the demolition of the neighborhood around the temple. He looked at my hand and then at my face and then at my hand again.

"You stopped sweeping," he said.

"I've been working."

"You have a new finger," he said. "Everyone can see it." He went back to the pruning. "Sweep anyway. The courtyard does not care what you owe."

So I swept. And it was while I was sweeping, two days later, that I failed the test the whole book has been setting me.

It was evening and I was walking home from the temple, through the night market on the lower road, where the vendors set up their griddles and the smoke goes up in columns and every third person is holding food. There was a commotion ahead of me, the kind this city produces constantly. A crowd had formed a loose ring around something, and I pushed in to see, because that is what you do, because the ring is the only television that has ever mattered in this city.

Inside the ring was an old man on the ground and a young man standing over him. The young man had a plastic bag and the old man had a plastic bag, and the bags had collided, or the old man had fallen, or the young man had pushed him. The story was already being told six different ways by six different bystanders, and none of them agreed.

"He walked into me," the young man said. His voice was high and frightened. "I swear, he walked into me. Everybody saw."

"You bumped him," a woman said. "I saw you bump him."

"I didn't touch him!"

"Then why is he on the ground?"

"Because he's doing this! This is what they do! This is pengci!"

"Don't say that word," someone said. "You don't know that word."

The old man was holding his wrist and saying that the young man had knocked him down. The young man was say-

ing that the old man had walked into him on purpose. The word pengci had already been said out loud by at least three people, and the ring was swaying back and forth the way a ring does when it has not decided whom it is going to punish.

I stood at the edge of it with my splint and my broken finger and Wen Xiaoyu' s student card in my pocket, and I did nothing. I did not step in, and I did not offer to be a witness. I did not take out my phone. I watched an old man on the ground and a young man with his fists at his sides, and I did the arithmetic I had learned from a nineteen-year-old girl on a wall. The arithmetic said: if you step in, you become the story. If you become the story, you become the suspect. If you become the suspect, you lose the little you have.

So I stood there, and I did nothing, and eventually a man in a delivery uniform did step in and separated them. The crowd dispersed, the old man got up, and the young man walked away. I went home and lay on the bed and looked at the ceiling for a while.

The guilt was louder than the finger. I want to write that sentence plainly, because it is the true one. I had been beaten, and suspended, and re-broken, and made into a set menu, and none of it had touched the place where I live. But standing at the edge of that ring and doing nothing, which is the thing I had done every day for my whole life and which had never once cost me anything, now felt like a coin taken out of my chest. I had seen the machine from the inside, and I had joined it. I had become the crowd in the video. I had become every person who ever stepped over me in an alley.

I went to the temple the next morning before the gate was open and sat on the step with my broom. The abbot came out with the congee pot and found me there, and he did not ask what was wrong, because he never asked what was wrong. He ladled out two bowls and sat down on the step beside me,

which he had never done before, and for a time neither of us said anything.

"You know the rhyme," he said at last.

"Wine and meat pass through the gut, and the Buddha stays in the heart."

"That is the whole rhyme that people say," he said, and drank his congee. "It is a very comfortable rhyme. It lets a man do anything he likes and call it holy. I have watched a hundred men use it that way. I have used it that way myself."

"There's more of it," I said. "The old men at the river say there's a second half that nobody remembers."

"There is a second half," the abbot said. He looked out at the courtyard, at the wet stone and the green roofs and the towers beyond, and he did not say the second half, and he did not say why. He finished his congee and stood up and went back inside. I sat on the step with my cold bowl and my crooked finger, and I came to see, in a way I could not have explained, that he had just told me everything he intended to tell me, and that the rest was mine to find.

I went home and took the broken fan out of the drawer where I had been keeping it, beside the empty pouches and the wedding invitation. I opened it and looked at it for a minute. It was a piece of junk, a palm-leaf fan with a wire-bound handle and a tear down the middle that had been mended twice with cloth and once, badly, with what looked like fishing line. It had nothing to do with the mad monk and nothing to do with the video and nothing to do with any saint. It fit my hand, and that was all it did.

I put it in my jacket, on purpose, for the first time. Not be - cause I had decided to be a hero, and not because I believed in anything, but because I had stood at the edge of a ring and done nothing, and because the man who did nothing was a man I could not stand to be one more day. That is my whole

reasoning. It is not noble; it is barely even a reason. But it was mine, and I have not put the fan down since.

CHAPTER 8

The Cableway

The Yangtze cableway was built for tourists, but before it was a tourist thing it was just a way across the river, and there are still people in this city who use it the way you use a bus, without thinking about the view. I had used it maybe forty times in my life, mostly to carry food to the west bank when the bridge was stopped and the food would not survive the detour, and I had long ago stopped noticing that the floor of it moved and the river underneath was the colour of old metal and that somewhere below the wire there was nothing but the water that had carried my father.

I was on the west platform that evening in late February, with a bag of hotpot broth strapped in the box and my fan in my jacket, because a shop in Nan'an had ordered from a kitchen in Yuzhong and paid me cash to beat the bridge traffic. The fog was down again, the low grey fog that sits on the river like a lid, and the cars were coming in and going out with their windows blind, and the platform was almost empty because no one rides the cableway in weather that has eaten the view.

I saw the boy because I was looking for the boy. That is the truth of it, and I have never dressed it up. I had spent three weeks half-looking for Wen Xiaoyang, the brother, the night-shift worker with the bad sleep, and I had found him the way you find people in this city, by asking the delivery network. A rider at the west station had told me he was working a cash run down to the cableway, and that he had been nervous all week, and that two men had been asking about him. So when I saw the two men walk him onto the platform with one hand

each on his arms, I did not need to be told what I was looking at.

He was smaller than his sister. In the video of my own fail - ure I had built him in my head as a big man, but he was thin and hunched, with the face of a boy who had not slept in a week. The two men were the leather-jacket one from the yard and a second man I had seen with Ma-ge, and they were not hurrying him, and they were not hurting him, and that was the most frightening thing about them, because it meant they had done this enough times for it to be boring.

The car came in, and it holds a surprising number of people if the people are Chinese and the weather is bad. The two men walked the boy into it and stood him against the far window, and I got on behind them, because there was nothing else to do, and because the alternative was to watch the car leave with him in it and then go home and lie on the bed and do arith - metic. The doors closed, and the cable took up the weight. And then there was no exit for any of us until the far bank, which is four minutes on a good day and longer when the fog makes the operator cautious, and the fog that evening was cautious.

I want to tell you that I had a plan. I did not have a plan; what I had was a fan, a bag of hotpot broth, crooked fingers, and the memory of a room above a laundry. I stood by the door and watched the two men and the boy, and the few other pas - sengers watched the fog and their phones, and the car swayed out over the water, and the water below was so much the col - our of the sky that it stopped being water, and the city went soft and far away, first one bank and then the other, and we were suspended over nothing with the doors shut.

The leather-jacket man saw me about thirty seconds in. I watched him place my face, and I watched him decide that I was not a problem, which was the correct assessment and also,

that evening, the wrong one. He said something to his partner and the partner laughed.

"You again," the leather-jacket man said.

"Me again."

"You're like a fungus." He shifted his weight and said, "What do you want?"

"Nothing," I said. "I'm going to Nan'an. Same as you."

"You're not going to Nan'an. Get off at the far side and keep walking."

"I have a delivery."

"There's always a delivery." He looked at my bag and asked, "What's in the bag?"

"Broth."

"Broth," he repeated, and shook his head. "A grown man carrying broth in a cable car over the river. The city's full of lunatics and I've found the king of them."

I did the only thing I have ever been good at, which was to become pathetic.

I did not sing this time. The car was too small and the joke would not have carried. Instead I began, very loudly, to com-plain. I complained to a woman beside me about the fog. I complained to a couple in matching ponchos about the price of the ticket.

"Forty yuan for a view of nothing," I said. "In my day the ferry cost two. Now the ferry's gone and the bridge is full and they put you in a box in the air and charge you for the priv-ilege."

"Nobody asked you," the woman said.

"Exactly," I said. "Nobody asked anybody. That's the whole problem with this city."

I complained to the whole car about my bag of broth, which I said had cost me a day and would spoil if the cable was slow.

I asked the leather-jacket man, cheerfully, as if he were a fellow sufferer, whether he thought the cable was slow. He told me to shut up, and I complained about that too. I complained at the top of my voice, in dialect, the way an old man complains at a bus stop, the way that is so annoying and so familiar that people stop hearing it. That was the point, because I wanted them to stop hearing me, so that no one would look at what I did next.

Then I stumbled, hard, into the leather-jacket man, and as I went down I swung the bag of broth and burst it across the floor between his feet. The broth was not hot; it had gone cold in the bag. But it was oil and it was greasy and it was everywhere, and the car, which had been a smooth machine, became a skating rink. The leather-jacket man grabbed the rail and swore, and his partner stepped back and hit the wall, and the boy, who had been waiting his whole life for one second of confusion, was already moving.

The fight lasted, all told, about ninety seconds, and I remember it the way you remember a fire, in pieces. The boy got past the partner and made for the door end of the car. The partner caught him by the collar. I hit the partner with the fan, which did nothing, because a fan is a fan, and then the knife came out.

I had known there would be a knife. There is always a knife; the movies lie about that too, in their own way, by making the knife a surprise. It was a folding knife, small, the kind men carry in this city for opening boxes and settling arguments, and the leather-jacket man opened it and held it low.

"Everybody stand still," he said, and his boredom was gone. "The boy comes back here, and nobody gets cut, and the drunk gets off at the far side with a lesson."

And here is the part I have never been able to explain to anyone, including the police, including myself. I did not think,

I only stepped into the space between the knife and the boy and put up my hands.

"I'm his uncle," I said, loudly, in my best imitation of a man who has authority. "Whatever he owes, I'll take it to the police station. You can come with me. We'll do it properly."

Everyone in the car turned to look at us. The woman with the shopping bags began to scream. And in the confusion the boy did the thing that saved us both, which was that he grabbed the emergency handle and the car lurched and stopped.

We were stopped over the middle of the river. The knife went in somewhere I could not see and everywhere at once. In the movies a man gets cut and looks at the wound with noble surprise. In the actual world you feel it in your teeth first, and then you hear yourself making a sound you did not authorize. The woman with the bags screamed a second time in a different key. The cut was along my forearm, not deep, the kind of wound that bleeds a great deal and means very little, though I did not know that yet. I looked down at my arm and saw my own blood coming out of me onto the floor of a cable car over the Yangtze, and I thought, with a clarity as cold as the water below: so this is what it costs.

The rest of it was the crowd, and that is the honest sentence. I have been asked many times how I fought off two armed men in a cable car, and the answer is that I did not. The answer is that there were fourteen other people in that car. When the knife appeared and the blood appeared, those fourteen people, who had spent the whole ride deciding not to see any of us, stopped deciding.

"Get him!" the woman with the bags shouted, and hit the leather-jacket man with the bag itself, which was full of oranges. A man in a taxi jacket grabbed the partner's arm. The couple in the ponchos pulled the boy behind them. The car

rocked and swayed on its wire and the fog pressed against the windows and the whole city vanished, and for two minutes we were not Chóngqìng at all. We were a box of human beings in the air with a knife in it, and the box decided that it was not going to let the knife win.

The cable started again, and we came into the east platform with the doors still shut and the emergency alarm ringing and two men held against the wall by four strangers and a boy on the floor with his arms around his head. When the doors opened, the platform police were already there, because the operator had seen everything on his camera and had stopped the car on purpose.

The leather-jacket man went down on his knees on the platform and put his hands behind his head without being asked. His partner said, loudly and repeatedly, that the drunk had attacked them first. I have heard that sentence a lot in my life now. It has become a kind of music.

"Sir," the policeman said to me. "Your arm."

"It's fine."

"It's not fine. Sit down." He looked at the two men on their knees. "Do you want to make a statement?"

"I want to know what happens to the boy."

"The boy's coming with me." He said it not unkindly. "He'll give a statement, and then we'll call his family, and then we'll see. He's the victim here, if anyone is. You're the one who's bleeding."

The boy was taken away and I never learned what happened to him that night, though I learned later that he was released with no charge and that he did not return to the station, which is a way of saying that he vanished into the same fog that had taken his sister. I sat on a bench on the east platform with my arm wrapped in a stranger's scarf, and I watched the police write things down, and the fog came in off the river and ate the

platform and the cars and the whole far bank, until the only things left in the world were the bench and the blood and the ringing in my ears.

And then she came out of the fog.

I did not hear her, and that is the first thing I noticed, later, when my body had begun to file reports: that a person could come out of that fog and be standing three feet away without making a sound. She was small and thin and she wore a school uniform jacket over a hoodie and she had a bag on one shoulder that was too heavy for her and a face that had never once been young, and she was not more than fifteen. She stood in front of me and looked at the fan in my jacket pocket, and then at my face, and then at the blood.

"Don't move," she said.

"I wasn't…"

"Put your hand down. You're making it worse." Her voice was flat and quick, and she spoke dialect like someone who had learned it as a weapon. "The scarf's too loose. You're going to bleed until some nurse does it properly, and then they'll ask you questions, and you'll tell them everything, because you're the kind of man who tells everything."

"You don't know me."

"I know you're the drunk from the video. Everybody knows the drunk from the video." She looked at the fan again. "You're not him, though. Not really. The man in the video had nothing to lose. You've got a delivery to make and a debt and a name you keep saying to yourself in your head."

She took out a knife and came at me.

It lasted ten seconds and I have never been able to describe it properly. She did not try to kill me. She tried to teach me, which was worse. She moved inside my reach and put the flat of the blade against my throat and held it there for the space of

a breath. Then she took it away and stepped back and tripped me without touching my wound, and when I put my hand out to catch myself she caught the wrist and turned it and put me on the bench, and the whole time her face did not change at all. When I was sitting there with my heart going, she put the knife away and looked at me with an expression I can only describe as professional disappointment.

"You're slower than the video," she said. "You're drunk, and you're hurt, and you didn't even try to block. You're not a fighter. You're just someone who can't sit still while somebody suffers. That's not the same thing. That's dangerous for you."

"Then why are you talking to me?"

"Because I want to know if you're one of Tan Hong's clowns. The drunk who saves girls could be useful to him. A face. A distraction." She watched me and asked, "Are you?"

"I don't know who that is."

She studied me for a moment, and then she asked the question that ended Part One, the question I would spend the rest of the year trying to answer and never would.

"Ni xiao bu xiaode Tan Hong?"

Do you know the name Tan Hong (谭鸿).

I said no, because it was true, and because a fifteen-year-old girl with a knife was standing in front of me in the fog, and because I had just learned that the way to survive a cable car and the way to survive a child were not the same skill. She nodded, once, as if I had passed some small test and failed a larger one, and then she turned and walked back into the fog, and she was gone in about five steps, and I sat on the bench with my bleeding arm and my crooked finger and a question I did not understand ringing in the air like the cableway alarm.

CHAPTER 9

The Child with the Ledger

She was waiting for me when I came out of the clinic the next morning, and this time I had the sense to be afraid before she did anything.

She was perched on the parapet across from the door, in the school uniform jacket over the hoodie, with the heavy bag between her feet, and she watched me come down the steps with the expression of a small official auditing a corrupt ledger. My arm was stitched and bandaged and the clinic had charged me two hundred and ten yuan I did not have. The fog was up and the street was loud with morning, and she stood when she saw me and walked toward me without any hurry at all, and I realised that there was no version of walking away that worked.

"You lied to me last night," she said.

"I don't remember lying."

"You said you didn't know Tan Hong. That part might be true. But you said it like a man with something to hide."

"I said it like a man with a knife at his throat."

"That's the same thing." She fell into step beside me, which was worse than following. "Where are you going?"

"Work."

"You're bleeding through the bandage. You're not going to work." She took my elbow, and her hand was small and hard as a bicycle lock. "Come here."

She walked me into the mouth of a stairwell between two buildings, the kind of stairwell that in this city goes down as often as it goes up, and when we were out of the street she put me against the wall. I need to record exactly what happened

next, because I have heard people talk about fighting all my life and almost none of it is true. She did not punch me.

She took my bandaged arm and turned it, not hard, and my whole body followed the turn the way a door follows a hinge, and then her other hand was on my shoulder and my feet were gone. I landed on the concrete on my good side. The pain in my arm went white and wide, and something in my stomach, which had been deciding for a day whether to mutiny, made its decision. I turned my head and was sick on the steps, once, and then again.

She stood over me and watched until I was finished. Then she said, "Get up."

I got up. My hands were shaking and my mouth tasted of the tooth and the bile, and I looked at her and she regarded me and neither of us said anything for an instant, and then I did the only thing I had left.

"I'm a professional," I said.

She blinked. It was the first time I had seen her surprised.

"A professional what?"

"A professional." I wiped my mouth with the back of my good hand. "I'm not a hero and I'm not a drunk. I work for people. I was sent to the cableway. That's all you need to know."

She studied me for a minute. Then she took the heavy bag off her shoulder and unzipped it, and took out a school exercise book, the kind with a cartoon on the cover, the kind every child in this country has owned, and she opened it and held it so I could see.

The pages were ruled. The entries were in two colors. Most of the entries were in blue-black ballpoint, small and neat, and each one was a date and a place and a name and a short line about method, and some of the entries were crossed out, and some had a small tick in the margin, and a few of them,

scattered through the book, were written in red. The red ones had a different shape to them. They had a date and a place and a name, and then, underneath, a second line, which was not about method at all. One of them said he had a daughter. Another said he said sorry. Another said I don't know why this one is red.

I am not going to describe the rest of that book. I have read it once and I have not asked to read it again, and I am not going to turn it into a thing for strangers to look at. What I will tell you is what I came to see standing in that stairwell with a fifteen-year-old's homework in front of my face: the neat black entries were a business and the red ones were a sickness, and she carried both in the same bag, against the same back, and she did not know how to make the red ones stop.

When she had finished with the book, and before she put it away, she asked me a question that was not about the case at all. She asked me whether I had ever killed anyone.

"No," I said.

"Not even by accident."

"Not even by accident."

She watched me for a moment, and then she did something I had not expected, which was that she explained herself. "The red ones," she said, "are not the important ones. The black ones are the important ones. The black ones are the ones where the rules said yes, and I did it, and it was clean, and there was nothing in it. The red ones are where I did it and it was not clean and I still did it, and I wrote them in red so that I would have to look at them." She closed the book. "You have never done a black one. So you don't know the difference between a black one and a red one. And that means you don't know what you're asking when you ask me to stop."

"I'm not asking you to stop," I said. "I'm asking you to eat something."

"Who are you?" I said.

"Nobody."

"Where are your parents?"

"None of your business." She closed the book and put it back in the bag and zipped the bag, and when she looked up again her face was the same flat professional mask, and I understood that I had seen under it for exactly as long as she allowed and not a second longer. "You say you're a professional. Who do you work for?"

"I can't tell you."

"Then you're lying."

"I can't tell you because you'd kill them."

"I wouldn't kill them." She said it without heat. "I'd write them down."

And there it was, the whole child, in four words. I looked at her and I thought about the red entries and the he had a daughter and the I don't know why this one is red, and I realised for the first time that I was standing in front of a person who had been made into a weapon before she was old enough to know what she was being made into, and that the weapon was still a child, and that she had no idea which of the two things was speaking when she spoke.

"Fine," I said. "Then write me down. But you should know that if I'm a professional, I'm a very bad one. You put me on the ground in four seconds."

"Three."

"Three. So either I'm a very bad professional, or I'm lying, and you've already decided which."

She considered me. "I've decided you're not one of Tan Hong's. His people don't throw up." She picked up the bag. "But you're not nobody either. Nobody does what you did on that cable car. I've watched the video twenty times. You used the oil and the crowd. That's not luck. That's a tactic."

"I've been in a lot of fights I lost," I said. "That's all it is."

"That's the most professional thing you've said all morning." She started up the steps, and then stopped and looked back at me. "I'm going to find out what you are. I'm going to follow you until I do. You can make it easy or you can make it interesting. I don't care which."

"I'd prefer easy."

"Everybody does," she said, and as she went up past me she put two fingers on the sleeve of my jacket for half a second, as if to check that the sleeve was real. Then she was gone into the fog before I could ask her name, and I stood in the stairwell with my bandage and my bitter mouth and a small cold knowledge that I had just been adopted by something I did not understand.

Two fingers on a sleeve. I have turned it over more than any blow I have ever taken, because it was the first time in her life, I think, that she had touched another person without a purpose. A weapon does not touch anyone without a purpose. A person does. And for half a second, in a stairwell, in the fog, the child in her had come to the surface, and then the water had closed over it again, and she had gone.

The days after the cableway were the days I learned what it is to be studied by a child.

She did not follow me in a straight line. That was the first thing I noticed, and it took me three days to notice it, which tells you how good she was and how tired I was. A man who is being followed looks for a figure behind him. Huajiao was never behind me. She was ahead of me, or beside me in a doorway I had already passed, or on the roof of the bus shelter, or at the far end of the platform pretending to read a notice that had been out of date for two years. She was where I was going, not where I had been, which is a much harder thing,

and which meant that she was not tracking my body; she was tracking my habits.

I know this because on the fourth day I turned a corner and walked into her on purpose, and she did not flinch, and she did not run, and she did not pretend to be a schoolgirl, which would have been the easy move. She looked up at me with the flat patience of a person who has been caught doing her job and is waiting for the boss to be reasonable.

"You're learning me," I said.

"I'm learning what you are." She fell into step beside me, because being caught did not mean being dismissed. "You take the same stair every morning even when it's longer. You stop at the same three shops. You never look up at the buildings. People who work in the sky look up. You don't." She glanced at me. "You've never been above the tenth floor of anything, have you."

"Once," I said. "A hospital."

That was the whole conversation, and I did not think about it again until the following week, when she let the other thing slip.

We were on the river steps, in the evening, because she had decided that the steps were the one place in this city where two people could talk without a camera, and because Uncle Tuo had adopted her the way old men adopt anyone who does not ask them for anything. He had given her a piece of cardboard and a pouch of sunflower seeds and was explaining, at length, the correct way to eat a seed, and she was doing it, badly, and for one half hour she looked exactly like a fifteen-year-old, which I had not seen before and did not see again for months.

Then a scooter backfired somewhere behind us, and she was on her feet with the slingshot up.

It took less than a second. It was so fast that Uncle Tuo did not even stop talking. She stood over the cardboard with the

slingshot at full draw and her eyes on the mouth of the lane, and then the sound did not repeat, and she lowered the slingshot and sat back down and picked up the seeds as if nothing had happened, and her hand was not shaking, and her face was not doing anything at all.

Uncle Tuo went on with the lecture. I did not. I watched her crack the seeds, and I understood, in a way I had not understood from the ledger or the ledger's red entries, what her childhood had been.

"Drills," I said.

She did not look at me.

"Your mother."

"Games," she said. "She called them games." She cracked a seed. "I thought they were games until I was eleven. There was one where I had to cross a room without making a sound, and she would sit in the dark and listen, and if she heard me she would turn the light on and we would start again. That one was called the mouse. There was one where I had to lie on the floor and let her walk around me and not flinch, and that one was called the statue. There was one where she would wake me in the middle of the night and I had to be out of the window before she counted to five, and that one never had a name." She ate another seed. "The games stopped when I was eleven. After that she just called it practice."

"Where is she now?"

She looked at the river for a time. It was the only question I ever asked her that she did not answer, and I have never asked it again, and I have thought since that the not-answering was the answer, and that I should have understood it sooner than I did. What she said, instead, was this.

"She left me the notebook. When she went, she left it under my pillow, and it had seven rules in it, and the seventh was

blank." She put the seeds in her pocket. "I used to think that meant she hadn't finished. Now I think it meant she wanted me to finish it. Which is a lot to put on a piece of paper."

That was the night I stopped being afraid of her, which was, I understand now, the most dangerous thing I could have done, because a frightened man is careful and someone who has stopped being afraid makes a promise he cannot keep.

I went to the temple. I do not know why I went to the temple. I had been going there for weeks by then, and the going had become a habit, and a habit is a kind of shelter when you have nothing else. The abbot was in the courtyard with a watering can, and he looked at my face and then at my bandage and then at the street behind me.

"Who was the child," he said.

"There's no child."

"There is a child," he said. "She followed you to the corner and stopped and watched you come in. Small. School jacket. A bag too heavy for her." He watered something. "She waited outside the gate for a beat and then she left. She will be back."

"What should I do?"

"Feed her when she comes." He put down the can. "A weapon that is hungry is a weapon that is being aimed by somebody. A weapon that has eaten is a person, at least for an hour. Feed her, and let her decide."

"You don't even know who she is."

"No," the abbot said. "But you do now. That is usually how these things begin."

INTERLUDE 10

The Dossier

Assembled from a trademark filing summary, an internal brand memo, and a public post. The documents are reproduced as they were; nothing has been corrected. Names of the applicant and its officers have been redacted in the original and are redacted here.

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1. TRADEMARK APPLICATION — SUMMARY SHEET

APPLICANT: Hongfa Culture & Wellness Co., Ltd. (a subsidiary of Hongfa Group) **FILING DATE:** 3 March **MARK:** SHANCHENG JI GONG (word + device) **CLASSES SOUGHT:** - **Class 25** — clothing, footwear, headwear (robes, fans, gourd-shaped novelty goods, printed T-shirts) - **Class 30** — tea, con - gee, rice, condiments - **Class 32** — non-alcoholic beverages - **Class 33** — alcoholic beverages (application withdrawn after objection) - **Class 41** — entertainment, live performances, "cultural experiences," video production - **Class 43** — res - taurant and catering services - **Class 44** — wellness, alternative therapy, "mindfulness" services

GOODS/SERVICES DESCRIPTION (extract): " Character licensing; production and distribution of audiovisual works featuring a benevolent folkloric figure; operation of themed dining and retail; provision of spiritual and wellness experiences; charity and philanthropic event organisation, in Class 41."

EXAMINER NOTE (internal): ” Mark is descriptive of a well-known folkloric and religious figure and is therefore weak. Registration in Class 33 likely to be refused. Recommend proceeding in Classes 25, 30, 41, 43 on the basis of acquired distinctiveness through use in commerce, with a documented campaign.”

NOTE ON PRIOR USE: On the question of the street per - former whose image the campaign was based on, the file records a single line: ” No personal-name rights asserted. Subject is unidentified and unlikely to oppose.”

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2. INTERNAL BRAND MEMO — “PROJECT LITTLE MENDICANT”

FROM: Office of the Chief Brand Officer **RE:** Launch and narrative architecture, Q2–Q4 **CLASSIFICATION:** Internal. Do not forward.

1. Opportunity. Public sentiment has produced an organ - ically occurring folk hero in the municipality. The figure is unowned. He is a story with no owner, which in a market this size is a liability to the public and an asset to whoever moves first. We move first.

2. The problem with the asset. The organic figure is un - photogenic, unreliable, and drunk. He cannot be contracted, scheduled, or insured. He is, in brand terms, a **negative**. We do not acquire the negative. We acquire the **myth** and staff it with a positive.

3. The replacement. Cast a clean, sober, camera-ready “Ji Gong” (see casting brief, Annex B; preference for a trained performer with a martial-arts background and no visible tattoos). The replacement performs precisely the same

archetype — the benevolent eccentric who intervenes — but on a schedule, in daylight, with consent forms and a video crew.

4. Content pillars (Phase One). - P1 Mercy in the Open: three staged interventions per week, each resolved by the ninth second. (Lean, no visible poverty; poverty reads as failure on camera.) - P2 The Bowl: daily short-form "ask a stranger" content; the bowl is the brand device. Never show the bowl empty. - P3 The Temple: association, not membership. We do not claim affiliation. We appear near, we donate publicly, we let the public draw the inference.

5. Community response management. Anticipate the "he's a fake" objection. Pre-empt it. The line is: " There is no original. There is only the spirit." Repeat until it becomes true. Never mention the drunk. If asked directly, express warmth and concern for "whoever he is" and hope he "gets the help he needs."

6. The name. The surname Ji is unregistrable alone. Register Shancheng Ji Gong in word and device. In consumer copy, use "Ji Gong" without the city prefix: the universal figure, not the local one. The local one is a man. The universal one is an institution.

7. Risk register. - (High) If the organic figure is named by the press, the campaign becomes a comparison. **Mitigation:** we do not name him, we do not doxx him, and we make no comment on his legal status. Any arrest, any scandal, any hospitalisation attaches to his name and not ours by default. - (Medium) Religious objection from the temples. **Mitigation:** the Foundation donation. Money is the only sermon that is always heard. - (Low) The replacement is recognised. **Mitigation:** recast. The mask is the identity. This is the point.

8. The ceiling. If the campaign succeeds, the figure becomes municipal, then national. The long-term asset is not the

man in the robe. It is the **franchise**, and the franchise is the property of the company.

9. Content calendar, first month (extract). - Week 1: soft launch. Three "mercy" clips, no name, no logo. Seed to eight accounts, none of them ours. - Week 2: the bowl. Two "ask a stranger" clips a day. The bowl is never shown empty and never shown more than a third full. - Week 3: the temple association. No photography inside. A public donation of twenty thousand yuan, with a photographer present by coincidence. - Week 4: the first "miracle." A staged recovery, scripted, with a real hospital bill attached. Solicit the bill from a partner clinic.

10. Influencer seeding (extract). Twelve accounts, total reach four million. No contracts in the file; all payments routed through the Foundation as "gratitude gifts." Deliverable: one post each in the first fourteen days. The words Ji Gong must appear in the first line.

11. Crisis playbook (extract). - If the drunk appears: do not name him. Express concern. Offer help, publicly, once. - If a victim speaks: pay the medical bills before they speak, and photograph the payment. - If the law moves: distance the Foundation, not the company. The Foundation has no owners in the file. - If the replacement is caught: recast within ten days. The robe is the brand. The man is inventory.

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5. SCREENSHOT — COMMENT FRAGMENT, 11 April

> **@Anonymous:** I met the real one in a noodle shop and he told me to eat. **@Anonymous:** no you didn't **@Anonymous:** I know. I wanted to have

> met him. That’s the difference between us and them. They don’t have to want.

※

3. PUBLIC POST — Xiaohongshu, 8 April

@Xiaoman in Chongqing · following **I met Ji Gong at Guanyinqiao**

This afternoon I went to Guanyinqiao to buy milk tea, and there were a lot of people gathered in the square. There was an old shifu in rags holding a broken fan, and he helped up a delivery rider who had fallen down, and bandaged him. The rider kept crying, and the shifu crouched there and talked to him for a long time. Everyone was filming, and the shifu wasn’t angry; he even smiled and let them film.

I don’t really believe in these things. But I was standing close, and I saw the wound on his hand. A real old wound. His hands were very steady while he bandaged the rider.

Then he stood up and bowed to everyone and said one line: “Wine and meat pass through the gut; the Buddha stays in the heart.”

I don’t know why I cried.

Later someone told me he’s an internet celebrity, that it’s a company doing it. My friend said: look at the camera positions, three cameras, even a bounce board. I saw it too. I saw it.

But I still want to believe him. Because the rider’s crying was real, not acting-for-a-video crying. That part I saw with my own eyes.

Comments: > @Anonymous: This is Hongfa Culture. The “Ji Gong” is an actor. It’s all over the chat groups. >

@Xiaoman in Chongqing: I know. I said so above. > @Anonymous: If you know, why post it? > @Xiaoman in Chongqing: Because when he helped that rider, nobody around him reached out a hand. Including me. > @Anonymous: … > @Xiaoman in Chongqing: So I say, never mind whether he's real or fake. We can't even do the fake.

♥ 12,406 comments 388 saves 2,103

※

4. SCREENSHOT — COMMENT FRAGMENT, 9 April

> **@A Shancheng Witness:** The real Ji Gong drinks under the ficus tree; the fake Ji Gong takes disciples in the square. I won't say which is which. **@Anonymous:** Which is which? **@A Shancheng Witness:** Think for yourself. **@Anonymous:** I can't. **@A Shancheng Witness:** Then you haven't been hungry enough.

CHAPTER 10

Noodles at the Bomb Shelter

For eleven days the girl followed me, and for eleven days I pretended not to notice, and she pretended not to care that I noticed, and it became a kind of weather between us, the way fog is weather.

Huajiao came back to it the way a coin comes back to a pocket. She had never been fed anywhere for long, and she did not know how to be fed, and so she did it wrong for three weeks. She ate standing up, she ate fast, she ate with the plate at the very edge of the table as if she expected to be moved along, and she never once took a second helping without being told. Wang Niangniang corrected none of this.

Instead she began, without any announcement, to make one more dish at each meal than the table needed, and to set it down near the girl without comment, so that a second helping became something that was simply there, and not a thing that had to be asked for. I have watched the aunties do this to other people since, and this is the truest ceremony I have ever seen, and the reason it is true is that it never announces itself as kindness. It just leaves food where the hungry person can reach it.

The birthday was the same. Nobody made a speech. Zhang Niangniang put two eggs on a plate, Wang Niangniang said the date, Liu Niangniang poured the tea, and the whole thing las - ted less than a minute, and it was the first birthday the girl had had since she was five, and she ate the eggs the way she ate everything, fast and joyless and with her eyes on the door. The aunties let her. No one said the word family, and yet the word

was in the room for the rest of the night like the smell of cooking.

She was good at it. I have been followed by collectors and by men who wanted money and by one man who wanted to know where I lived, and none of them were as good as a fifteen-year-old with a heavy bag and nothing to do. She could stand in a doorway and become a shadow. She could ride two cars behind me on the light rail and get off at the same stop by a different door.

She knew which corners had cameras and which stairwells had two exits, and she used the knowledge the way other children use a phone, without thinking about it, because it had been poured into her before she could refuse it. I began to leave food out for her. I would buy two of something at the noodle shop and put one on the wall by my building, and in the morning it would be gone and the plastic would be folded and weighted down with a stone, which I took to be a thank-you, and also a rebuke, because a professional does not leave a trace.

On the twelfth day the collectors came for me, and she saved my life, and I have not been able to make peace with it since.

It was evening and I was crossing the small square behind the wholesale market where the taxis wait, and three men came off the wall at once, and I knew before I knew that this was not Ma-ge's style, because Ma-ge's men talk first. These men did not talk. One of them hit me from behind with something that was not a fist, and I went down, and the square tilted, and I remember the light of the taxis and the smell of diesel and a shoe coming toward my face.

And then the shoe was not coming toward my face, because it had gone sideways, and the man attached to it had gone

sideways with it, and there was a small figure moving in the middle of the three of them like a stone in a bucket.

I have seen violence my whole life and I still cannot de‐scribe hers. She was small. That was the first thing and the last thing: she was small, and she did not fight the way men fight, and she did not fight the way the movies fight. She fought the way water finds a hole. She was under their arms and behind their knees and once, briefly, on the shoulders of the biggest one, and then she was on the ground again, and all of it took less time than it takes to read this sentence. In eleven seconds, three grown men were on the ground around me, one of them holding his throat, one holding his elbow, and one not holding anything at all, his eyes open, breathing, out.

She stood over the third one with a small folding knife in her hand, and she was not breathing hard, and she watched me.

"Which one sent you?" she said to the man. He did not answer. She put the point of the knife under his chin, at the soft place, and he answered. He answered quickly and badly, and the name he said was a name I did not know and a name I have since learned to be one of the small fingers of a very large hand, and then he said something else, which was a plea, and he said a name that was not his own, a woman's name, and a child's age, and he said it the way men say those things when they are buying a little more time.

She did not stop.

I want to be exact about it. Her hand did not shake. Her face did not change. Her weight shifted onto her front foot the way it did when she was working, and she kept the point where it was, and she began to press. There is a difference between a fight and this, and I understood the difference for the first time in that square behind the market: a fight is a thing that both

people are in, and this was a thing that only one of them was in, and the other had already left.

"Little sister," I said.

She did not look at me.

"Little sister, look at me."

Something in the word did it. I do not know why. Maybe it was the word, maybe it was the voice I used, which was not the voice of a man who had a right to stop her but the voice of a man asking for a small favor. She did not take the knife away. But she studied me, and the small hot thing that had been in her eyes went out of them the way a pilot light goes out, and for a second, one second, there was a fifteen-year-old girl standing in a square with a knife under a grown man's chin, and she did not know why she was there.

"Don't," I said. "Not this one. Not tonight."

"He would have done it to you."

"I know. That's not why." I got up onto one elbow. My head was ringing and there was blood in my mouth again. "Not because of what he deserves. Because of what it costs you. I'm not going to watch you pay for him."

She regarded me for a moment. Then she took the knife away. She withdrew the blade and stepped back and stood there, and the man on the ground began to breathe again in a way that meant he was going to live, and she looked at the knife in her hand as if she had not seen it before, and then she put it away and looked at me, and what was in her face was not gratitude, and it was not relief. It was anger, cold and enormous and personal, the way a person looks at you when you have taken something from them that they did not know they were allowed to have.

"Don't ever do that again," she said.

"I won't."

"You just did."

"I know." I held up my hands, which were shaking. "I know. I'm sorry."

The men left, the two who could walk helping the one who could not, and she and I stood in the square with the taxis going by, and then she picked up her bag and said, in a flat voice, "Come on. You're bleeding. I know a place."

That was how I came to the fangkongdong (防空洞).

A fangkongdong is an air-raid shelter, and this city is full of them the way an old man is full of scars. They were dug in the war, by frightened people with hand tools, and after the war they were forgotten, and then they were rediscovered and filled with things the city needed: hotpot restaurants, barbers, warehouses, nightclubs, and mahjong. The one she took me to is under the Mountain City Trail, a long tunnel cut into the slope, lit by strings of bulbs and warmed by a single stove, and it holds six tables and a kitchen at the back and a wall of photographs and a cat that has never been named. It is run by three women, and the women are the reason I am still alive.

I learned, sitting in that tunnel through the spring, how this city actually works, which is not through the government and not through the platforms and not through the national broadcast. It works through lunch. The man who will not answer a question will answer it over a bowl, because eating is the one activity in this country that is not a negotiation, and because a bowl of noodles is a small truce. The tunnel had fed half the local offices and half the local rackets, and it had never once asked a question that could be repeated, and by the time I came to see what I was sitting inside, it was already the intelligence service of the only city I had ever known.

Zhang Niangniang (张嬢嬢) owns the tables. She is sixty-eight and she has won enough at xuezhan daodi (血战到底) to pay for other people's surgeries, and it is not an exaggeration, it is a line item, and she has the arms of a woman who has

carried water her whole life. She looked at my face and my shirt and did not ask a single question.

Liu Niangniang (刘嬢嬢) is seventy-one and she remembers everything. She keeps the gossip the way other people keep accounts, in a small notebook in a plastic sleeve, and she remembers every man who ever came to that tunnel to play mahjong and what he drank and who he owed and what he said when he lost, and she remembers every face, and she never forgets a name, and she is the reason the tunnel knows more about this city than the city knows about itself.

Wang Niangniang (王嬢嬢) is sixty-three and she runs the kitchen and she runs the etiquette. She took one look at the girl and took her bag off her shoulder without asking and put it behind the counter and sat the girl down at the end of the table and brought her a bowl of noodles, and the girl looked at the bowl and then at her, and Wang Niangniang looked back at her and said, "You eat first. You argue after."

The girl ate. I have seen her do many things, and I had by then seen her put three men on the ground in eleven seconds, but I had not seen her eat. She ate the way a person eats who has been eating standing up for years, with her eyes on the door, fast and joyless, and when she was finished she put down the chopsticks and said nothing, and Wang Niangniang refilled her bowl without being asked, and the girl ate that too.

It was only afterward, when she had eaten and the shaking had gone out of her hands, that I noticed the date, because Zhang Niangniang had put a plate on the table with two eggs on it, and eggs in this city mean a birthday.

"Whose birthday?" I said.

"Nobody's," the girl said.

"Today," Wang Niangniang said. "Fifteen."

"Nobody's," the girl said again, and Zhang Niangniang said, "Eat the eggs, Huajiao (花椒)," and that was the first

time I heard the name she is called, which is not her name, and which is what her mother called her, because when she was small her face used to go numb when she was frightened, the way your tongue goes numb when you eat too much Sichuan pepper, and the name had stuck, and so had the numbness, and she had been calling herself by it since she was five years old.

She ate the eggs. While she ate, Wang Niangniang asked her questions, in the way of an auntie, about school and food and sleep, and the girl answered in the way of a soldier, in single words, until Wang Niangniang said something to her in dialect so old and so specifically domestic that the girl stopped with the egg halfway to her mouth, and then the two of them did something I had not predicted, which is they laughed, both of them, at the same moment, at a joke no one else could hear.

And later, when the tables had filled and the tunnel smelled of smoke and wet stone and the particular sweet oil of the hotpot at the far end, the girl took a small notebook out of her bag, a different notebook from the ledger, a smaller one, held together with a rubber band, and she opened it and began to read.

"Rule one," she said, quietly, to herself. "Never work in daylight. Rule two. Never twice in the same district. Rule three. Always know the second exit. Rule four. Eat before, not after. Rule five. Never sleep in a place you have killed in. Rule six. Never let them see your face for longer than a breath. Rule seven…" She stopped. She looked at the page. "Rule seven is blank."

"You don't know it?" I said.

"I know it," she said. "I just don't write it down."

I did not ask what it was. I have thought since that I should have, and I have also thought since that the not-asking was the

only correct thing I did that night, and both things are true, and that is the whole problem with being a person.

The postcard came while we were sitting there. Chen Popo's grandson brings the mail to the tunnel because the tunnel has the only door that is always open, and he put the postcard on the table in front of the girl, and she looked at it the way a person looks at a wound in a mirror, and then she turned it over. It had a picture of a mountain on it. It had no message. It had a postmark from a place I did not recognize, and a date, and it was dated eleven days before, and it had arrived exactly on time, the way it always did, once a year, near her birthday, and she put it in the small notebook and closed the notebook and put the rubber band around it and did not say anything at all.

"Your mother," I said.

"I don't know that."

"Then who sends them?"

"I don't know that either." She put the notebook away. "She left me rules. Rules are a thing you can follow. A postcard is a thing that happens to you. I don't do things that happen to me."

And there it was. I looked at her across the table, at the fifteen-year-old with a schoolbag full of ways to hurt people, and I thought about the first rule of my own life, which was that I was a man things happened to, and I thought: she is me. She is me at fifteen, only she was given all of my lessons at once, and she was given a knife to learn them with.

"The things your mother taught you," I said, "I can't teach. I don't know them. I don't want to know them."

"Good."

"But some of the things she never got to," I said, "those are mine."

She considered me. The tunnel went on around us, the tiles clicking, the hotpot boiling at the far end, the three aunties pretending not to listen with the total attention of women who have spent their lives listening.

"The things your mother taught you, I can't teach," I said in dialect, because it was the only language it would fit in. "But the things she never got to are mine to teach."

She was quiet for a time. Then she picked up her chopsticks and ate the last of the noodles, and she did not say yes, and she did not say no, and she did not leave, and that was the whole of her answer, and it was enough.

CHAPTER 11

The Sober Art of Falling

The abbot began to train me in the spring, though he would never have used that word.

He taught me to fall the way you teach a child to swim, that is to say he pushed me and then refused to be impressed. The courtyard stone is unforgiving, and I was twenty-eight and proud of my calves, and for the first week I went down like a sack every time. He would take me by the shoulder at the moment I was least expecting it and pull, and I would fight the pull, because that is what the body does, and the fighting is what breaks the wrist and the collarbone and the hip. "Again," he said. "You are still trying to stay standing. A man who is trying to stay standing is a man who has already decided he is going to be knocked down." So I stopped trying to stay standing. I learned to go with the shoulder, to turn the fall into a step, to put my weight somewhere it could not be broken, and after about a month the thing happened that he had been waiting for, which was that I stopped bracing altogether. I stopped being a wall and became something closer to water, and water, it turns out, is almost impossible to knock over. He would push me, without warning, on the stone courtyard, and I would go down, and he would say, again, and after a while I stopped going down and started going with the push, turning it into a step, and after a while longer I could do it in the dark. The body learns faster than the mind and remembers longer.

It started with sweeping, which I had been doing for weeks, and it turns out that sweeping is a curriculum. He watched me for a while and then he began to correct things, one at a time,

always in passing, never as a lesson. My grip on the broom. The way I put my weight on the balls of my feet and then rolled to the heel and let the hips turn after. The way I held my breath when I bent and let it out when I straightened. He corrected the way I stood when I was tired, and the way I stood when I was not, and after a while I realised that the two had become the same, and that this was the point. "You walk like a man who expects the ground to move," he said one morning. "The ground does move." "Then walk like a man who knows it." He took the broom and swept one stroke, a single long unhurried stroke that started at the shoulder and ended at the hip, and the leaves moved in a clean line. "You brace against the fall. That is why you fall. If you are already falling, you cannot be knocked down."

He did not teach me to hit. I will record that, because the city would like to believe that the man in the alley learned to fight in a temple. He did not. The abbot was seventy-four years old and had the hands of a man who had spent forty years lifting a kettle and a broom, and he could not have fought the man in the leather jacket for eleven seconds. What he taught me was how to keep my eyes open, how to roll with a blow instead of taking it square, how to be underestimated by default, and how, when a man is trying to kill you, to put a table between you and him. That last one was a lesson I used on the roof of a service elevator a year later, and it worked, and I have never told anyone that the table was his.

Then he taught me to be drunk. I do not mean he taught me to drink. He never once gave me liquor or forbade it. What he taught me was the performance of drunkenness: the specific slackness of a face that has stopped managing itself, the way the eyes focus and then let go, the way a drunk man's weight lives in his heels. He had me walk the courtyard at dusk with a pouch of water in my sleeve, and he would watch, and say,

more, or less, or now you are pretending to be clever, which no drunk man ever is.

"Why are you teaching me this?" I said.

"Because you are already doing it," he said. "You have been doing it for months in the wrong order. You drink and then you fall. That is the way of a man who cannot choose. The other way is to fall and let the city do the drinking for you. Then you keep your eyes." And then, one evening, when I had finally done it well, he said the thing I did not understand for months. "Good. Now do it again tomorrow, and drink nothing, and do not tell anyone. A trick that needs the trick to work is not a trick. It is a door. You want to be able to walk through the door and leave it open behind you."

I have turned over that sentence more than almost anything else he said to me, because for a time I thought he was teaching me a trick, and I understand now that he was teaching me a discipline, which is a different thing. The abuse is not the costume. The costume is the costume. That is the difference between a monk and a fool, and it took me a long time to learn it, and I learned it in the worst possible way.

The worst possible way was a Tuesday in April, on the steps above the river.

I had been drinking all afternoon, because I had been paid and because Ma-ge had taken the money and because the difference between being paid and being robbed by agreement is a difference that lives in the stomach. I got a call on the app, a delivery up the Eighteen Stairs to a building on the upper road, and I should have refused, and instead I took it, because I needed the run and because I liked the stairs, and I climbed with the bag in one hand and the world tilting gently to the left, and at the top there is a place where the steps narrow and the handrail is broken and everyone who uses that stair knows to slow down.

There was a woman coming down with a child on her hip. I did not see her in time. That is not an excuse, it is the whole fact: I did not see her, because I was looking at my phone and because I was drunk, and she did not see me, because she was looking at the child and because it was the hour when every - one on the stair is going somewhere and no one is looking. When we met I put out my hand to steady myself on the rail that was not there, and I hit the edge of the step, and I went sideways, and my bag of food went up and came down, and the woman did the thing anyone does, which was to turn away to protect the child, and her foot went off the edge of the step.

I caught her by the wrist. I only just caught her, by the wrist, and the child on her hip hung out over the drop for a second and a half, and then I got my other hand on her arm and I pulled her back onto the step, and the three of us sat down on the stone, breathing, while the city went on around us as if nothing had happened, which it had not, except that it very nearly had.

The woman was all right. The child was all right. She thanked me and slapped me, in that order, which is the correct order, and then she took the child and went down the stairs, and I sat on the step with the spilled noodles and my heart going like a bird in a box.

I did not drink again that night. I did not drink for nine days. And I want to be precise about why, because the noble version of this story is that I saw the face of the child and I was changed, and that is not true. What changed me was the arithmetic. The arithmetic was very simple: if I had missed her wrist, a child would be dead, and I would be in a prison, and it would have been because of the pouch in my pocket, and the child would have been nameless to me and I would have been nameless to the child, and the whole thing would have been

processed by the city as an accident, and the accident would have been me.

I could not have that. I still could not have it. I could not have it and I did not know how to stop, so I did what drunks do when they do not have the courage to stop: I retained the appearance and withheld the substance. I filled the pouches with tea. Cold, dark, bitter tea, which looks like gaoliang from a distance and tastes like medicine up close. I learned to take the pouch from my pocket and put it to my mouth and take the smallest sip, and to let the rest run down my chin or into my sleeve, and then to stagger a little, and to laugh, and to sing.

The abbot watched me do it in the courtyard one evening and said nothing, and I came to see from his nothing that he had known all along, and that he had been waiting to see whether I would arrive at the trick myself or try to pass the test with the old tools. I had arrived. It had cost me a child's half-second over a drop. That was the fee, and I paid it, and if I had not paid it I would not be here.

The convenience store was open all night, at the mouth of the Mountain City Trail, and that became the other place I lived.

I would go there after the last run, around one or two in the morning, and buy a packet of instant noodles and a bottle of water and sit at the window by the door, and there was a woman who came in at the same hour most nights, a young woman with a big ring light folded in a bag and a phone on a gimbal and the specific tired brightness of a woman who talks to a camera for a living. She was Yingtao-jiang.

I knew her by then, because the whole city knew her channel, and I had a more specific reason to know her: she was the one who had filmed me. She did not know me. This is the part I want to be honest about, because it would be easy to make it funny and it was not funny. She did not know me because the

man in the video was a fool in a fan, and the man at the win‑dow was a tired rider in a tracksuit with his hood up and a crooked finger around a cup of tea.

The first night she spoke to me she was waiting for her noodles to cook. She looked at my phone, which had the channel open, and she said, "You watch Fog Walks?"

"I watch everything," I said.

"You shouldn't. Half of it's fake." She tore the season‑ing packet with her teeth. "Do you know what I hate? Every‑body in this city now wants to be the drunk monk. I get fifty submissions a week. People falling down in front of their own cameras. It used to mean something."

"Does it not mean something?"

"I don't know." She stirred the noodles. "There was one guy. Months ago. The first one. He wasn't trying to be any‑thing. He was just a man who couldn't watch a girl get hurt. I edited that clip myself and I put a name on it and I made him a thing. And now every idiot with a phone is trying to be him, and the only person who never tried is the actual man, and I've never found him." She watched me, and I looked at my tea, and she said, "Sorry. I talk too much. You come here every night. What do you do?"

"I deliver."

"That's not what I asked." She smiled at me, and it was a real smile, tired and curious. "What do you do? When you're not delivering. What are you?"

I looked at the tea in my hand, and at the scar on my arm under the sleeve, and at the small cold eye of my own fan in my jacket, and I did not know how to answer her, so I gave her the only true answer I had, which was also the least true answer I had ever given.

"I'm nobody," I said.

"Everybody's somebody in this city," she said. "That's the whole trouble with this city."

She took her noodles and went out into the fog, and the door swung shut, and I sat at the window with my cold tea and my crooked finger and the whole truth sitting three feet from her and not crossing over, and I thought about the abbot's word for it, which was discipline, and I thought that this was the hardest discipline of all, which is to be seen clearly by one person and to choose, every single night, not to be seen.

I have gone back to that store in my head more times than I have gone back to the golden room. The noodles were terrible. The tea was cold. The woman across from me was the only person in the city who had ever asked me what I was, and I had answered her with the least true sentence in the book. I do not know what I would say to her now. I have had a year to think of it, and I still do not know.

CHAPTER 12

Little Maitreya

The young man came to the temple on a Thursday in May, with a film crew and a donation and a smile that had been profes - sionally whitened, and the whole courtyard changed temperature the moment he walked in.

I did not understand what Tan Xiao was for several weeks, and that is the privilege of a man who has never had money: money looks like weather.

He came back twice in the following month. The first time he came with a photographer and stood in the lane while the photographer took pictures of him standing in the lane, and the second time he came alone and asked to see the abbot and was told the abbot was ill, which was a lie the novice had been told to tell.

I watched all of it from the east courtyard, sweeping, and what I saw was a young man who had been sent to charm an institution and had not been given the tools for it, because charm is a currency you spend on people who want some - thing, and the abbot wanted nothing and the arhats wanted nothing and I wanted nothing, and a man who has nothing to offer you looks at a man like Tan Xiao and sees the thing itself, which is a boy in a good shirt, asking the room to admire him.

The counterfeit Ji Gong appeared three weeks later, and the city took him the way it takes a new season, without noticing that it had been sold one. I watched the videos the way I had watched everything that year, in the small hours, on the same phone, on the same steps, and I have to record what they were, because the book has spent a year saying that this city is made of people who decide not to see, and these videos were the

machinery of the deciding. The fake was good. He was better than good.

He was sober and handsome and punctual, and he knelt in daylight on clean pavement in front of consenting strangers and wrapped real bandages around real ankles, and every clip ended with his palms together and a caption about compas - sion, and the comments underneath were not stupid, they were hungry. That is the thing I understood, sitting on the steps at two in the morning: the city had not been fooled. The city had been asked, and it had said yes, because a clean story is easier to carry than a true one, and because the man on the screen was the man everyone had wanted the drunk to be. I read a thread that month in which a woman explained to her friends that she preferred the new one because the old one made her feel guilty. She was not a bad person. She was a normal person, and the whole machinery of the year was built to find that normal person and sell her the version of mercy that asked nothing of her.

I did not fight it. That is the part I would do differently if I could go back, and I have turned it over long enough to know that I would not, actually, do it differently, because I had no platform and no face and no name, and because the only per - son in this city who could have pushed back was standing in a courtyard with a broom. What I did instead was to keep sweeping, and to keep the fan in my jacket, and to go on being the thing I had been, and that is what the abbot had told me to do, and which is the hardest discipline in a city that has decided it prefers the fake.

I was sweeping the east courtyard, which by then was my office. I heard the cars first, three of them, black, parked in the lane where no one parks because the lane belongs to the temple' s vegetable seller and the temple' s cat. Then the crew: a woman with a gimbal, a man with a boom, a photo -

grapher with two bodies and a bag of lenses, and a stylist carrying a garment bag for a change of clothes that would never be used. Then the young man himself, in a plain white shirt and no tie, with his hair pushed back and his hands in his pockets, walking through the temple gate like someone who had bought the sky above it and was being gracious about letting everyone else look up.

I did not know who he was. That is the truth and I want to keep it, because it is the only advantage I had that day. I knew he was rich by the shoes, and I knew he was performing by the crew, and I knew he was dangerous by the way he looked at the donation box before he looked at the Buddha.

The abbot came out to meet him with his hands folded, which is what he did for everyone, and the young man bowed first, deeper than he needed to, and said, "Elder, forgive the intrusion," which is the correct thing to say and the completely wrong thing to mean.

"You are the son," the abbot said.

"I'm Tan Xiao. Most people call me Little Maitreya." He smiled. "It started as a joke online. Now it's on my business cards. That's the modern world for you."

"The modern world," the abbot agreed. He did not smile. He did not offer tea. He stood in the middle of his courtyard with his hands in his sleeves and looked at the young man the way a man looks at weather he cannot stop.

Tan Xiao did not seem to notice, because a man like Tan Xiao never notices a thing like that; he simply reclassified it as an obstacle and moved on. He gestured, and the photographer began to work, and the woman with the gimbal began to film the photographer, and Tan Xiao walked the courtyard with his hands behind his back and looked at the arhat hall and the old bell and the stone, and he said the sort of things you say, and

the crew recorded him saying them, and after a while he came to a stop in front of me.

"You're the sweeper," he said.

"I'm the sweeper."

"The abbot's got a good operation here. Small. Authentic. The whole thing feels real." He watched me with real interest, which was worse than contempt. "Do you know who I am?"

"No."

"I'm the reason this temple is going to survive the next ten years," he said, pleasantly. "The city's changing. Old things die unless somebody with reach decides they shouldn't. I have reach. I want to help. That's all. That's the whole story." He looked at the broom in my hand. "Do you want to be in a photograph?"

"No."

"Everybody wants to be in a photograph." He said it without malice, the way you would correct a fact. "Stand up straight. You've got the face for it. A working man's face. Real."

I stood up straight, because I am not made of stone, and he took the photo of me anyway, and the woman with the gimbal filmed him taking it, and then he turned to go, and that is when one of his people leaned in and said something in his ear, and Tan Xiao stopped and looked at me again, and his whole face changed. It did not become cruel. It became interested, which is worse.

"Oh," he said. "It's you."

"I don't know what you mean."

"The drunk. The one from the cable car. The one on the phone." He came back. "You're the original. You're the..." He laughed, and it was a genuine laugh, and it was the first honest thing in the courtyard. "You're Shancheng Ji Gong. You're the actual guy. I've been looking for you."

"I'm a rider."

"You're the actual guy, standing in a temple, holding a broom, refusing to be in a photograph." He shook his head slowly, delighted. "That's incredible. That's better than anything my team could write. Do you know what you're sitting on? Do you have any idea?"

"I have a debt."

"Everybody has a debt. That's not a story, that's a condition." He put his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Let me offer you something. A real offer. We do a partnership. You keep being you, the drunk, the fan, the whole thing, and I put a team behind you. Charity ambassador. We get you on a stage, we get you a foundation, we get you into schools, hospitals, the whole circuit. You'd never worry about money again. You'd never worry about Ma-ge again." He let that sit. "I know about Ma-ge. I know about the twenty-eight thousand. I know more about you than you think."

"You don't know me."

"I know your rating. I know your routes. I know your grandfather's teahouse used to be in a neighborhood my father's company redeveloped." He said it lightly, and he watched my face when he said it, and I have still not decided whether he knew what he was saying or whether it was just the one piece of information he happened to have, thrown in because it was sitting on top of the pile.

The abbot spoke from behind him. "He is not for sale."

Tan Xiao turned. "Elder, with respect, nobody's asking you."

"He is under this roof."

"He's a rider with a debt who's been sleeping on your floor." Tan Xiao smiled. "I'm offering him a life. That's not a sale. That's a rescue. You of all people should be happy."

The abbot looked at him for a long moment, and then he said something that I did not understand at the time and have thought about every day since, which is: "A man who rescues other people so that he does not have to be rescued is not a saint. He is a runaway."

He had a way of saying a thing once and then letting it sit in the room like a verdict. I did not understand it then. I understand it now: a man who explains his own wisdom has already stopped trusting it.

Tan Xiao's smile did not move. But something behind it did, very slightly, the way a plate shifts under a tablecloth. Then he turned back to me and held out his hand.

"Think about it," he said. "I'm not going anywhere. The city's only got one of you, and I'm patient."

I did not shake his hand. He did not seem to mind. He put his hand back in his pocket and walked out of the courtyard, and the crew folded up around him and followed, and the three black cars went away, and the courtyard went back to being cold, and I stood there with the broom and understood that I had just been weighed by something that did not need my consent to weigh me.

I did not think about the offer, because I did not take it seriously. What I thought about was the sentence about the redevelopment. I thought about it that night on the floor of the arhat hall, and the next day on the scooter, and the day after that, and I could not make it into anything, because a rich man's son making conversation is not evidence, and because the part of me that had spent its whole life accepting the shape of the box was already working to make the sentence mean nothing.

For a week after Tan Xiao left, I did what I always did, which was to work. I took the runs nobody wanted and I swept the courtyard and I checked the platform's message board for the

offer that never came, because I had said no and because a man who says no to a rich man spends the next week proving to himself that he meant it. The abbot watched me. He did not ask about the offer, and he did not ask about the sentence about the redevelopment, and one evening, when I was sweeping near his step, he said, without looking at me, that a man who refuses a gift should know why he refused it, or he will spend the rest of his life calling it a virtue. I said I knew why. He said, "Then say it." And I could not, and he went inside, and that was the whole lesson.

Ten days later the fake Ji Gong appeared.

I saw him first on a phone at the noodle shop, because someone at the next table was watching it with the sound up. A man in a tattered robe and a tattered hat, handsome in the way a photograph is handsome, clean-shaven, with a fan that had been made to look broken by a costume department rather than by years. He was kneeling on a pavement, wrapping a bandage around the ankle of a fallen delivery worker, and the camera was very close and the light was very good and the delivery worker was crying, or acting very well.

The caption said: Shancheng Ji Gong, today at Guanyinqiao, helping the wronged, doing good for its own sake.

The video had two million views. The comments said this is the real one and the last one was a drunk and shifu is so handsome and this is real positive energy. A woman at the next table said to her friend, "Finally, a proper one."

I sat there with my noodles going cold and watched the fake Ji Gong stand up and put his palms together and bow to the camera, and I felt something I had not expected, which was not anger. It was relief. That is the shameful part, and I am putting it down because I have promised to keep the receipts. What I felt was relief, because the city had found a better monk, and a better monk meant that the real one could go

back to being a rider with a debt, and the pressure of the crowd could come off me like a coat, and I could sleep.

I finished the noodles and paid and went out into the fog and did not know yet that the invention of the fake Ji Gong would kill a man, and that I would be fifty meters away when it happened, and that I would spend months afterward being asked, by the city and by myself, why I was not closer.

CHAPTER 13

The Dispatch

My cousin came to find me in June, which is the month this city turns into a wet oven and everybody's temper goes soft at the edges.

The network did not begin with a plan. It began with a habit, which is this: riders talk to each other, and that the talk is faster than any official channel in this country.

There are about a hundred thousand delivery riders in this municipality on a busy day, and they know the city the way water knows a slope, and they know it collectively, in a way that no map has ever managed. When a rider cannot find a building, he asks the group chat, and someone answers in el - even seconds, because someone has been to that building and remembers the second door and the elevator that only goes to even numbers.

When a rider's bike dies, another rider swaps a battery and does not ask to be paid. When a rider is robbed, the whole route knows within the hour, and the corner where it happened goes quiet for a month. None of this is heroism. It is just the mutual aid of people who are paid by the algorithm and who have learned, over years, that the algorithm is not a colleague and that the only colleague is the next person with a box.

Yaoji understood that before anyone. He did not try to build an organization; he simply started answering the channel, and the channel started answering him, and within a month the tunnel had a shadow network of about forty riders who did not know what they were part of and did not need to know. A rider in Shapingba would mention that a certain office had been

dark for a week. A rider in Nan'an would mention that a certain teahouse had new owners who did not look like teahouse people.

A rider on the Jiangbei route would mention that the van that used to come on Tuesdays had started coming on Thursdays, and that the man driving it had a burn scar. None of them were told what it was for. They were just asked to keep noticing, which is the one thing every rider in this city is already an expert at, and the board behind the counter at the tunnel slowly became the only honest map of the racket that anyone had ever drawn.

Huajiao did something different and harder. She went into the places the riders could not, because she was a child and looked like a child, and she came back with names and numbers and small hard facts. She went into the dormitory above the hardware shop and sat in the corridor with a schoolbook until someone asked her what she wanted. She went into the teahouse where Ma-ge collected and sat at the next table with a bowl of noodles and counted the men.

She went to the doorway of the man with the good watch and asked, in the voice of a lost schoolgirl, whether this was the building with the dentist, and when he said no, she apologized, and she memorized his face, and the face was in the ledger by the end of the week. I have thought since about what it cost her to do that, and I have decided that I do not get to decide, and that she did it because she had been trained for it, and that using the training was both her gift and her injury, and that the difference between the two is the whole difference between the aunties and the men who made her.

His name is Zhou Yaoji, and I have known him since he was a fat child with a bowl haircut who cried when the adults ate the fish, because he had named it. He is twenty-three now and he works security at a shopping mall in Jiangbei, that is to say

that he stands in an air-conditioned atrium for twelve hours a day and watches other people's children ride an escalator, and he is very good at it, because he has spent his whole life watching other people's lives from the edge of the room.

He collects cards with pictures of warriors on them and watches animated series in a language he translates for himself, and he can tell you the plot of every heist film ever made, and if you ask him a question about any of them he will answer it in the voice of a man who has been waiting his whole life to be asked.

He found me at the tunnel, because the tunnel was where I could be found, and he stood at the mouth of it with his uniform shirt untucked and his bag on one shoulder and looked at the mahjong tables and the photograph wall and the three aunties and the fifteen-year-old girl playing with a slingshot at the far table, and then he watched me.

"Biao-ge (表哥)," he said. "What is this."

"It's a mahjong parlor."

"It's a lair." He sat down across from me without being invited. "Why am I the last person to know everything. Why is it always me. You got famous and you didn't call me. You got stabbed on a cable car and you didn't call me. You've got…" he gestured at Huajiao, who looked up from her slingshot and looked back at him with the flat reptilian patience of a cat, "a small associate, and you didn't call me."

"I didn't call anyone."

"That's not a defense. That's the crime." He put his elbows on the table. "I know what you're doing. I've watched the videos. I've read the forums. There's a whole thing on the internet about Shancheng Ji Gong, and half of it's fake and half of it's you, and I can tell which is which because I'm the only person in your life who's ever paid attention."

He studied me. "You're going to get hurt. More than you already are. And it's going to be me who finds you."

"Then don't find me."

"Biao-ge." He said it the way you say a word to a child who has climbed onto the roof. "Tell me what you actually need."

And that, I think, is the moment the thing I have been calling the network was born, though at the time it looked like nothing but my cousin ordering two bowls of noodles and refusing to leave.

What he needed, it turned out, was a job. Yaoji could not fight, and he knew it, and he had no interest at all in the part of the operation that involved being hit. What he could do was the part that no one else in the city could do, which was to sit in a mall with a radio and a notebook and a computer and make sense of a crowd. He understood systems. He understood the way an app is also a map of who needs what and when. He understood that this city is a machine that moves food and people and money, and that whoever can see the machine can move inside it without being caught.

He started with walkie-talkies, because he is a man who loves equipment, and because a phone call leaves a record and a radio does not. He bought a set of cheap radios off an online seller and assigned every one of us a handle, and the handles were all characters from a children's show about a monkey, which I did not understand and which he refused to explain. Huajiao's handle was the small sharp one who fights. Mine was the fool in the yellow jacket. The aunties' handles were numbers. He made us practice. He made us repeat each other back. He made us say the wrong thing on purpose to see if anyone would break discipline, and when I broke discipline he took my radio away for a day, and I complained, and he said, "You'll thank me when it matters," and I did.

Then he built the board. He took a piece of foam board and covered it with sticky notes, and the notes were the collectors and the shell companies and the addresses and the phone numbers, and he kept it behind the counter at the tunnel, and every night he moved the notes, and the notes were never the point; the point was that he made us look at the board, which meant we had to think about the same thing at the same time, which is a form of prayer.

I need to put down one night of the network, a small one, because the book has been about the large nights and the small ones are the actual texture of the thing.

It was a Thursday in June and the board had been up for three weeks. Zhang Niangniang had called the network for a "hotpot meeting," and that is what the aunties called any gathering that had to produce a decision, because a decision made over a hotpot is a decision no one can pretend not to have made. There were nine of us around two pots at the back of the tunnel: the three aunties, Yaoji, Huajiao, me, and four riders who had come because a man in the group chat had asked them and because the man had once helped them with a battery.

The question on the table was whether to keep going. One of the riders, a man of about forty with a bad wrist, said what everyone was thinking: the whole thing was getting bigger than a favor, and that if it got any bigger than a favor then the people in it would have to decide whether they were in it for real. He said it without heat.

And then Liu Niangniang, who was seventy-one and had not said a word all night, put down her chopsticks and told a story about a man she had known in the eighties, a neighbor, who had stood up for another neighbor in a dispute over a wall and had lost his job for it and had never once said he regretted it, and had died of a stroke at fifty-eight. She told the whole story.

It took about four minutes. And then she said, "That is what it costs. If you are not willing to pay it, eat now and go home, and no one will think less of you, because the wall was not your wall."

Nobody got up. I do not know why. It was not courage and it was not politics. I think it was that four men who spend their lives at the bottom of a machine had been, for the first time, asked to make a decision together, and the asking itself was worth more than the decision. That is the whole network. Not an organization. Nine people at a hotpot, and the decision to stay, and the aunties pretending not to count who stayed.

The trail began to appear in small pieces, and the small pieces were always offstage, and that is how I will describe them, because that is how they came to me. A rider in the group chat mentioned that a collector named Cui San had been seen at a certain teahouse on Tuesdays. Liu Niangniang remembered that a certain man had once lost four thousand at her table and paid it in cash and left a card with a company name on it.

Zhang Niangniang's grandson, who is a locksmith, told her which of the buildings on the list had old locks and which had new. Huajiao could go where none of us could go, because she was a child and looked like a child, and she came back from those places with names and numbers and small hard facts, and she wrote them down in the ledger, and the ledger was beginning to fill.

The thing we were looking at was bigger than a loan racket. That was the discovery of the summer, and I am not going to pretend I realised it all at once. A loan racket takes a person's money. What we were looking at took the person. There were chat groups that no one admitted to, and a service the riders called the "training," and a funnel that started in a dormitory room in this city and ended somewhere none of us had

ever been, and the customers of that funnel were not this city and not this country, and the whole thing was so well organ - ised that it looked, from the outside, like a travel agency.

Wen Xiaoyu had gone southeast for a good salary. Her brother had vanished after the cableway. There was a girl in the group chat whose cousin had gone to the same place and come back without her passport, and a boy who had come back with a scar he did not explain, and none of them had gone to the police, because none of them could prove that they had not simply gone abroad to work.

Yaoji put a note on the board for each of them. Then he put a note in the middle of the board, and on the note he wrote a name I had heard exactly once before, in the fog, from a fifteen-year-old with a knife.

Tan Hong.

"I don't have him yet," Yaoji said. "I have the word. I have eleven people who say the word. I don't have the man."

"You'll find him."

"Of course I'll find him. I'm the only person in this family who finishes things." He said it with a grin, and under the grin there was the other thing, which is the thing I have promised to write down. Yaoji worships me. He has always worshipped me, since he was a child, because I was the older cousin who could climb the wall behind the market and get the ball back, and he has also resented me his whole life, be - cause I was the one with every advantage and I spent it on gaoliang and a rented room and a debt.

He wants to be me. He also wants to be nothing like me. He watched me waste ten years and then he built me a radio and a board and a plan, and he will tell you he did it out of loyalty, and it is loyalty, and it is also the only way he knows to save the money I threw away.

One night in late June the whole crew was at the tunnel, and it rained so hard that the tunnel leaked in three places and the aunties put basins under the drips, and the radios crackled, and Huajiao was cleaning her slingshot, and Yaoji was moving notes on the board. And my cousin looked up at me and said the line that has kept me alive, on and off, ever since.

"Biao-ge," he said. "You be the hero. I'll be in charge of getting you home."

"You don't get to decide who the hero is."

"I don't want to." He did not look up. "That's the point. Somebody in this family has to have a job they can actually do."

And then he told us, because he had been saving it, that the fake Ji Gong was going to do a stunt the following Saturday. The Riverside shopping complex at Liziba, next to the train station, where the light rail runs through the building. A staged rescue. A big one. Cameras. A brand launch. The Hongfa Foundation. He had the poster, because he had found it on a site that published the schedules of the actors' agencies, and the poster said, in clean type, that the true spirit of Ji Gong would appear at Liziba at three o'clock.

Huajiao put down the slingshot. "That's not a stunt," she said. "That's a trap. Liziba's got one entrance from the station and one from the road. If something goes wrong, there's nowhere to run."

"Then something will go wrong," Yaoji said.

And the thing I had been hearing in my chest for three days, which I had been calling weather, finally got a name.

CHAPTER 14

The Train Through the Building

Liziba is a station where the light rail goes through a building, and by the summer it had become the most photographed address in the municipality, which is saying something in a city that photographs itself for a living. The train comes in on the eighth floor and the people on the platform stand behind glass and watch it arrive, and under the platform there is a shopping complex and a road and a river view, and the whole thing is so obviously the future that no one stops to ask what it is for.

I have to explain the train, because the train is the reason the set piece worked and the reason the book chose this building over any other.

The light rail line at Liziba runs into the eighth floor of a residential block and out the other side, and the residents have learned to sleep through a train passing through their living room wall every few minutes, and the tourists have learned to stand on the platform under the building with their phones up. What that means, physically, is that the building is a resonator. When a train comes in, the whole structure hums and shakes, and the platform glass sings, and every phone in the crowd jitters in the hand, and for about eight seconds nothing in that building can be heard and nothing can be filmed steadily. It is the loudest machine in the neighborhood, and it comes on a schedule that everyone knows and no one thinks about.

I thought about it. That was the one tactical idea I had all night, and it was not an idea I was proud of; it was the observation of a man who had delivered noodles to that building for four years and had learned, without ever writing it down, that

a train through a building is a kind of weather. So when the knife came out and the plaza turned into a hundred phones and a man in a rented robe did nothing at all, I did not run at the knife. I looked at the departure board on the far wall, which was blinking, because the trains at Liziba run every six minutes and the board is always counting, and I had two minutes and eleven seconds.

That is the difference between a hero in a story and a man who has to live with what he does. The story makes the timing a coincidence. The man makes the timing. I stood at the edge of the crowd and did the only thing a rider knows how to do with a crowd, which is to read it the way you read traffic: where the pressure is, where the gap is, where a bicycle sign would fit, when the light changes.

The fake had been doing his rounds for a month by then, and I had watched enough of them to know the machine, so let me describe it once and then leave it, because the machine is the villain of this book and it deserves to be understood.

The operation was run from an office in Jiangbeizui with a whiteboard and three salaried employees and a freelance crew. The crew was booked by the day; the set-ups were booked by the week; the distress was booked by the hour. A woman with a sprained ankle on Tuesday morning, a lost child at noon, a pensioner who had fallen in the pedestrian underpass at four, and at every one of them the same handsome man in the same rented robe, kneeling, bandaging, palms together, and at every one of them a camera that had been positioned before the accident was allowed to occur.

I watched a clip once where the fake arrived at a "rescue" four minutes before the person in the clip had fallen down, and the caption said just happened to be passing. Nobody commented on it. Nobody noticed. The city had asked for a clean story and the clean story had been delivered, and the

fact that it had been scheduled was not a flaw in the story; it was all of its appeal. A real rescue is a mess that happens once. A scheduled rescue happens forever, at three o' clock and again at four, and a city that is tired of messes will take the schedule every time.

Nobody had been paid by the people they helped, and nobody who was helped had ever asked to be paid. That was the part of the machine I found hardest to hate, and the part that made it work. The old woman in the underpass did not know she was an asset; she only knew that a young man in a robe had helped her up and that the whole country had watched him do it. The machine did not need to lie to the helped. It only needed to film them, and to be there first, and to be the only camera in the frame. The city' s goodness was real. The machine had simply learned how to invoice it.

The fake Ji Gong' s people had chosen the plaza under the station for the launch, and by the time I got there at half past two the plaza was full. There were three camera crews and a drone and a stage with a red cloth over something, and there was a crowd of maybe four hundred people, and every second person in the crowd was holding a phone at chest height, the way people hold a cigarette, without thinking. The dead air smelled of hot concrete and fried food and the faint sweet smoke of the incense that someone had lit at the far end, where a vendor was selling prayer beads and gourd-shaped bottles of lemonade.

I was in my rider jacket and I had left the fan at the tunnel, because Yaoji had said, in the flat voice he used for operations, that I was not to bring it. Huajiao was somewhere in the crowd in a school jacket with her bag, and Yaoji was on the roof of a parked service van with a radio and a pair of binoculars, and the three of us were connected by a channel that no one else in the city could hear.

"It's a stunt," Yaoji said in my ear. "The script is a staged robbery. Two actors, a fake bag, a fake knife, and the monk stops them and gives the bag back to the old lady. The old lady's an actor too. Stay back and watch. If it goes right, it's boring. If it goes wrong, we move."

"What does wrong look like?"

"Wrong looks like the knife being real," he said. "Nobody's checked the knife."

The stage went live at three. The fake Ji Gong walked out in his costume, and the crowd made the sound a crowd makes when something it has seen in a video appears in front of it, and it is not applause but a soft collective recognition, like a sigh. He was good. I will give him that. He had the walk and the smile and the humility face, and when he raised the fan the phones went up like a field of small dark flowers. A woman behind me said to her friend, "He's even better-looking in person."

Then the two actors came out of the crowd, and the staged robbery began, and for about forty seconds it was exactly as boring as Yaoji had promised. The old lady screamed on cue. The first actor grabbed her bag. The second actor held up a knife, and the crowd, which knew what was happening, filmed it with the indulgent calm of an audience watching a fire drill.

And then the second actor did not lower the knife.

I saw it before I came to see it, which is the way these things arrive. The choreography asked him to hold the knife at the level of his own chest and let the monk take it. Instead he turned, and he put the blade against the old lady's throat, and he said something that was not in the script, and the old lady's face changed from performance to something else, and the crowd did not change at all, because the crowd had been trained by ten thousand videos to believe that everything inside a frame is a story.

The fake Ji Gong froze. That is the honest report, and I have never blamed him for it. He was an actor, and the man in front of him had a knife at a woman's throat, and the actor's body did the correct thing, which was nothing. The phones kept filming. Somewhere behind me a girl said, "Is this still the show?"

"Biao-ge," Yaoji said in my ear. "The knife's real. The woman's not an actor. I know her. She sells lottery tickets on the corner. She's seventy. Go."

I went. I had no plan to speak of, but what I had was a stairwell, and what I did was the only thing my body knew how to do, which was to move along the edge of the crowd instead of through it, because the front of a crowd is a wall and the edge of a crowd is a door. I came out beside the stage on the left, where the speaker stacks were, and I picked up the only thing that was loose, which was a folding metal sign advertising bubble tea, and I threw it, not at the man, but at the drone.

The drone was the joke and the drone was the key. The sign hit it and the drone came down into the crowd, and four hundred people looked up at once, and in that one second of looking up I closed the distance and put my shoulder into the actor's ribs. The knife went across my forearm, the old cut's neighbourhood, and then it was on the ground, and then the old lady was on the ground too, and the crowd, which had been a single organism a moment before, broke into four hundred separate people who all wanted to be somewhere else and all wanted to film it.

The train came in then. I have turned the timing over for months and I still do not know whether it was luck or whether the operator, watching his camera, decided to bring the train in as a signal, because a train through a building is the loudest thing in this city and thunder is a kind of cover. The whole

platform shook. The glass sang. The crowd surged toward the station entrance the way water goes to a drain, and the actor was up and running, and the old lady was up and holding me by the arm, and somewhere in the surge a woman screamed a scream that was not a story, and I turned and could not see her, and the crowd closed over the place she had been stand‑ing.

I found her afterward, on the ground, because the crowd had moved on. She was a woman of about fifty in a red jacket, and she had gone down in the crush, and her hand was under the foot of someone who had not noticed, and by the time we got the man off her, three of her fingers were the wrong shape. She did not cry. She looked at her hand with the flat, practical attention of a woman checking a receipt, and then she watched me and said the sentence I have not been able to put down.

"Is the monk all right?"

I did not know what to tell her, because the monk was a hundred meters away by then, running, and the dressings on my arm were the real version of the thing she had come to see, and she had come to see it with her grandchildren, and she was going to lose the use of two fingers so that a brand could launch.

I sat with her until the ambulance came. The fake Ji Gong's people had cleared the stage in four minutes, and the drone footage was already circulating, and the caption that circulated with it was not the caption they had written. Someone had caught the moment the knife touched the old lady's throat and the monk did nothing, and someone else had caught the moment a man in a yellow jacket came out of the crowd and threw a bubble-tea sign at the sky, and by din‑ner the fake's account had been deleted and a statement had gone out that the actor had been the victim of a "scripted

misunderstanding,” and by midnight the whole brand was a joke, and the only person who was not laughing was the woman in the red jacket.

I did not watch Tan Xiao leave. Yaoji did. He said the young man came out of the service door on the north side and walked to his car without looking at anyone, and that his face was not angry. That was the detail Yaoji kept repeating, because it had frightened him. Not angry. Empty. He got into the back of the car and the car went away, and the man who had been publicly humiliated in front of four hundred phones did not look like a man who had lost. He looked like a man who had written something down.

I went to the tunnel that night, and I sat at the end of it where the tiles are stained with something I have never identified, and I did the thing I had promised the abbot I would not do. I took a pouch out of my pocket, and it was not tea.

I drank it all, in two swallows, and then I bought another one and drank half of that, and I sat in the tunnel and listened to the mahjong and the rain and the sound of a hand that was not mine being carried out of a plaza on a stretcher, and I understood that the discipline the abbot had given me was not a wall. It was a room. And I was standing outside the room with the door open, the way a man stands when he wants to be seen choosing, and there was no one watching, and that was the loneliest thing of the whole summer.

CHAPTER 15

The Umbrella

Tan Hong did not send men for me after Liziba. He sent money, which is the same thing done at a higher altitude.

The first sign of it was a headline on the local news app, and the headline was so clean and so generous that I read it twice before the contents reached me. The Hongfa Group had pledged a donation of two million yuan to the restoration of Luohan Temple, the Song-dynasty foundation on Minzu Road, "in the spirit of the charity figure Ji Gong, whose selfless conduct has moved our city this year."

There was a photograph of Tan Hong in a plain blue jacket, hands folded, standing in front of the temple gate with an expression of grave humility. I had never seen his face before. I had heard the name once, in fog, from a fifteen-year-old with a knife, and now I was looking at the face of the man who owned the name, and the face was soft and courteous and entirely calm, and it was the face of someone who had decided a long time ago that the world was a business and that he was its chairman.

I was in the tunnel when the news broke, and Yaoji read it aloud from his phone, and when he finished there was a silence that lasted long enough for the mahjong table to click three times.

"He's buying the temple," Yaoji said.

"He's buying the story," I said.

"It's the same thing. If the temple takes the money, then the temple is him. Then the monk is him. Then you're him." He watched me. "Biao-ge, you understand what that means. If the man who attacked you owns the temple you sleep in, then

every time you sweep the courtyard you're sweeping his floor."

The board of the temple met the following week, and I was not in the room, and I have pieced the meeting together from what Liu Niangniang heard from a cousin who knew a donor, and from what the abbot told me afterward, which was not much. The board is nine people, and eight of them are lay Buddhists and benefactors and one of them is the finance monk, Venerable Jiefeng (界风法师), who is fifty-five years old and has run the temple's accounts for a decade and who is not a villain.

He is a failure mode. He stood up in the meeting and said that the temple's roof needed forty thousand yuan of repair, that the incense income was down, that the young visitors who came to photograph the arhats did not put money in the box, and that a two-million-yuan donation from a lawful registered company was not a spiritual event; it was a roof.

Jishan sat and listened to all of it. Then he said the sentence that lost him the room, and I will write it as he said it, because I have never forgotten the plainness of it.

"If we take his money, then when the police come for him, the temple will be asked why it stood beside him, and we will have no answer. I would rather have a wet floor than no answer."

The vote was six to three. The board did not reject the donation outright; it voted to "continue discussions," which in the language of institutions means yes. Jiefeng was given authority to negotiate. The abbot was given, by a vote he did not contest, a diminished voice in the affairs of his own courtyard.

Nobody on that board was bought. The eight lay members were Buddhists and benefactors and shopkeepers of good faith, and every one of them believed, genuinely, that a roof is

a roof and that a temple with a wet floor is no use to the poor. They did not think they were choosing a criminal. They thought they were choosing a repair. That is how the thing works. The devil in this book never once asked to be loved; he only ever asked to be useful, and there is no institution in the world that says no to a useful gift, and the men who exploit that are not monsters, they are patient.

I found him that evening in the east courtyard, standing under a broken gutter with a bucket, watching the rain go into the bucket, which is what he did instead of arguing.

"They took the money," I said.

"They will take the money."

"You could refuse."

"I did refuse." He watched the bucket fill. "The refusal is now a fact in the record. That is what a refusal is worth in an institution. It is a fact in the record. Somebody, in some year, will read it and know that at least one man said no."

"That's not enough to save the temple."

"No," he said. "But I have never been asked to save the temple. I have been asked to keep one hall standing and to feed one drunk. The rest is business."

The thing I have not described is what the abbot said to me the night the board voted, because it is the only time I ever heard him talk about the man who wrote the signature, and it changed how I understood the whole year.

We were in the east courtyard. He was under the gutter with the bucket. And after a long time he said, without turning around, "Do you hate him?"

"I don't know."

"That is a good answer. A man who knows he hates has already decided something." He watched the water. "I have known men like him. Not this one. Men like him. They are made in the same way: somewhere, when they were small,

they were made to kneel. And then one day they decide that no one will ever make them kneel again, and they spend the rest of their lives building a world where everyone else is on their knees and calling it charity. I have sat across a table from such a man and I have accepted his tea.

That is the thing I want you to understand, Xiao Li. I have accepted his tea. I have sat with the suffering he causes and I have drunk the tea he bought with it, because the temple needed the roof and because I am not a monk who lives in a cave. And I have never been able to decide whether that makes me complicit or whether it makes me a keeper of a roof. The difference, I have come to think, is not in the tea. It is in whether, at the end of the year, there is a thing you refused."

"You refused the money."

"I refused the money, and then I lost the vote, and then I lost the temple, and I went back into the fire." He finally turned and looked at me. "I have not decided whether I was right. That is what an old man has instead of wisdom: a list of the things he has not decided." He held out the bucket for me to take. "Now you are going to have to decide, and you are going to do it without me, and I am sorry for that, and it is also the whole point."

The second sign of Tan Hong's altitude came to me in the form of a message from the platform, and the message was almost funny. It informed me that a third party had asserted rights in the mark "Shancheng Ji Gong" and that my use of the term on my public profile, which I did not have, and in my "associated content," which I had never made, might constitute an infringement. It asked me to refrain from presenting myself as "Ji Gong" in any commercial setting. I read it twice and laughed out loud in the noodle shop, because I had spent the whole year trying not to present myself as anything, and the one thing I had never done was sell it.

But the message was not for me. That is what I understood when I read it the third time. The message was the paper trail. It was the thing that would let a lawyer stand up in a room someday and say that the mark belonged to the company and that the street drunk had been given notice and had ignored it. It was an umbrella being opened over the city, and I was standing under the edge of it without knowing.

The third sign was the cruel one, and it came for the riders.

It began with a thread in a group chat that I did not see until it was a week old: a list of names, some of them rider handles, some of them real names, with addresses beside them. Two of the addresses were wrong. One of them was the address of Old Zhou, the rider who had asked me why I did it, who had a wife and a mother-in-law and six hundred yuan of my money in his pocket. Another was the address of a girl who worked the Nan'an route and had once given me her spare battery in the rain and had never asked for anything. The thread said, in the language of men who have never been punched, that these were the "support network" of the "fake monk," and that they should be "re-educated."

Old Zhou's e-bike was torched on the second night. It was parked under the stairs of his building, and someone poured something on it and lit it, and the fire did not spread, because it rained, but the bike was gone, and the smoke went into the stairwell and his mother-in-law breathed it and spent a night in the clinic. Old Zhou called me once and did not say a word about the bike. He said, "You should know that my wife is scared." And then he said, "I'm not blaming you," which is a sentence that exists for the sole purpose of making blame unmistakable.

I want to put down what the shrink actually looked like, because "the network shrank" is a sentence that hides a hundred small human decisions. The first to go were the riders

who had family in the trade, because a man whose brother drives a taxi and whose wife works at a hospital cannot afford to be on a list. The second to go were the ones who had helped us for money, which was most of them, and I do not blame a single one. The third to go were the ones who had helped us for nothing, and those were the four I could not explain, because there was no arithmetic in it. They did not stop because they were frightened; they stopped because the thread had made them visible, and visibility in this city is the one tax a poor man cannot pay.

I met one of them at the battery station, a man of about thirty with a daughter in primary school, and he would not meet my eyes. He said, "I can't do the night runs anymore," and I said, "I know," and he said, "It's not about me," and I said, "I know," and we stood there with our batteries in our hands and neither of us said the true thing, which was that he was right and I had cost him something I could not repay. The aunties did not shrink. Zhang Niangniang kept the tunnel open and kept feeding whoever came, and Liu Niangniang kept her notebook, and Wang Niangniang kept the kitchen warm, and the three of them did the thing the aunties always did, which was to behave as if nothing had changed until the thing that had changed changed back. The tunnel smelled the same, of tripe and bleach and wet cardboard, and the men who had quit still came for the noodles and stood at the door and did not come in.

The network shrank. That is the plainest way to say it. The riders stopped answering the radios. The group chat went quiet. The aunties kept the tunnel open, and Zhang Niangniang kept feeding people, but the board on the wall of the tunnel was taken down for a week and put back with half the notes missing. Huajiao did not shrink. Huajiao did the opposite, which was to go out more, and come back later, and write

more in the ledger, and Wang Niangniang stopped her one night at the door and made her eat before she did anything else, and the girl stood in the kitchen doorway with her jaw set and ate the noodles standing up, and it was the closest she came all summer to crying.

I sat with the abbot on the last night of June and told him about the fight I was having inside myself, which was not a fight about Tan Hong. It was the older fight. It was the question of whether the thing I was doing was a discipline or a costume, and the question had teeth now because I had drunk half a pouch in the tunnel after Liziba, and I had not told anyone, and the secret was sitting in me like a second broken finger.

"You drank," the abbot said.

"Yes."

"After Liziba."

"Yes."

He did not scold me. He did not quote anything. He said, in the same voice he used for the weather, "A man does not fall because the road is hard. He falls because he stops watching his feet. The road was always hard. You simply stopped watching." He looked at the bucket, which had filled and begun to overflow. "Start watching again."

"Everything I look at is the umbrella."

"Then look at your feet," he said. "The umbrella will still be there when you look up."

I did not drink the next day, and I did not drink the day after, and on the third day I went to the tunnel and I took the fan out of the drawer where I kept it and I put it back in my jacket, and no one said anything, and I realised that the war with the umbrella had not ended and would not end, and that the only thing I could control was the length of the list of days I had not opened a pouch. So I started counting, and the count was zero, and the count was my whole wealth.

CHAPTER 16

Rule Seven

The man's name was Cui San, and by the middle of July the network had his address in a new building in Nan'an, his shift pattern, the name of the teahouse he used on Tuesdays, and the fact that he had a wife in a county town and a boy of seven who went to a school with a yellow gate.

The ledger was a school exercise book, and I have thought since that this city keeps its whole life in school exercise books. The debt to Ma-ge was in a school exercise book. The list of the placed and the pending was in a folder that had been copied from one. The rules a dying mother left a five-year-old were in a school exercise book with a rubber band around it. Somewhere in a district office there was a file with my grandfather's teahouse in it, and the file was in a folder, and the folder was in a cabinet, and the cabinet was in a room, and the room was on a floor, and the floor was above a street, and the street ran down to the river, and the river had carried my father. That is the whole city, in the end: a set of books on a set of shelves, and a set of men who know which shelf to reach for. The girl knew. That was the thing that made her dangerous and the thing that made her a child. She had learned the shelves before she had learned to sleep.

I have to say something about Cui San, and I am not going to make it comfortable, and I am not going to use it to excuse what happened.

He had a son. I learned that from a photograph on a shelf, and I learned it again from the note in the ledger, and I learned it a third time from the mother, later, in a corridor, when she asked me whether I knew who had done it and I said I did not,

which was the first flat lie I told that year and the only one I have not been able to put down. The boy was seven. He went to a school with a yellow gate. And the man who held the photographs of other people's daughters kept a photograph of his own son on the shelf above the machine where he copied them, and the two facts sat in the same room without ever touching, because that is what a human being is.

He was not a cartoon. He was a soft-voiced man with a good watch and a bad back and a collection of model cars, and he had explained the interest to more widows than I can count, and he had done it in the tone of a man explaining a necessary truth to someone too emotional to see it. When the story of him is told in this city, which it is, on the walls of the tunnel, where Huajiao wrote his name in red under the others, the tellers always simplify him into a monster, and the simplification is a lie, and the lie is the reason it will keep happening.

Huajiao knew all of this before I did. That is the thing I want to get down. She was fifteen, and she had read the file on him the way she read everything, from the top, in order, and she understood that the man she was going to kill had a son and a bad back and a shelf of model cars, and she decided to kill him anyway, because the rules said so, and because the file said so, and because he was the one who held the pictures.

When we found him, he was coming out of a building on the west side with a paper bag of fried food, and he was not on his guard, because men like him are never on their guard in their own neighborhoods. I have turned over that too. He was not on his guard because he lived in the belief that the city was arranged correctly, and that the rules of the city protected him, and that a man who does what he does in the daylight with a good watch and a paper bag of fried food has nothing to fear from anyone.

I did not go into the building. That is the truth I have to own. I stayed on the street, because the plan said two people, one to watch the door and one to go up, and because I had told myself that the watching was the important part. It was not the important part. It was the part that let me say, afterward, that I had only been watching, and I have spent a long time understanding that the man at the door is the same as the man on the stairs, and that there is no difference that a court or a conscience has ever recognized.

Yaoji had found the last of it. He did not want to have found it, and he told me so in the tunnel, in the flat voice he used when he was frightened of his own competence. "I have a photo of the kid," he said. "I wasn't looking for a photo of the kid. The kid was in the background of a photo of the man. Now I have a kid on my board, and I can't unhave him." He looked at the notes and did not touch them. "Biao-ge, this is how it starts. This is how the men above Ma-ge think. First you have a name, then you have a face, then you have a family, and then you have leverage, and then you have done to somebody what they did to us."

Cui San was the man who had held Wen Xiaoyu's photographs. He was not the man who took them, and he was not the man who profited most, but he was the man who carried them, in a phone, in his pocket, and who put them in front of girls and their mothers and said the things he said, and he did it as a service, for a fee, with a scale that he could explain. He was forty-three. He had a belly and a soft voice and he wore a good watch, and I had seen him once in the lot behind the hospital, and I had not known his name then, and I had known his voice, and that is a thing you learn not to forget, because the voice is what the photographs were for.

Huajiao wanted him. She had wanted him since the cableway, or longer, since the first time she saw the folder in the

ledger with Wen Xiaoyu's name on it. She did not say it. She did not have to. It was in the way she cleaned her slingshot, and in the way she sat with Liu Niangniang and asked, in the voice of a child doing homework, which teahouse Cui San used on Tuesdays.

We had a plan. That is what I want entered into the record: we had a plan, and the plan was to give the photographs to the police and to the riders' network and to a journalist who would not take money, and to let the law do the thing the law almost never does. The plan was to keep the girl's face out of it. The plan was to make Cui San a fact in a folder instead of a name in a ledger. It was, I think, a good plan. It was the plan of a man who had learned, slowly, at the price of a finger, to use the machines that already existed.

Huajiao did not break the plan. She edited it. That is the distinction I have come to understand, it is the distinction that matters, and it is also the distinction that made no difference at all to Cui San.

On the last Tuesday of July she told us she was going to the night market to buy a new bag. She went to the teahouse instead, and she watched him for an hour, and she followed him to his building, and she went up the fire stairs after him. Yaoji heard the door of the ledger when she opened it and he called it in and I was on the Nan'an bridge and I rode the wrong way down a one-way street at fifty, and I was still four minutes too late.

I do not know exactly what happened in that apartment, and I am not going to invent it. What I know is this. The building's camera in the corridor was not working, which is not unusual. The neighbours heard nothing, which is not unusual either, in a building where the walls are thick and the televisions are loud. When I came up the fire stairs and along the corridor, the door was open, and inside the lights were on,

and Cui San was on the floor by the sofa, and the notebook was open on the table, the ledger open at a page that had Wen Xiaoyu's name in blue above and a date in red below, and Huajiao was sitting on the floor against the wall on the far side of the room, and she was not moving.

She was in it. That is what the medics call it and it remains the best word, because it is not a fit in the way the movies show a fit. It was a seizure of the whole small body, but a slow one, as if the body were trying to fold itself into a shape that could not be reached, and her eyes were open and they were not looking at anything in the room. I put my jacket under her head and I turned her on her side, which is the one piece of first aid I know, and I held her hand, and I did not look at the man on the floor, and I stayed there for a long moment.

When it passed she lay on the floor and breathed. Her hand was cold and small in mine, and there was a smear of blood on the cuff of her school jacket, and she looked at the ceiling and said, in a voice that was flat and quiet and about ten years younger than she usually sounded, "Rule seven."

"What?"

"Rule seven." She closed her eyes. "Never do it because you hate him. Only do it because the rules say. I did it because I hated him. I hated him so much." She turned her face toward the wall and her shoulder began to move, and I have never seen a person cry the way she cried, which was without any sound at all, the way a tap drips.

I did not tell her it was all right, because it was not. I did not tell her he deserved it, although he did. I told her the truth, which was that I was there and I was not going to leave, and that it was four in the morning and she was going to sleep, and that tomorrow we would do the next thing, whatever the next thing was, and that she did not have to decide anything tonight. Then I carried her down the fire stairs and put her on

the back of the scooter and drove her to the tunnel, and Wang Niangniang opened the door in her nightclothes without asking a single question, and made up a bed behind the kitchen, and sat with her until she slept.

Before she slept, she said one more thing, which I have carried since.

"He said something."

"Who?"

"Him." She meant Cui San. "He said, 'Tell my son I'm sorry.'" She studied me with the flat tired eyes of someone who has just learned something about the size of the world. "I wrote it down. In the red. Under his name. Why did I write it down."

"Because you're not a weapon," I said. "You're a person who's been given a weapon's job. Those two things aren't the same, and the difference is the writing down."

She regarded me for a time. Then she closed her eyes, and the rain went on outside, and the aunties' tunnel went quiet, and somewhere in the city the man with the good watch was a fact in a folder, and the folder was not the one we had planned to file.

There is one more conversation from that night that I have to put down, because the ledger has a page for it and so do I.

After the seizure, after the tunnel, after the aunties had made the bed behind the kitchen and she had slept for eleven hours, she woke up and would not eat, and she asked me to sit with her. We were in the back of the tunnel with the radio off and the pot cold, and she said the thing in the flat voice she used for the weather.

"I want you to say it was the right thing."

"No."

She watched me.

"I'm not going to say that," I said. "Because if I say it was right, then the next time you do it because it's right, and the time after that you do it because it's what we do, and the red entries stop being red. So I'm not going to say it was right. I'll say it was done, and you did it, and he's dead, and there's a boy with a yellow gate who won't have a father, and you're the one who has to carry that. If I take it off you by saying it was right, then I'm stealing the only thing you've got left. And you need the thing you've got left more than you need me."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "You're not as soft as you look."

"I'm exactly as soft as I look."

"Then you're softer." She pulled the blanket up to her chin. "But you're not lying to me. That's the whole of it…" And she stopped, because she does not finish sentences like that, and I did not make her, and that was the point. I sat with her until she slept, and the radio stayed off, and somewhere above the tunnel the city went on making its own arrangements, and the ledger lay on the chair with its red page open and its lesson unlearned, and this is the only way a lesson is ever learned.

I saw Dao-ge (刀哥) for the first time that night, though I did not know it. He was sitting in a car across from the building, in the dark, watching the fire stairs, and he watched me carry the girl down and put her on the scooter and drive away. He did not follow. He stayed a long time after the ambulance came and the police came and the building filled with the blue light, and then he put out his cigarette and started his car and drove to the temple, and parked on the corner, and sat there through the rest of the night with the window down, watching the wall, the way a man watches a house he grew up in.

CHAPTER 17

The Hundred Ji Gongs

By the last night of October the city had made me into a costume, and I need to describe the costume precisely, because I stood in the middle of it and watched, and because it is the strangest thing I have ever seen.

Halloween had become, in this city, an excuse. It was never really an American thing by the time it reached us; it was a night when the whole of Jiefangbei came out in costume and took photographs of itself, and the costumes were not ghosts and vampires but whatever the internet had been that year. That year it was Ji Gong. I do not know who started it.

Somebody posted a photograph of a group of friends in tattered robes with paper fans and gourd bottles, and the photograph did well, and by the last week of October the market stalls around the monument were selling a complete Ji Gong kit for ninety-eight yuan: a robe, a hat, a fan, and a plastic gourd on a string. There were inflatable gourds. There were electric fans printed with the four characters. There was a bubble-tea shop selling a "Ji Gong" flavour, which was just osmanthus and ice.

On the night itself there were hundreds of them. I stood at the edge of the crowd by the monument and watched a hundred drunk monks photograph a hundred other drunk monks, and the whole square was a soft roar of laughter and shutter sounds, and somewhere in the middle of it a man in a rented robe was doing the four words of the old song into a microphone for a crowd of tourists, and the tourists were filming him film them.

It was the funniest thing I have ever seen and I could not laugh, because every one of those costumes was made in a factory in the districts, and every one of those fans had been cut from the same template, and the man who had started the whole thing was standing at the edge of it in an ordinary jacket with a crooked finger, invisible, the way he had spent his whole life being invisible, which was the punchline the city had written for me without knowing it.

The city had taken the one man who never wanted to be looked at and made him into the costume of the year, and the costume was sold for ninety-eight yuan, and the man himself stood at the edge of the crowd in an ordinary jacket and watched the money change hands and did not get a fen of it.

I want to give Zhang Maliu a life for a minute, because the book has spent a year describing the deaths of people I loved and it owes the same to the one who died for a story he did not understand.

He was born in a county town three hours out, and he came to the city at nineteen, and he cooked for fifteen years in kitchens that were too hot and paid too little, and he was good at it, and he was not ambitious, and the two things together meant that he had spent his whole adult life in other people's kitchens, on the night shift, making food for people who were asleep. He had a mother he sent money to and a daughter he saw twice a month and an ex-wife who did not hate him, which is more than most men in this city can say. He collected nothing and owned nothing and had one pleasure, which was the old series, the 1985 one, which he had watched with his own grandfather in the county town and which he still watched, on a cracked phone, in the twenty minutes between the lunch service and the dinner service, because it was the only program that made the kitchen quiet in his head.

He had a theory about it that he explained to me once, in the ninety seconds we had: the monk was not mad. He said the monk was the only man in the town who was paying attention, and that everyone else was mad and did not know it, and that when the town laughed at the monk they were laughing at the one person who could see them. I have turned over that theory a great deal, more than he ever got the chance to, and I have decided that he was right, and that he was killed for being right, and that being right is not a protection in this city and never has been.

He had bought the ninety-eight-yuan kit with his own money, and he had put it on with real care, and he had come to the square because he believed, in the way that a person believes a thing they have decided to believe, that the drunk monk of the videos was a real thing and that the real thing was good. He did not know that the videos were me and the costumes were a market. He did not know that the whole night was a joke at the expense of a man he had never met. He just wanted to be near the thing he believed in, which is a hunger I understood.

I met him for about ninety seconds, and I am grateful for those ninety seconds, because without them he would have been only a name in a red entry. He came up to me at the edge of the crowd, in his rented robe, holding his plastic gourd, and he asked me if I knew where the "real" Ji Gong was.

"There's no real one," I said.

"There has to be a real one." He said it without any aggression at all. "There's the one who saved the girl in the alley. My daughter showed me. She's nine. She said, Baba, this is what a man is. I want to be that." He smiled, embarrassed. "So I came out tonight. Stupid, right? A grown man in a costume."

"It's not stupid."

"It is a little stupid." He laughed. "But my daughter thinks I'm brave now. That's worth ninety-eight yuan."

And then he went off into the crowd to find the real one, and I did not see him again until I saw him on the ground.

The other thing that night was Tan Xiao's production, and it was running in the same square at the same time, and it was, I have to admit, well made. A staged robbery: a "Ji Gong" in a costume, a "thief," a "victim," and three camera crews hidden in the crowd, and the plan was to catch the fake monk "attacking an innocent man," to film it from three angles, and to release it the next morning with a headline about how the Ji Gong craze had produced violence.

Kill the meme by making its own image ugly. I knew about it because Yaoji knew about it, and Yaoji knew about it because the same actors' agency had listed it on the same public schedule board, and he had read it aloud in the tunnel with a kind of appalled admiration. "It's a good plan," he had said. "That's what scares me. They're not trying to beat us. They're trying to make us unwatchable."

Huajiao was in the square somewhere. She had been quiet since July, quieter than usual, and she wore the school jacket and carried the bag and did not do the things she used to do. Wang Niangniang had started sending her out with a thermos of soup, which was her way of saying stay out but eat. I do not know where she was when it happened. I have never asked her. She has never told me. That is the one thing about that night that I have let stay dark, because some things do not belong to me.

What I know is that the honeypot was on the east side of the monument, in a lane behind the phone stores, and that the honeypot was real, and that it had nothing to do with Tan Xiao's production. It was Dao-ge's. The staged robbery was the theatre. The honeypot was the business. They ran it the

way you run a net for birds: a boy with a stolen bag runs down the lane, a person follows him, and at the end of the lane there are three men, and the person who followed is the one who pays. The stolen bag is the bait. The thief is a child, usually an addict, usually owed money himself. The people who follow are the honest ones. That is the whole design, and it has been the design since before any of us were born: use the good against the good.

That was the year the second death happened, and it happened fifty meters from where I was standing, and I have spent a long time trying to write the two things in the same sentence without making the dead man into a lesson.

Zhang Maliu followed the boy.

I want to be exact, because the whole city has an opinion about that night and almost none of the opinions are correct. The boy took a woman' s handbag outside the phone store and ran east. Zhang Maliu was standing there in his rented robe with his plastic gourd on a string. He saw it. He did the thing that every man in this city had been trained by the videos not to do, which is he ran after the thief. He was fifty meters behind the boy and fifty meters in front of me, and I did not see him go, because I was watching the staged robbery on the other side of the crowd, because I had been told about the staged robbery, because the whole night was a production and I had come to watch the production.

By the time I heard the shout and turned, he was already in the lane. By the time I reached the mouth of the lane, it was over. It did not take long. It never takes long. Three men, one boy with a bag, one man in a robe who had come to be brave. The men did not beat him the way men beat a man in a fight. They did it the way you do a job. And then they left him in the lane, and the boy ran on, and the woman whose bag it was never came down the lane at all, because a woman whose bag

is taken does not follow, and everyone knows that, except a man who has decided to be brave for his daughter.

I got to him in time for the last moment. That is the one thing I have, and I do not know whether it is a mercy or a cruelty. He was on his back on the wet ground with his plastic gourd in his hand, and the gourd had cracked, and he was looking up at the sky between the buildings, and he turned his eyes to me, and he was not afraid. That is what I cannot put down. He was not afraid. He watched me in my ordinary jacket and he did not know who I was, and he said, in the voice of someone who has decided something, "Did I get him?"

"No," I said.

"Oh." He closed his eyes. "Tell my girl I tried."

I held him. I held him, and I will not pretend it was only comfort, but the truth is that I held him because I did not know what else to do with my hands, and because the warmth was leaving him and I wanted to be the thing it left into. Somewhere above and behind me the crowd was still roaring at the staged robbery on the other side of the square, and a drone was up, and the phones were all pointed the wrong way, and the story the city would tell the next morning was already being written in four thousand short videos, and it was a story about a fake monk who attacked a man, and it was entirely false, and it was entirely true, because it was happening, and everything that happens in this city is half-invented at the moment it is born.

The police came. The ambulance came. I gave a statement that I knew would be worthless, because I had seen nothing, because I had been watching the wrong thing. Dao-ge watched from his car at the mouth of the lane, and when the police ar - rived he drove away slowly, and he did not hurry, because he was a professional and because he had done this his whole life and because he had a burn scar on his shoulder from a kitchen

fire he had once carried a child out of, and none of that is a contradiction, because that is what men are.

I went to the temple at dawn and I did not sleep. The abbot was up, because he was always up. He studied me and he did not ask, because he did not need to; the whole city knew by then, and the city had already made it into a joke about a drunk who was not a drunk, and a copycat who was not a copycat, and the joke was efficient and complete and it had eaten the man whole.

"Where is the girl?" the abbot said.

"At the tunnel. Asleep. She doesn't know yet."

"Tell her today." He poured congee into two bowls on the step, the way he had a hundred times, and this time he did not hand me mine. He studied me for a moment, and his face, which had been the calmest thing in my life for a year, looked older than I had ever seen it.

"You have a choice now," he said. "You can be the thing the city made, which is a joke that hurts people. Or you can be the thing the man in the lane was trying to be, which is a person who tries, and who dies for it, and whose death teaches nothing by itself." He set the bowl down between us. "There is a third thing, but it is harder. The third thing is someone who keeps the discipline, not the costume, and who makes the city look at what it is eating." He regarded me. "Which of the three are you?"

CHAPTER 18

The Second Half of the Couplet

The aunties paid for the funeral, and I have never been able to say that sentence in a way that carries what it weighed.

Zhang Maliu had a mother in a county town and a daughter of nine and no savings, because a night cook in this city does not have savings; he has a wage and a phone bill and a daughter he sees twice a month. The family could not have buried him properly. His mother wanted him cremated and taken home, and the cost of the cremation and the transport and the small ceremony was more than she had.

So Zhang Niangniang went to the mahjong table the week after he died and she played for three nights the way she plays when it matters, and she won enough to pay the undertaker, and she came to the tunnel on the fourth morning and put the money in an envelope on the counter and said nothing about it, and Wang Niangniang made her a bowl of noodles without being asked, and that is the whole transaction. That is how this city keeps its books.

The ceremony was in a small hall behind the crematorium, the kind with plastic flowers and a rental curtain and a photograph on an easel. There were about forty people. The aunties came. Yaoji came in his one good jacket. Huajiao came and stood at the back in the school jacket with her hands in her pockets and did not speak to anyone. Old Zhou came, in a borrowed suit, with his mother-in-law's clinic bill folded in his pocket. A handful of men from the noodle kitchen came in their aprons, because they had come straight from the shift. And the daughter was there, nine years old, in a white dress, and she did not cry for a moment, and then she cried in the

way children cry when they have been holding it, which is all at once and nothing afterwards.

I have been to funerals in this city where the professional mourners wept louder than the family and the band played and the paper money went up in a column, and I have been to quiet ones, and this was quiet. Nobody made a speech. That is the thing about a death in a city like this: there is no official to speak, because the man was nobody official, and there is no priest to speak, because the family were Christian on one side and nothing on the other, and there was no one left to speak except the people who had paid for the hall, and none of us knew what to say.

So the abbot said it.

He had come without being asked, in his plain grey robe, and he stood by the photograph on the easel with his hands folded and he did not tell anyone that Zhang Maliu was in a better place, because he did not know that, and he did not tell anyone that Zhang Maliu had died for a good reason, because he did not believe that either. What he did was this. He took a piece of paper out of his sleeve, a piece that had been folded and unfolded many times, and he read the rhyme.

"Jiurou chuanchang guo, fo zu xinzhong liu." He read it slowly, in dialect, so that everyone could hear it, and half the room said the words with him, because everyone knew them. "Wine and meat pass through the gut; the Buddha stays in the heart."

Then he paused. He looked at the paper. And he read the second half.

"Shiren ruo xue wo, rutong ru mo dao." He read it again, in dialect. "But if the world should imitate me, it walks straight into the demon's path."

The room was very quiet. The daughter looked up at him. And the abbot folded the paper and put it back in his sleeve

and said, to the room and to me and to the photograph on the easel, "This is the whole thing. We have been saying half of it for a hundred years and calling it wisdom. The second half is not a warning to other people. It is a warning to us. It says: do not mistake the man for the way. The way is not the man.

The man was a fool who stumbled into a life, and the life he stumbled into was the truest thing about him, and if you try to copy the stumbling you will end up in the ditch with him." He looked at Zhang Maliu's daughter. "Your father did not copy the stumbling," he said. "Your father did the one thing the rhyme actually asks. He stayed in the heart. That is the whole thing. That is all of it. And it cost him everything, and that is not a lesson. That is just what happened."

I watched the faces. I watched a man in an apron, a colleague of Zhang Maliu's from the kitchen, hear it and frown, the way a man frowns when a bill arrives that he did not expect. I watched an auntie from the tunnel hear it and nod, the way the aunties nod at things they have known for fifty years and never had a name for. And I watched the daughter, nine years old, in a white dress, look up at the old monk with her mouth slightly open, and I understood that she was hearing, at nine, what it had taken me twenty-eight years and a dead teacher to hear: that the man on the altar was not a model to be copied. He was a warning and a comfort at the same time, and the two were not in contradiction, and the whole trick of living was to hold both.

We ate in the back hall on paper plates. The aunties had made noodles and a soup and a plate of cold chicken, and there was a pot of tea that kept going round, and there was no alcohol on the table, because Zhang Maliu had not drunk and because I had not drunk for eight days at that point and the aunties had quietly made the whole table dry so that I would not have to explain myself. I did not notice for an hour. That is

the aunties. They do not make a rule for you; they make the world so that the rule is not needed.

The daughter ate two bowls. She was nine, and she had cried, and after the crying she was hungry, the way children are, and Wang Niangniang fed her the way Wang Niangniang fed everyone, without announcing it. The men from the kitchen yard sat at one end of the table and told stories about Zhang Maliu, and the stories were all about food, because he was a cook and because that is how his friends remembered him: the time he made a soup out of nothing, the time he burned the duck and served it anyway and it became a menu item, the time he fell asleep standing up with a wok in his hand. There was the sound of people laughing at a funeral, which is the sound this city makes when it decides that a person was real enough to be joked about.

And at the end, when the plates were cleared and the daughter had fallen asleep against her grandmother's shoulder, old Uncle Tuo, who had come up from the river in a clean jacket, stood up and said the only eulogy anything got that day, which was: "He was a cook. He fed people and he did not take their money. That is more than most." Then he sat down and drank his tea, and no one clapped, and no one needed to. The hall emptied. The aunties stacked the plates.

There is a way of feeding people that is a form of accounting, and there is a way that is a form of love, and the aunties had done the second so long that the two had become the same motion.

I want to say one more thing about that meal, because it is the part of the day the city does not film. A funeral in this city has two halves: the ceremony, which is for the dead and for the neighbors, and the meal, which is for the living and for the family. The ceremony is where people say what they are supposed to say. The meal is where they say what they actually

feel, and they say it by putting food on a plate and pushing it across a table. Nobody at that table said the word dead. The men from the kitchen told their food stories, and the aunties refilled the bowls, and the daughter ate, and the whole thing was, in the truest sense, a delivery: a set of people carrying what the dead man had left behind to the people who were going to have to live in it. The daughter would be fed by that table for years. She did not know it yet. The aunties did.

And there was one more thing, which I did not understand until later, which is that the aunties had already decided, at that table, that the girl would be theirs. They did not say it. They never say it. But the second bowl, the refilled bowl, was the whole adoption, and the daughter ate it, and that was the contract, and it held.

I walked the abbot back to the temple. It was the first day of November, and the fog was back, and the city was in the long grey season where the sky and the river and the buildings are all the same colour, and neither of us said anything for a time.

"He was trying to copy me," I said.

"He was trying to copy the story of you. That is a different thing, it is the thing that killed him." The abbot walked with his hands in his sleeves. "The man in the alley was not a fool and he was not a saint. He was a man who had been trained, by you, by the videos, by the city, to believe that the correct response to an injustice is to run into it alone with a broken fan. Nobody ever taught him the second half. You did not teach him the second half, because you did not know it either. That is why I am telling you now."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Stop being the thing they can copy." He stopped at the temple gate and turned to me. "You are not Ji Gong. You are a drunk who found a discipline. There is a difference, and the difference is everything. Ji Gong was mad like a Buddha. You

are mad like yourself. If you keep being mad like yourself, in front of a camera, the city will make a religion out of the film and the next Zhang Maliu will die in the same alley, and his blood will be on the image, and the image will be yours."

I stood in the fog and looked at the gate and did not answer.

"You drank after Liziba," he said. It was not a question.

"Yes."

"You drank after Cui San."

"Yes."

"And you are drinking now."

"In my pocket," I said. "I haven't opened it."

"Yet."

"Yet."

The abbot nodded, as if I had confirmed a fact he already had in his book. "Here is the test, and it remains the only test I will ever set you, and if you fail it I will not set another. Forty-nine days of congee. Plain congee and rice and vegetables and nothing else, one bowl at each meal, and no liquor at all, and no fan, and no saving of girls, and no crowd. Forty-nine days. Then one full week sober, with the fan still in the drawer.

If you can do that, at the end of it you may put the fan on again, and you may do what you do, and I will help you do it. If you cannot, then you are not a discipline and you never were, and the whole thing was a costume, and you should go back to delivering noodles and drinking pouches and leave the saving of the city to the people who are not lying to themselves."

"Forty-nine days is a long time," I said. "The network has people who need us. The funnel is still moving. Wen Xiaoyu is still gone."

"Yes," the abbot said. "That is what makes it a test and not a holiday. The clock is against you. It was always going to be against you. That is how you know it is real." He opened the gate. "Come in and sweep."

I looked back down the hill before I followed him. The fog was thick and the streetlights were only stains, and a car was parked on the corner where no car parks, and a man was standing beside it with a cigarette, and he was not looking at me, or he was looking at me without looking, which is the way men in his profession look at everything. He was a big man, heavy through the shoulders, and the coat he wore did not hide the way he stood, which was balanced and patient and a little bit ruined. He had a scar that ran up under his collar on the left side, and when he raised the cigarette I saw his face, and I knew, without knowing how, that he had known my father.

He did not move. He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it and got back into the car, and the car pulled away and was eaten by the fog, and I stood at the gate of the temple with the second half of the couplet in my ears and the first day of the forty-nine in front of me, and I realised that the whole next part of my life was going to be an argument with two dead men and one living one: the father who fell on the stairs, the grandfather who died on them, and the porter-shaped man on the corner who had chosen the other road and was now watching me walk into the temple.

CHAPTER 19

Withdrawal

The first three days were the worst of my life, and I have been beaten with a shoe and watched a man die in a lane, so I want you to understand what I am comparing them to.

It began on the second of November, which was the day after the abbot set the test, and it began the way it always be - gins, which is with a bargain. I told myself I would taper. I told myself a man my size could not simply stop, that the body needed to come down gently, that a pouch in the morning and a pouch at night was not drinking, it was management. I told myself these things in the voice of a reasonable person, and the reasonable person bought a pouch and put it in the drawer and did not open it, and then lay on the bed and looked at the ceiling and began to calculate how long the shop downstairs stayed open.

The body knows before the mind does. By the afternoon my hands were shaking in a way I had never seen them shake, a fine tremor that turned into a coarse one when I tried to hold the phone, and my heart was going at the speed of a man being chased, and there was a slick cold sweat on my back and my thighs that had nothing to do with the weather.

I have to say something about the body, because the book has treated the gaoliang as a character and now the character had to leave and the leaving was physical.

The first thing that happens is that you sweat, and the sweat is not the sweat of heat or effort; it is a cold, thin, constant film that comes out of the skin without asking, and it does not stop for three days. The second thing is that your hands acquire a mind of their own, a fine tremor that becomes coarse when

you try to use them, so that a bowl of congee is a hazard and a phone is a foreign object.

The third thing is the sleep, or the absence of it: the body is exhausted and the nervous system will not allow the exhaustion to become rest, and so you lie in a state that is neither asleep nor awake and watch the ceiling turn from dark to grey to dark again, and you count things, and the things you count are the years.

I could not eat the congee the aunties sent up. I drank water until my stomach hurt and then threw the water up, and I sat on the floor of the little room above the fish market with my back against the bed and my arms around my knees and waited for it to pass, and it did not pass.

I am not going to turn this into a medical text, because it is not one, and because the book has more important business. But I will say this, and I will say it plainly, because the guardrail of this whole story is that the bottle is a disease and not a costume.

On the second night my whole body cramped, and I saw things at the edges of the room, small quick movements that were not there when I turned my head, and my mouth tasted of metal and old sweetness, and I realised, with the floor cold under me, that I had been drinking not for pleasure and not for courage but because my body had rewritten itself around the liquor, the way a river rewrites itself around a stone.

The aunties took shifts. I did not ask them to. Zhang Niangniang came in the mornings and Wang Niangniang came in the afternoons and Liu Niangniang came at night with a flask of soup I could not drink and sat in the chair by the wall and talked to me in a low voice about people who had died, hers and mine, as if the talking itself were the medicine, and I have thought since that it was. Huajiao came once and did not come again.

The aunties knew all of this before I did, because the aunties had lived through the last thirty years of this city, and every one of them had buried a husband or a brother or a neighbor who had come apart in exactly this way and had not been taken to a place where a doctor could watch him. That is the part I want to get down. What happened to me, on the floor of a rented room with three old women taking shifts and a fif - teen-year-old standing in the doorway for ten seconds before she closed up like a shop, was what happens in this city to thousands of men without the three old women and the floor.

The difference between my withdrawal and theirs was not courage and it was not medicine. It was company. It was three women who had learned, in a lifetime of aunts and cooks and mahjong players, that the only treatment for a person coming apart is to be present, and to keep the water coming, and to not make a speech about it, and to sit in the chair by the wall and talk about the dead so that the person on the floor is not alone with his own.

Sobriety, when it finally came, was not a light. It was a room with no furniture in it, and I had to sit in it, and I had to learn that the room was not the punishment. The room was the life. The punishment had been everything before it. I have never trusted a man who calls his recovery a gift. It was not a gift. It was a room I had to furnish, one chair at a time, and the chair I am sitting in now is one I made myself.

And here is the thing about the company, which I did not understand until I had been through it. A man coming off the bottle is not cured by argument, and he is not cured by shame, and he is not cured by a speech from a monk. He is cured, to the extent he is cured at all, by the ordinary presence of people who do not make a project of him. Zhang Niangniang in the morning with the congee. Wang Niangniang in the afternoon with the floor swept. Liu Niangniang at night with her stories

of the dead. None of them ever said the word recovery. They said, eat this, sleep now, drink the water, and by saying noth - ing they made the whole thing bearable, which is the only medicine that has ever worked on a man like me.

I thought about my father during those days, which I had not done honestly in twenty years. He had been a man who worked with his body until his body was taken from him by a refrigerator on a stair, and I had built him into an image: the silent porter, the honest back, the man who died so that a neighborhood could be sold.

She stood in the doorway for about ten seconds, in the school jacket, and looked at me shaking on the floor, and her face did something I had not seen it do before, which was to close completely, the way a shop closes, and then she was gone, and I did not see her for four days, and later I came to see that she could not watch it, because watching a person come apart is the one thing she had never been trained for.

The beggar came on the third night.

I want to be exact about it, because the whole discipline of this book depends on being exact. It was about three in the morning, and I had not slept and had not eaten and had been shaking for thirty hours without stopping, and the room was dark except for the streetlight coming through the window and lying on the floor in a long cold rectangle. In the far corner, beside the wardrobe where the landlord kept the extra bed - ding, there was a shape. It was a man. He was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, cross-legged, and he was waiting, and after a while, because I did not turn my head, he laughed.

It was the same laugh. Not a cruel one, not a kind one, some third thing, the laugh of a man who has decided that the whole apparatus, the room and the shaking and the debt and the city and the two of us, is a joke of enormous length and that the

only correct response to it is to enjoy it. He was ragged and barefoot and there was a gourd at his hip and a broken fan in his hand, and I did not look at him directly, because if you look at a thing directly it becomes a fact, and I was in no position to be handing out facts.

I said, out loud, in the voice of a man negotiating with his own fever: "You're not real."

He laughed again, and I do not know what he said, because I could not hear it over the shaking of my own jaw, and then I closed my eyes for what I thought was one second, and when I opened them the corner was empty and the streetlight had moved and it was morning.

I have gone over that night more than any other night of the year, and here is the account I give, and this is the account I will stand behind. I was in alcohol withdrawal. Alcohol withdrawal is a condition in which the nervous system, having been suppressed for years, fires without restraint, and one of its well-documented symptoms is visual hallucination. I had not slept in three days. I had not eaten. My body was flooded with the particular chemicals of terror.

The corner of that room contained a wardrobe, a pile of landlord bedding, and a coat on a hook, and the human brain is a machine for finding faces in coats on hooks. That is the medical reading, and it is a good one, and it was available to me that very morning and I took it. There is no other reading that I am going to endorse, and there is no other reading that I am going to deny. I was sick. A sick man sees things. That is what the book says, and the book is not going to say anything else.

But I will tell you what I did with the rest of that week, because that is the part that matters it is the part that no fever can explain.

On the fourth day the shaking eased enough for me to sit up, and on the fifth day I could eat, and on the sixth day I did the thing the abbot had told me to do, which was nothing. That was the hardest instruction of the whole test, harder than the abstinence, and I want to give it its own sentence: he told me to do nothing, and I had never done nothing in my life.

I had spent every sober hour of my adulthood doing some - thing for somebody, and I had never once stopped to ask what the doing was for. So I sat in the room above the fish market for three days with a bowl of congee and my phone and the drawer with the pouch in it, and I looked at my own life the way you look at a room after the guests have gone.

What I saw, in order, was this.

I saw that my mother had called eleven times since the spring and that I had answered none of them, and I read the messages in a row instead of one at a time, and that is a thing I had never done, and the row said: How are you. Have you eaten. The weather here is cold too. Send a photo.

What are you doing with your life. And then, three months later, a single message with no punctuation, which is the way she sends things when she is worried: I saw a video of a man in Chongqing who saves people. Is it you. I put the phone down and picked it up again and did not answer, because I could not think of a true thing to say, and because a lie would have been worse, and because the drawer was three feet away and the pouch in it was a solution.

I saw Tingting's invitation, still in the bag, lavender, good paper. I had been carrying another man's wedding to a girl I had failed, for eleven months, in a bag of noodles, and I had told myself it was sentiment and it was not sentiment, it was a receipt, because as long as I carried the invitation I did not have to admit that I had been left and that I had deserved to be left. I took it out and looked at the names. I did not throw it

away. I put it back, because I am not someone who throws things away, and that is not a virtue, it is just the other half of the same disease.

I saw my cousin. Not the man; the board. He had taken a photograph of the foam board behind the counter at the tun - nel and sent it to me on the fifth day, with a caption that said only it' s getting full. The sticky notes were the loan racket, the collectors, the shell companies, the teahouse on Tuesdays, the man with the good watch who was now a fact in a folder. And under the board, in his handwriting, there was a single line that I had not seen before, added in a different colour: for Biao-ge, who was already doing this before I got here.

He had written it as a joke, or half as a joke, the way boys write things they cannot say. I looked at it for a moment and understood that my cousin had been keeping a faith with me for twenty years that I had never once noticed, and that I had repaid it by being the person he had to rescue, and that there is no arithmetic in the world that makes that come out even.

CHAPTER 20

The Vault Under the City

The vault was a fangkongdong, which should surprise no one who has been paying attention, because in this city the war is still under the streets and everything that cannot be done in the light gets done in the dark that the war left behind.

Yaoji had found it the way he found everything, which was by listening to people who did not know they were being listened to. A rider in the group chat mentioned that a certain man went into a certain door near the Mountain City Trail on Tuesdays and came out with a briefcase. A city worker mentioned that the old shelter under that stretch had been "closed" in the nineties and never filled in.

Liu Niangniang remembered that a collector she had not seen in years had once told her, drunk, that he did not keep his paperwork at home because a fire could take a house but not a hole in the ground. And Zhang Niangniang's locksmith grandson had done a job in the building above it and had come away saying that the basement had a second basement, which is the kind of sentence that in this city is not a metaphor.

So they mapped it. That was the word Yaoji used, and he used it with the pride of a man who has finally found the job his whole strange education was for. He took the riders' knowledge of the service tunnels and the aunties' knowledge of the old shelter network and a map from the municipal archive that Liu Niangniang obtained from a retired clerk who owed her money, and he laid it all on the board, and the board became a plan.

The operation had a shape, and I need to describe the shape, because the city later made it into a heist and the city's heist had a hero and our heist had a map.

Yaoji was the brain and the board, and he ran the whole night from a laundry in Jiangbei, of all places, because the laundry belonged to a cousin of Zhang Niangniang and because the machines made a noise that defeated any microphone and because a man doing his laundry at midnight is the most invisible man in China. Liu Niangniang ran the counter and the tea and, more importantly, the telephone, because the telephone was the whole operation: she called four different people in four different offices over four hours, and each call was a small social visit, and by the end of the four hours the city's attention had been moved, the way a mahjong player moves the tiles, away from the one door we needed.

The riders did the street. There were eleven of them, and none of them were told what they were doing, and each of them was given a small task that was consistent with their job: hold this corner for ten minutes, keep this gate open, tell me when the white car comes back.

You do not ask people to break the law; you ask them to do their jobs at a particular time and place, and you do not tell them what it is for, and the city takes care of the rest. The riders did not know they were running cover. They only knew that a man in the group chat had asked them, and that he had helped them with a battery once, and that is enough, in that economy, for a small favor.

Huajiao did the wall, and I have already said what the wall cost her, and I am not going to repeat it here, because the book does not owe a child's courage to its own plot. What I will say is that when she came out of the vent at the end and I helped her pull the dust out of her collar, she was shaking, and she

hid it immediately, and the thing she said was not about the danger or the guard or the server.

She said, "There were folders with photographs in them. In plastic. Like school photos." And then she said, "I didn't look," and I realised that she had been given a choice inside that wall that no one had planned to give her, and that she had made the choice her mother had not made, and that the choice had cost her something I could not see.

I was not in the first week of it. I was in the room above the fish market, learning to do nothing, and the crew built the operation without me, and I have to record that it worked perfectly well without me, because that is a fact that a man in my position needs to sit with. Huajiao did the entry. She had been in and out twice before we moved, once as a lost school-girl asking for a toilet and once at three in the morning through a vent that Yaoji's map said did not exist.

The aunties did the lookouts and the cooking and the codes, because a mahjong table is the best cover in this country and because a woman of sixty-eight who is winning three hands in a row is invisible. And my cousin did what my cousin does, which was to sit in a mall with a radio and hold the whole thing in his head.

My role, when the night came, was to be the loud one.

It is not a small role and I am not going to pretend it is. The operation needed the street outside the building to be thinking about something other than the building, and the street was a night market, and the thing a night market cannot resist is a commotion that is not dangerous. So at ten past ten on a Tuesday in late November I walked into the middle of that market without a fan and without a single drop of liquor in my blood, and I did what I had spent a year learning to do, which was to be a drunk man.

I want to be very clear about the difference, because the abbot had spent the whole year teaching it to me and this was the first night I used it on purpose. I was not drunk. I had been sober for twenty-six days. But I had watched drunks my whole life, and I had been one, and the body remembers what it was, and I let the body do it while the mind stayed behind the eyes. I staggered. I sang the old song, badly.

I complained to a fruit seller about the price of the fruit, and then to the same fruit seller about the weather, and then to a stranger about the fruit seller. I dropped a bag of oranges, which I had bought on purpose, and the oranges went under everyone's feet, and the market did the thing a market does, which is to stop and help and complain at the same time, and for eleven minutes the entire street was looking at a fool in a yellow jacket and not at the door of the building.

Inside, Huajiao was already down. The vent came out behind a row of filing cabinets in the outer room of the vault, and the outer room was lit by a single bulb and smelled of paper and damp and something sweeter underneath. She did not take the files. That was the discipline Yaoji had insisted on, and it was the right call, because files can be missed and files can be traced. What she took was photographs. She went along the shelves with a phone and photographed every folder's spine and every page she could reach, and she photographed the ledgers, and she photographed the wooden shelf where the oldest things were kept, bound with string, in envelopes that had gone soft with handling.

It took her nineteen minutes. The plan allowed for twenty-five. She came out through the vent at the back of the building and along the service lane and into the mahjong parlor, where Zhang Niangniang dealt her a hand as if she had been sitting there all night, and the three of us played for an hour, badly, and then went home in the fog.

The photographs were on Yaoji's laptop by morning. That is the part of this I still cannot quite get used to, the speed of it, the way a thing that used to be carried in a briefcase and buried in a hole in the ground can be in a room above a mahjong table before the man who owns it has finished his breakfast. We drank tea, the four of us, and Yaoji scrolled, and the city's secret life went past on the screen like a river.

There were hundreds. I am not going to describe most of them, because most of them were the same, and because the people in them deserve better than to be a list in a book. Campus loans, some taken out for a surgery, some for a phone, some for a flight home, all of them with the same interest and the same photographs as collateral. Collection sheets with names and addresses and phone numbers and, in a column on the right, small paternal notes in the same handwriting that told the collector which method to use, because there was a method, and the method depended on what the borrower loved.

A folder of settlements, marked in red. A folder of girls who had gone east or south or abroad, with photographs of high-rise windows and no return address, and a separate list with two columns, one headed placed and one headed pending, and the handwriting in that list was not the collector's handwriting but a neat, educated hand that used proper punctuation, which I noticed, because the men with knives do not use proper punctuation.

And at the back, on the oldest shelf, in an envelope that had been opened and closed so many times that the flap had the softness of cloth, there was the file.

Yaoji opened it on the screen and we all leaned in. It was not a folder of crimes. It was a folder of paperwork, which is worse. It was a redevelopment file from the mid-2000s, from the years when this city was being taken apart and sold and

put back together at a different height, and it was for a plot of land on the slope above Chaotianmen.

The plot had a name on it that I had not read in nineteen years and that I will not write here in full, because I am not going to turn my grandfather's teahouse into a document. The file had the survey, and the compensation schedule, and the list of households, and the date of the clearance, and the name of the contractor, and the name of the developer, and at the bottom, on the last page, where the authorising signature went, there was a signature.

It was not a scribble. It was a careful, educated hand, the same hand as the list, the hand that used proper punctuation, and beside it a second signature from a district office and a third from a bank, and the whole page had the mild bureaucratic beauty of a thing that had been done correctly, in the daylight, by people who were going home to dinner.

Tan Hong.

I sat there for a moment. The tunnel went on around us, the tiles clicking, the hotpot boiling at the far end, and nobody said anything, because the three of them had understood what they were looking at before I did, and they were waiting for me to catch up.

Let me describe what I felt, because it was not the thing the scene requires. The scene requires a man to feel the hand of fate, to understand that the villain who erased his childhood is the same villain he has been fighting all year, to shake his fist at the symmetry of the universe. I did not feel any of that. What I felt was a small, cold, almost professional calm, because I had been waiting my whole life for a signal that the world was a system, and now I had one, and the signal said that the world was not a system of fate at all.

It was a system of contracts. My grandfather's teahouse had not fallen to a curse or a curse-shaped man. It had been

signed away, page by page, by a young contractor with a careful hand, who had bought the land because it was cheap and cleared it because it was in the way and moved on to the next thing, exactly as he would have done to any other block of stinking little houses on any other slope.

It was not fate. It was monopoly. That is the sentence I said out loud in the tunnel. The man who had taken my father's river and my grandfather's stairs and my childhood and my name had not been aiming at me. He had not even been aiming. He had simply been collecting, the way a river collects, and I and mine had been in the water.

"So he's the one," Yaoji said, quietly.

"He's the one who signed," I said. "That's different."

"It's the same."

"No." I looked at the screen. "If it's the same, then it's fate, and if it's fate then there's nothing underneath it and I'm just a man who got deleted by a storm. But it's not the same. He's a man. Someone who did arithmetic. And a man who does arithmetic can be shown the arithmetic he did."

Huajiao had not spoken. She was sitting at the end of the table with her hands around a cup of tea she was not drinking, and she was looking at the list of girls, the two columns, the placed and the pending, and she was reading it the way she read everything, which was from the top, in order, like homework. After a while she looked up and said the thing that turned the whole night from a discovery into a plan.

"The list is not finished," she said. "The placed column has the southeast. The pending column has our city. Wen Xiaoyu is in the pending column."

Yaoji leaned over and found the line. He read the name and the code beside it and the small column headed processing, and his face went still in a way I had never seen, and then he

said, in the flat voice he used when he was scared of his own competence: “She’s still here.”

The vault had given us the monster. That was the easy part. The vault had also given us a reason to move. The reason had a name and a student card and a brother who had vanished into the same fog, and the reason was still, for now, inside the city.

INTERLUDE 21

The Report, and the Candles

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1. INCIDENT SUMMARY (MUNICIPAL FIRE AND RESCUE)

INCIDENT: Structure fire, Luohan Temple, Minzu Road, Yuzhong District **DATE:** 14 December **TIME OF CALL:** 02:41 **TIME UNDER CONTROL:** 05:18 **UNITS:** 11 appliances, 2 aerial platforms, 1 command unit **CAUSE (preliminary):** Electrical fault in the east cloister; ignition of stacked restoration materials. Materials recovered from the site are described in the annex as "foam-rubber composites and synthetic batting," inconsistent with the temple's stated restoration programme. The annex notes this discrepancy and recommends no further action pending review. **DAMAGE:** Total loss of the east cloister and the kitchen range. The Arhat Hall (five hundred clay figures) sustained partial smoke and water damage; 61 figures described as "irrecoverable," 214 as "restorable," 225 as "unaffected." The Song-dynasty bell was removed before the roof fell. The donation box was recovered intact. **CASUALTIES:** One fatality. Male, 74, a monastic resident, cause of death smoke inhalation. One minor injury: a female caregiver, 83, deaf, removed from the east cloister by a member of the public at 02:52. The names are withheld at the family's request. **NOTES:** The fire service records no accelerant. The insurers' report is appended at Annex 7 and is not reproduced here. The Foundation for Cultural Renewal has pledged reconstruction

funds in the amount of ¥2,000,000. Reconstruction is expected to begin in the spring.

3. WITNESS STATEMENT (TRANSLATED EXTRACT)

Recorded at the scene, 14 December, 04:10. Male, 52, night watchman, a neighbouring block.

"From my window I could see the courtyard. I see it every night. I have seen that courtyard for eleven years and nothing happens in it. At about twenty to three I saw two men come over the wall by the east side. They were not hurrying. One of them was carrying something in a can. I thought they were the restoration men, because the restoration men had been com - ing and going for a month. I did not think anything. Then they went into the cloister and the light changed, and they came out and went back over the wall, and it was only when the light changed that I understood.

I did not call anyone for four minutes. I want to say that. I stood at my window for four minutes because I was deciding whether it was my business, and then I called. If I had called four minutes sooner, the old one might be alive. That is what I think about now. I am not a bad man. I was deciding whether it was my business."

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2. LIVESTREAM — "HELP US LIGHT A CANDLE FOR LUOHAN TEMPLE"

The following is a transcript of the chat column and the host's spoken lines, captured between 02:44 and 05:30. The channel's host is not visible. The candle graphic is a looped animation. The donation counter is in the top right corner of

the frame. Chat is slow-mode, one message per user per thirty seconds.

02:44 **HOST:** Friends, a fire has started at Luohan Temple. We are lighting candles. Every candle is free. If you can, donate. All donations go to the rebuilding.

02:46 **CHAT:** lit one for the abbot 02:46 **CHAT:** which abbot 02:47 **CHAT:** the old one. the one who feeds the drunk 02:47 **CHAT:** I heard he's still inside 02:48 **CHAT:** don't say that 02:48 **CHAT:** I'm watching a livestream of it, the roof is gone 02:49 **CHAT:** ^ don't post links 02:50 **DONATION:** ¥20 — for the temple 02:51 **CHAT:** yi zhu yi yuan (一烛一愿) 02:52 **CHAT:** is the cat okay 02:53 **CHAT:** WHAT CAT 02:53 **CHAT:** the temple cat. it sits on the bell 02:54 **HOST:** Friends, we do not have information about the cat. We are lighting candles.

02:58 **CHAT:** my grandmother's ashes were blessed there in 1998 02:59 **CHAT:** the arhats 02:59 **CHAT:** are the arhats okay 03:00 **CHAT:** 500 of them. clay. you cannot replace them 03:01 **CHAT:** you can 3D print them 03:01 **CHAT:** shut up 03:02 **CHAT:** I'm not saying it's the same. I'm saying it's pos-sible 03:02 **CHAT:** it's not the same 03:03 **DONATION:** ¥100 — anonymous 03:04 **DONATION:** ¥5 — student 03:05 **CHAT:** even five yuan matters 03:06 **CHAT:** I don't have five yuan. I lit three candles. 03:06 **HOST:** That is enough. A candle is enough.

03:11 **CHAT:** where is Ji Gong 03:12 **CHAT:** what 03:12 **CHAT:** the drunk. the one who saves people. where is he 03:13 **CHAT:** probably drunk 03:14 **CHAT:** ^ blocked 03:15 **CHAT:** no I mean it. if he's real he should be there 03:16 **CHAT:** he's a meme 03:17 **CHAT:** he's a man 03:17 **CHAT:** you don't know that 03:18 **CHAT:** I know a man was in that courtyard every day for a year. I don't know if he's the meme. I know he's a man.

03:24 CHAT: the fire’s out 03:25 CHAT: it’s not out 03:25 CHAT: the east cloister is gone 03:26 CHAT: they got the bell out 03:27 DONATION: ¥2,000 — Hongfa Culture & Wellness Co., Ltd. 03:27 CHAT: … 03:28 CHAT: … 03:28 CHAT: the company that owns the fake ji gong just donated two thousand 03:29 CHAT: that’s the company that wants to build the tower 03:29 CHAT: take the money. the roof needs it. 03:30 CHAT: take the money. the roof needs it. 03:31 CHAT: take the money. the roof needs it. 03:32 CHAT: you people would sell anything 03:33 CHAT: and you would let the temple burn to keep your hands clean 03:33 HOST: Friends. Peace. We are lighting candles.

03:47 CHAT: they found him 03:48 CHAT: who 03:48 CHAT: the abbot 03:49 CHAT: … 03:50 CHAT: he went back in for the caretaker’s cat. that’s what they’re saying 03:51 CHAT: that’s not what they’re saying 03:51 CHAT: that’s what I heard 03:52 CHAT: he went back in for a person 03:53 CHAT: what person 03:54 CHAT: I don’t know. a person.

04:02 CHAT: yi zhu yi yuan 04:03 CHAT: yi zhu yi yuan 04:04 CHAT: yi zhu yi yuan 04:05 DONATION: ¥50 — for the abbot 04:06 DONATION: ¥50 — for the abbot 04:07 DONATION: ¥8.88 — for the abbot 04:08 CHAT: I never met him 04:09 CHAT: I met him once. I was drunk and he gave me congee 04:10 CHAT: are you the drunk 04:11 CHAT: no 04:11 CHAT: ok 04:12 CHAT: but also yes

04:30 CHAT: I keep thinking about the second half 04:31 CHAT: what second half 04:32 CHAT: the rhyme. everyone knows the first half. there’s a second half 04:33 CHAT: what is it 04:33 CHAT: I don’t know. that’s the problem 04:34 CHAT: it’s about nobody imitating him 04:35 CHAT: what does that mean 04:36 CHAT: it means the man who ran into the alley last month was reading the first half 04:37 CHAT: …

04:41 CHAT: my mother is crying and she doesn't know why 04:42 CHAT: because it's a real fire 04:43 CHAT: everything here is real except the screen 04:50 DONATION: ¥200 — from a delivery rider 04:51 CHAT: riders, light a candle for the one who carries your food 04:52 CHAT: lit 04:53 CHAT: lit 05:00 HOST: Friends, the hall is standing. The hall is standing.

05:12 HOST: Friends, the fire is under control. The temple will rebuild. Light your candles. Keep them lit through the night. 05:13 CHAT: lit 05:14 CHAT: lit 05:15 CHAT: lit 05:16 DONATION: ¥1,000 — in memory of Zhang Maliu, who tried 05:17 CHAT: who 05:18 CHAT: the man from the alley 05:19 CHAT: oh 05:20 CHAT: there's no candle for him 05:21 HOST: Friends, every candle is for everyone.

05:29 CHAT: the sun's coming up 05:30 CHAT: the fog ate it

— stream ends at 05:30. total candles lit: 1,204,776. total donations: ¥418,900. the counter stops updating at 05:31. the host does not say goodbye.

CHAPTER 21

A Desk Drawer of Nothing

We took the archive to Officer Tian Tian first, because I had trusted her since the cableway, and because a year of watching this city had taught me that the institution is not the enemy; the institution is a machine that will do the right thing if you feed it the right shape of paper and if no one with money is standing at the intake.

What I have not described is the conversation with Tian that happened after the drawer, because it is the closest this book comes to showing what an honest institution looks like from the inside.

We met at the noodle shop again, and she was off duty, and she ate while I talked, and when I had finished she did something I had not seen a police officer do in this city, which was to apologize.

"I let you down," she said.

"You filed it."

"I filed it. That's not the promise I made you. I made you a promise with my face, and I kept it with a drawer, and those are two different promises. She put down her chopsticks. "You want to know what I actually think? I think the umbrella is not a person. Everybody wants the umbrella to be a person, a big man in an office, and then you can arrest him and it's over. The umbrella is a set of habits. It's the habit of the file going up instead of down. It's the habit of the case that's too big for the desk that's too small.

It's the habit of nobody's name being on the paper. I have been in this force nine years and I have never once seen a bribe. I have seen a hundred decisions where the honest thing

was technically available and nobody chose it, and every one of those decisions had a reason, and every reason was reasonable, and the reasons added up to a wall. She looked at the table. "And the wall has a girl's name in it, and a cook's name in it, and now it has your name in it, because you brought me a folder, and I put it in the drawer."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to tell me the day before you do the next thing. Not the plan. Just the day." She picked up her chopsticks again. "Because if you go into that tower without telling me, then I can't choose, and if I can't choose then I'm just the drawer, and I did not spend nine years in this uniform to be a drawer."

The eleven days between the vault and the woman were the quietest of the year, and they were the worst, because quiet is what a man like me is not built for.

I need to record what I did with the waiting, because there is a version of this book in which the hero waits with dignity and sharpens his resolve, and that is not what happened. What happened is that I worked. I took the runs nobody wanted, the far ones, the ones that cross the river twice; I rode fourteen hours a day and slept and rode again, and I told myself I was keeping my mind off the archive and the truth is that I was trying to earn back the right to the room I was sleeping in by the only means a man like me had ever trusted, which is labor.

I swept the courtyard at the temple, in the mornings, though the board had filed me; the novice let me in and pretended not to see me, and the abbot, who was alive then, would watch me from the step and say nothing, and I have come to believe that the watching was the point, and that he was measuring something and I never found out what.

Yingtao went dark on the ninth day, which I have already described, and what I did not describe is that I stood across the

street from her building on the eleventh night with two packets of noodles in a bag, because I had bought them out of a habit I did not know I had, and because I could not think of a better way to say a thing I did not have words for. I did not go up.

I stood in the fog for about twenty minutes with the noodles going cold, and I told myself that the reason was that she had asked for space, and the real reason was that I was afraid of what she would see if I came to her door, which is a man with burned hands and a stolen archive and a debt and a name he had never said out loud to anyone on this side of the river.

I ate both packets myself, one after the other, on a bench, and then I went home, and that is the whole of how I handled the waiting. Not dignity. Noodles on a bench in the fog, and the archive three feet from a woman who did not yet know whether she could carry it.

She met us in a noodle shop near the district office, in the afternoon, off duty, and she listened to the whole thing without interrupting, which I have come to understand is the rarest skill in any police force. I told her about the vault, and the folders, and the two columns, and the envelope at the back. I gave her a thumb drive, and she looked at it on the table and did not pick it up.

"Everything on this is photographs," she said.

"Yes."

"Photographs of documents, taken by a minor, in a place you entered illegally, with no chain of custody, no warrant, and no admissible origin."

"Yes."

"Mr. Li." She rubbed her eyes. "Do you know what I can do with this? I can do exactly one thing. I can put it in a drawer. And then I can watch the drawer."

"That's not nothing."

"It is very close to nothing. It is the shape of nothing. It looks like work and it feels like work and at the end of it noth - ing has moved, because the file is a photograph and the pho - tograph is not evidence, and the men above the men above me will ask me how I came to have it, and I will have to say I re - ceived it from a member of the public, and they will ask which member, and then they will ask about you." She watched me with the flat tired patience of a person who has had this con - versation before. "Do you want them to ask about you?"

"No."

"Then the drawer is the safest place for it. The drawer is where evidence goes to wait for a day when somebody with a bigger desk decides it is worth the risk. Sometimes that day comes. I have been on the force nine years and I have seen it come twice." She picked up the thumb drive and put it in her pocket. "I will file it. That is a promise. I will file it and I will flag it internally and I will not lose it. That is everything that I can do, and it is not enough, and I am telling you that now so that you do not build anything on it."

I knew about her daughter by then. I had not been told, exactly; I had seen the phone wallpaper when she pulled out her phone, and I had asked Liu Niangniang, who remembered, because Liu Niangniang remembers everything. The girl had a condition with a long name and a treatment with a long price, and the family's debts had been quietly bought by a company that was a shell of a shell of Hongfa, which meant that Officer Tian was standing at the edge of the same trap as every other debtor in the archive, only she was standing there in a uni - form, which made it worse, because she could see the shape of the thing from the inside and still had to salute it.

I did not say any of that out loud. I have wondered since whether I should have. The book does not get to decide what she owed the truth. I only know that she kept the drive and

kept her promise and that for the next three weeks the drawer did what drawers do.

So we went to the other lever, which was publicity, and the other lever did not exist.

That was the discovery of that week, and it was a duller discovery than I expected. In my head, the plan had always ended with the city finding out. I had spent a year watching the city find things out, and I had made the mistake that everyone in this city makes, which is to believe that the internet is a public square. It is not a public square. It is a shopping mall, and the mall has owners, and the owners decide which of the doors you are allowed to see.

Tan Xiao had understood this before any of us. His channels, his foundations, his virtual candles, his goodwill campaigns, his handsome fake in the costume: they were not vanity, they were locks, and by the end of the year he had more doors than the temple and more monks than the mountain. If Yingtao posted an accusation against Hongfa, it would go out to her eighty thousand followers, and by the afternoon Hongfa's own network would have three cheerful videos about temple rebuilding and a charity livestream, and the accusation would be a stone in a river.

I said this to Yaoji in the tunnel, and he did what he always did, which was to agree with the facts and then refuse the conclusion.

"Then we don't post an accusation," he said. "We post a document."

"It's the same."

"It isn't. An accusation is a person saying a thing. A document is a thing. The internet is very good at ignoring people it does not like and very bad at ignoring a document." He tapped the laptop. "But you're right about one part. It has to

go through her. She's the only camera in this city that isn't for sale, and if it doesn't go through her it's nothing."

"Then go to her," I said.

"I can't." He watched me in a way that was almost apologetic. "I know what she is to you, or what she's going to be, whatever. I don't get to be the one who tells her. You do."

"Because I'm the story."

"Because you're the man." He said it without any romance at all. "She's been chasing the man for a year. If the driver comes to her, she'll think it's a scam. If the man comes to her, she'll think it's an ambush, and she'll be right, and she'll still listen. That's the difference."

I did not go that night. I want to be honest about the delay, because it lasted four days, and the four days were the last quiet days of the year. I told myself I was waiting for the right moment. I told myself I was protecting her, which is the lie that every man tells himself when what he is actually protecting is the shape of his own life. The truth was simpler and less flattering. As long as I did not go to her, I got to keep the convenience store.

I got to keep the one room in this city where I was a man and not a myth, where a tired woman with a gimbal and a big ring light ate instant noodles beside me and talked to me about the drunk monk and did not know that the drunk monk was eating noodles two seats down. It was a lie, and it was the only thing I had that was not scorched, and I did not want to set it on fire.

But the city did not wait for me, because the city never waits. On the third day of the four, a letter arrived at the tunnel, hand-delivered, on good paper. It was addressed to me. It was not from Tan Xiao and it was not from the police. It was from the temple, and it was from the board, and it informed me that the board had accepted a generous donation from

Hongfa Culture & Wellness and that, in the spirit of renewal, the temple would be undertaking a period of "programmatic restructuring," and that my "informal association" with the temple had been "noted with gratitude" and "concluded in the current cycle."

It was a wonderful letter. It thanked me for everything and dismissed me entirely. I read it twice, and then I came to see its real purpose, which was not to dismiss me but to file me, the way Tian had filed the thumb drive, in a drawer marked "done," so that the man with the good jacket could proceed with the reconstruction and the consecration without a drunk in a courtyard, and so that the abbot, who had refused the money publicly and lost the vote, could be managed at the edge of the page.

I showed it to the abbot the same night, in the east courtyard, and he read it with his one small laugh and then used it to light the stove.

"You've been fired," I said.

"I have been filed." He watched the letter curl. "There is a difference. A man who is fired leaves. Someone who is filed is still in the building, in a drawer, and drawers can be opened."

"By whom?"

"By a woman with a key," he said, and looked at me, and I understood that he meant something I did not yet have words for, and that he had been watching the convenience store from a distance the way he watched everything, that is to say without looking at it directly.

The next morning I got on the scooter and rode down the hill to the store, and I did not go in. I sat across the street in the fog for an hour with the engine off, and I watched the woman inside lean over her noodles with her hair in her eyes, and I made myself say the sentence out loud in the cold, be-

cause I have learned that a sentence has to be said out loud at least once before it can be done.

"I'm going to tell her," I said.

The fog did not answer. It never does. But I went home and slept, and the next night I went back at the usual hour, and I bought my packet of noodles and my bottle of water, and I sat down two seats from the woman with the gimbal, and she looked up and smiled at me, which she always did, and said the thing she always said, which was, "You again," and I said the thing I always said, which was, "The noodles are terrible," and we both did the small laugh of two people who have a routine, and then She studied me for a moment longer than usual, and something in her face changed.

It changed the way a channel changes when a live feed cuts from a recording to a camera. She regarded me, and then at the packet of noodles in my hand, and then, I saw her count, at my hands, and the crooked finger, and the scar on the forearm under the pushed-up sleeve, and then at my jacket, and the thing in the inside pocket of my jacket that was not the outline of a wallet.

CHAPTER 22

The Woman Who Films

She did not say anything for a moment, and the silence was so specific and so complete that the convenience store seemed to grow smaller around it, until the two of us were the only real objects in a room full of bright packet colours and canned drinks.

"You're the man in the video," she said at last. It was not a question.

I could have lied. I need to record that the option was there and that I looked at it for one honest second, because I have spent this whole book promising you that I will not pretend to be better than I am, and the truth is that I considered the lie. It would have been easy. I had lied to her for a year by omission. One more sentence would not have cost me anything I had not already spent.

But she had not said are you; she had said you're, and a man who answers a statement with a lie is not a man who is protecting anything. He is someone who is still hiding, and I had promised the abbot, and I had promised the girl, and I had promised a dead man in a lane, and the promises had stopped being a costume a long time ago.

"Yes," I said.

She put down her chopsticks. She did it carefully, the way you put down something you are afraid of dropping, and then she folded her hands on the table, and I watched a person re-organize an entire year of her life in about ten seconds.

"The fan," she said. "You keep it in your jacket. I thought it was a wallet." She looked at the table. "The finger. The limp. The dialogue you know. The word you used last month,

the one that only people from the old town use. I noticed all of it. I noticed all of it and I didn't put it together." She looked up at me.

"That's the part I'm going to have trouble with. Not that you lied. That I didn't see. I'm the one who films. I'm the one who finds. And I sat next to you for a year and I saw nothing, because I had already decided what the story was, and the story was a man I couldn't find, and you were the man at the next seat."

"You weren't looking for me," I said. "You were looking for the story."

"That's the same thing." Her voice was quiet and very even, which is how she got when she was damaged; I had learned that from watching her channel for a year. "I made you. I edited you. I put the name on you. Do you understand? The drunk monk is not something that happened to the city. It's something I built, and I built it out of you, without asking, and then I spent a year looking for the person I'd built, and the whole time he was sitting two seats away buying instant noodles and telling me they were terrible."

"Yingtao…"

"Don't." She held up her hand. "Don't use my name like that. You don't get to have my name and the other thing at the same time. Not yet."

So I didn't. I sat there with my terrible noodles and let her do what she needed to do, and what she did was to go very still and very bright, the way she did on camera when she was about to say something true, except there was no camera, and that was the difference between every conversation we had ever had and this one.

"The copycat," she said. "The man in the alley. Zhang Maliu. She said the name like a fact she had been carrying. "I edited the first clip. I named the thing. And then a man in a

costume read the first half of a rhyme and ran into a lane and died. I have turned over that every day since it happened. I have thought: if I hadn't posted the clip, if I hadn't given it a name, if I hadn't made it into a thing people could imitate, he would be alive.

And every time I thought it, I told myself the same lie, which is this: I was only the camera. I only filmed what was there. She watched me. "But I wasn't only the camera, was I. I cut it. I chose the music. I gave it a hero. You want to know what I felt when I realized you were the man at the next seat? It wasn't betrayal. It was relief. Because now there was someone else I could blame."

The store hummed. The clerk watched a drama on his phone behind the counter and did not look at us. I wanted to say a hundred things and I said none of them, because I had learned, in a hard year, that the first thing a person says when they are in pain is usually a lie designed to end the pain, and the second thing is the truth, and the second thing only comes if you leave the room quiet enough for it.

"I'm not going to post it," she said.

"I wasn't going to ask you to."

"You were going to ask me to." She almost smiled. "You sat down two seats from me with the whole thing in your jacket and you were going to ask me to run a stolen archive of a two-billion-yuan company on a channel with eighty thousand followers, because you have run out of doors, and I am the last camera in the city that isn't for sale." She picked up her chopsticks and then put them down again. "You're right about that, by the way. I am the last camera. That's not a compliment you get to use. That's just the weather."

"I need you to look at it," I said. "Not to post it. To look at it. You're the only person I know who checks things. Every -

one else in this city checks which way the crowd is facing. You check the thing itself."

She was quiet for a time. Then she said, "If I look at it, and it's real, I don't get to unlook. You understand that. Right now I can walk out of this store and be the woman who makes videos about the drunk monk. If I open the folder, I become the woman who knows. And the woman who knows has to decide what to do with it every day for the rest of her life."

"I know."

"Do you?" She studied me for a minute, and it was the first time in a year that she had looked at me and seen me, and the strange thing is that it was also the first time I realised how much I had wanted her to. "Because I've watched you carry the whole city on your back for a year and never once let anyone carry a corner. You give people the story. You don't give them the weight."

And then she stood up, and put on her jacket, and picked up her gimbal bag, and I thought she was going to leave and I think she thought so too, and then she sat back down and said, "Give me the folder."

I gave her the folder. Not the thumb drive; a copy Yaoji had put on a phone, the photographs and the ledgers and the file with the careful signature. She looked at the first screen for a long moment, the way you look at a photograph of a person you have only known as an idea, and then she closed the phone and put it in her bag and stood up for real.

"I'm not going to run it tonight," she said. "I'm not going to run it because I don't run things I haven't verified, and because I'm not going to be the second person who turns a true thing into a meme. I'm going to look at every page. It will take me a week. And at the end of it, if it's real, I'm going to come to you, and you're going to give me the one thing you've never given anyone, which is not the story. It's your

face. On camera. With your name. Or there's no broadcast, and the folder stays a folder, and I go back to filming strangers."

"That's the price."

"That's the price." She studied me, and there was no softness in it and no cruelty either. "You built a myth to protect yourself from being seen. I built a channel to protect myself from being forgotten. We're the same kind of coward, you and me, and only one of us can afford to stop."

She walked out. The door swung shut on its slow hinge, and the fog took her in about six steps, and I sat alone at the window with a packet of noodles I could not eat and the drawer of my own life open in front of me.

The twelve days she was dark, I did something I have not told anyone: I watched the empty channel the way you watch a bed in a house where someone has gone.

There was nothing on it. That was the point. She had left the channel up and stopped posting, so her last video sat at the top of the feed like a stone, and underneath it the comment section became the actual content of the thing, because a comment section with no new video is a village square with no church. I read it the way Liu Niangniang read a ledger.

There were people asking where she was, and people answering wrongly, and people saying she had sold out, and people saying she was dead, and people saying the drunk monk had finally found her, and a small persistent minority saying nothing at all except take your time, and this is the only kind of comment that has ever helped anyone. I found one that said, "Whatever it is, you don't owe us the whole thing," and I read it eleven times, and I have thought since that the person who wrote it had no idea that the woman in question was sitting in a room somewhere with a stolen archive and that the comment was the only counsel anyone had offered her.

The other thing I did was to read her old videos, all of them, in order, from the beginning, and that is a thing a person should never do and which I did anyway. And what I found, going backward through a year of footage, was not the story of the drunk monk. It was the story of a young woman with an absent father and a grandmother's death and a hunger to prove that a life existed because it had been filmed, and she had been making that story for two years before the alley, and the drunk monk was not the beginning of her channel. It was the middle.

And I sat in the room above the fish market at three in the morning and understood that I had been making the same mistake about her that she had been making about me, which is to mistake the subject of the story for the person telling it. She was not the camera that found me.

She was the person who had spent two years teaching herself to see, and I had walked into her lens by accident, and she had paid for that accident with a year of her life and the small death of her channel, and the fact that she was going to come back did not make it even, because a thing like that is never made even. It is only carried, and the carrying is everything that one person owes another.

Her channel did not go live the next night, or the night after. By the third night the subscribers had noticed, because subscribers always notice absence, and the comment section had begun to fill up with the small ugly things that fill up comment sections, where did she go, did something happen, she's probably doing a collab, I bet the drunk monk got her. On the fifth night she posted a single still image, black, with no caption, and then nothing for twelve days.

I do not know what she did in those twelve days, except that she did what she said she would do, which was to look at every page, because at the end of the twelve days she came back, and

when she came back she was not the same channel. But that is later. This is the night she walked out, and this is what I did with the night, and I have promised you the receipts.

I went back to the room above the fish market and I sat on the floor with my back against the bed, and I took a pouch of gaoliang out of the drawer where I had been keeping it, the one I had not opened for thirty-four days. I held it in both hands and looked at it. And I did not open it, and I want you to understand why, because the reason is the ugliest thing in this book.

I did not open it because I was strong. I did not open it be - cause of the abbot, or the test, or the girl, or the dead man. I did not open it because I had found a new reason to live. I did not open it because nothing in me wanted it. I did not open it for any of the reasons a better book would give me.

I did not open it because, sitting on that floor with the channel black and the folder out in the world and the woman gone into the fog, I could not feel anything at all. The fear was gone. The grief was gone. The wanting was gone. There was nothing in the room to run toward and nothing in the room to run from, and a pouch of liquor is a solution to a problem, and I had no problem, because I had no person left in me to have one.

I put the pouch back in the drawer and lay down on the bed and looked at the ceiling, and the ceiling did not care, and neither did I, and that was the bottom of the year, and I did not even notice that I had reached it.

CHAPTER 23

The Fire

The materials came on the seventh of December, and I did not know what they were until much later, which is the way these things work, because the men who do them do not announce them and the men who receive them do not ask.

A truck delivered eleven bales of something to the lane behind the temple. I saw it because I was in the east courtyard that morning, sweeping, which was the one part of the abbot's test I had kept without being asked, because sweeping had stopped being a discipline and become a place to put my hands while my mind was somewhere else.

The bales were wrapped in grey plastic and stacked on a handcart, and two men in work clothes wheeled them into the cloister, and the abbot stood at the door of his cell with his hands in his sleeves and watched them, and did not look happy, and did not stop them, because there is no rule against a temple receiving materials, and because the institution had decided that the restoration would be done by the Foundation, and the abbot had lost that vote.

I asked him what they were. He said he did not know. He said he had asked, and a man had told him they were "restoration composites," and he had asked what a restoration composite was, and the man had said "modern," and gone away, and the abbot had told Liu Niangniang about it because Liu Niangniang remembers everything, and Liu Niangniang had told Wang Niangniang, and Wang Niangniang had said the words that sat in me for a week without meaning anything: "Foam. They're putting foam in an old wooden building."

The rezoning was the reason, though nobody said the word rezoning out loud. The Grand Buddha Tower at Jiangbeizui needed the block around the temple to change category before the consecration, because a twelve-storey golden atrium with a mall and a hotel does not fit on a plot next to a protected her - itage courtyard, and the difference between a fitting city and an unfitting city is a line drawn on a map by nine people who have never stood in the courtyard. The abbot had written a letter.

It was a good letter, short and plain, and it said that a her - itage hall is not a decoration and that the temple had fed this city for eight hundred years and did not need to be taught how by a company with a golden Buddha, and the letter had gone to the district and to the paper and to nobody who mattered. But it had gone, and it had his name on it, and that was the part the man with the good jacket could not file.

The fire started at twenty to three in the morning on the fourteenth of December. I know the time because Chen Popo's clock was the only clock in the east cloister and be - cause the report says it, and I have read the report more than once.

Huajiao saw it start, because Huajiao had spent the previ - ous two weeks doing the thing she did best, which was fol - lowing a man who did not know he was being followed. She had been tailing Dao-ge since the middle of November, on her own, without telling Yaoji, because she had learned long ago that the difference between a plan and an outcome is the number of people who know it. She had his routes and his teahouse and his car and the woman he bought noodles from on Fridays, and on the night of the thirteenth she was on the roof of the low building across from the temple lane because Dao-ge had parked there and gone into the lane on foot and not come out.

She saw two men go over the temple wall at twenty minutes to three. She saw the smaller of them carry a can. She saw them come out through the same door in the east cloister nine minutes later, unhurried, and drive away, and then she saw the smoke. She called Yaoji, and Yaoji called me, and I was asleep in the room above the fish market and the phone woke me at 02:44, which is the time the report gives for the call, and I put on my jacket and did not put on my shoes properly and rode down the hill with the fog in my face, and I got to the temple gate at what I would guess was 02:51, and it was already burning.

I need to describe the fire truthfully, and the truth is that it was not the wall of flame the movies make. It was a kind of breathing. The east cloister was brick and timber and old dry wood, and the foam inside it burned the way foam burns, which is fast and hot and black smoke, and the fire came out of the windows of the cloister in two long orange tongues that contracted and extended, and the aisle between the cloister and the arhat hall was a river of smoke, and the whole courtyard was lit the colour of a furnace, and the five hundred clay figures stood in their hall with their painted eyes and did not move at all.

The other thing I have not said is what it is like to watch an old building burn at four in the morning, and I owe it to the book, which has been about fire and fog in equal measure, to say it. It is not the roar. Everyone expects the roar and the roar is there but it is a low thing, a single long breath, less loud than the pumps and the crowd and the crackle of the water hitting the slate. What is loud is the water, and what is terrible is the way the fire comes out of a window on the second floor and goes back inside and comes out of a window on the first, as if the building were breathing.

The arhat hall stood in the middle of it, and the five hundred clay figures stood in their rows with their painted eyes and their individual small expressions, and the fire lit them from the side, and for about ten minutes, in the middle of the worst night of my life, the hall looked exactly the way it must have looked in the Song dynasty, when the first abbot first put them there, that is to say it looked like a room full of people who had come a long way and had nowhere else to be. I have not been able to forget that. I do not know whether it is a comfort or not, and I have decided not to decide.

The monks were in the lane. There are eight of them; four got out through the front, and the other four had been in the bell tower and came down the fire escape and stood in the lane in their nightclothes saying nothing. Jiefeng was there with his phone and a list, doing the only thing he had ever been good at, which was counting. I looked for the abbot and did not see him, and then I saw Huajiao at the wall.

She was not supposed to be there. That was the first thing I thought, and it was not a thought about safety, it was a thought about the test, because the abbot had said no saving of girls, no crowd, no fan, and I had not put the fan in my jacket that night, I had kept the test, I had been strict and clean, and now the night had come and the night did not care about tests, the night only cares about what a person does with their hands.

"The caretaker's inside," she said.

"She's deaf. She won't hear it."

"I know she's deaf." Huajiao was already moving. "She sleeps in the room next to the cloister. I've been in that room. The door sticks."

She went over the wall. I went after her, and I want to be honest that I did not think about the test or the abbot or the fan or the discipline for even one second, because there was a person in a burning building and I had hands, and that is my

whole moral philosophy, and I have never been able to improve on it. We went in low, because the smoke was at the ceiling and the air at the floor was still breathable, and the arhat hall was a cave of red light, and the figures stood in their rows and the firelight moved on their faces so that they looked, for the first time since I had known them, like a crowd.

Chen Popo's room was on the far side, and the door was stuck, and Huajiao hit it twice with her shoulder and then I hit it with my whole weight and it gave. The room was full of smoke and the old woman was sitting up in bed with the blanket to her chin, awake, because she had felt the heat through the wall and because she had spent eight decades being the only person in the room who could not hear the alarm.

She looked at us without surprise. Huajiao took her under the arms and I took her legs, and she weighed nothing, and we carried her out through the red light and down the aisle and over the wall, and Chief Fire Officer's report gives the time as 02:52, one minute after I arrived, and puts her down as a "female caregiver, 83, removed by members of the public," which is the closest that document comes to a compliment.

It was on the other side of the wall, in the lane, with the old woman in my arms and the monks closing around her, that I looked back through the gate and saw the abbot.

He was at the door of the arhat hall. He had come up the aisle from somewhere and he was standing in the doorway with the fire behind him, and he was looking at the hall, at the five hundred, the way a man looks at a thing he has spent forty years keeping alive. And then he turned and went back in.

I have gone over the next four seconds more than any four seconds of my life. I have asked myself why he went back. I have read the report, which says that he re-entered the structure at approximately 02:54 and did not return. I have asked the monks, and none of them know, and Jiefeng told me, in a

voice that was almost clinical, that there was no one else in the hall, that the count was complete, that every novice and every monk and the caretaker and the cat were accounted for, and that the abbot had known the count, because Jiefeng had told him the count himself.

So there was no one to save. That is the fact, and I have to sit with it. The man went back into a burning building with nothing to save. And I have turned it over for years, and here is the only account I can stand behind, and it is not a story and not a lesson, it is just the shape of the man.

I have been asked, many times, whether I blame the abbot for going back in, and the question has always seemed to me to be standing in the wrong room.

He did not go back in to save a person. The count was com - plete. The novice was in the lane and the cats were in the lane and the caretaker was in my own arms. He went back in be - cause a building he had kept for forty years was on fire and his body did not consult him, and to ask whether I blame him is to assume that a man of seventy-four is making decisions at that moment, when what a man of seventy-four is doing, what any man is doing at that moment, is moving toward the thing he loves.

The only thing I have ever blamed him for is that he left the test in motion and did not tell me the answer. And I have stopped blaming him for that too, because the whole design of the test was that I was supposed to find the answer myself, and a teacher who leaves you the answer is not a teacher, he is a vending machine, and Jishan was many things and never once a vending machine.

He had spent his whole life keeping one small wooden hall standing in the middle of a city that measures worth in floor area. He had refused the money and lost the vote and been filed in a drawer. And the hall was burning, and there was a

door, and going through a door is not a calculation, and a man does not need a reason to walk toward the thing he has loved for forty years.

The arhat hall did not fall. That is the thing the report records and the thing I cannot explain, and I am not going to try. The roof over the hall held, and the five hundred clay figures stood, and sixty-one of them were lost to the smoke and the water and two hundred and fourteen more were damaged, and the man who had fed me congee for a year was carried out of the east door by two firefighters and did not breathe again.

I do not know what his last sound was. The report does not record it. The firefighters did not describe it. But a novice told me, a week later, in the rain, that he had been on the far side of the lane and had heard, over the noise of the pumps and the fire, one sound come out of the smoke, and the novice was fifteen years old and had come to the temple from a county town because his mother was too poor, and he said the sound was a laugh.

I told him it was the building. Wood cracks like that. He said yes. We both said yes, and we both stood there in the rain, and neither of us said the other thing, and that is the whole ambiguity, and my whole life is standing in it.

They would not let me near the hall that night, and by the time they did, the fan was gone.

I had left it in the drawer in the abbot's room, because the test said no fan, and I had kept the test, and the east cloister had burned with my whole year inside it: the drawer and the fan and the empty pouches and a photograph of my grandfather that I had put there because it felt like the right place for it. All of it was ash.

The fan was a fan, and it burned, and I stood in the wreck of the courtyard at dawn with my hands wrapped in a paramedic's dressing, because I had caught the doorframe and the

doorframe had caught me, and second-degree burns across the palms and the fingers, both hands, and a blister on my right forearm the length of a finger, and I say all of this not for the cost but for the timing, because here is what happened in the courtyard at dawn, and this is the hinge of the entire year.

A man from the crowd, one of the neighbours who had come out to watch, offered me a pouch of gaoliang. He did it kindly. He did it the way people in this city do things, because he saw a man with burned hands standing in the ruin of the only place he had, and he gave me the only thing he had, which was a drink.

I looked at it for a long moment. And I did not drink it.

I did not drink it because of the test, and I did not drink it because of the abbot, and I did not drink it because I was strong. I did not drink it because I came to see, standing in that courtyard with my hands on fire and the smell of the foam still in the air, that the man who had gone back into the building had done it sober. He had walked toward the thing he loved with his eyes open and his body clear and nothing in him but the walking.

And I understood that the whole year had been a rehearsal for this one difference: I could be a drunk who fell down and saved people by accident, or I could be a man who stood in the courtyard of his own ruin with nothing in his blood and chose, one more time, to be of use. The abbot had told me the differ - ence once, in a courtyard, with a bowl of congee, and I had not understood it, and now he was dead and had left the lesson in my hands along with the burns.

I gave the pouch back to the man. I said, "Thank you, uncle. Not tonight." And he watched me the way people in this city look at a thing they do not quite understand, and then he nodded and put it in his pocket and stood beside me for a time, both of us watching the water go into the hall, and after a

long time he said, "Was the old one a good man?" And I said yes. And he said, "Then that's what he was." That is the only eulogy I have ever been willing to accept for Jishan, and it was spoken by a stranger in a crowd at dawn, and I have not added a word to it since.

CHAPTER 24

The City Mourns a Building

The city mourned the temple, and the city did it beautifully, and that was the hardest part to watch.

Within a day of the fire the mourning was everywhere, and it was not false, and that is what I will say first, because it would be cheap to call it false. People in this city loved Luohan Temple. They had been married in the courtyard and buried their parents from the hall and touched the five hundred on the hand when they were children and again when their own children were children, and when the roof went they felt it the way you feel a tooth, a small specific absence in a place you had stopped noticing.

The flowers at the gate were real. The old women who came to stand in the lane and cry were really crying. The temple had been a stubborn green roof in a forest of towers for eight centuries, and the city had used it as a fixed point, the way you use a mountain, and now the mountain had a hole in it.

But the city mourned the building. That is the sentence, and I have never been able to say it to anyone's face without sounding like a man who is angry at grief, and I am not. The city mourned the building, and it did not mourn the monk. It mourned the hall, and it did not know the man who had kept the hall alive, and the two are not the same loss, and the difference between them is everything that those forty years had been for. Jishan had fed drunks and swept leaves and refused a donation and walked back into a burning building, and when the city lit its candles, it lit them for a roof.

Tan Xiao's network led the mourning, and it did it with a competence that I have to describe honestly, because other-

wise I would be lying about the enemy. There was a candle page, and a fundraiser, and a documentary short, and a set of commemorative postcards, and a livestream that ran for three days and collected a great deal of money and a great deal of grief, and every one of them was made well, and every one of them pointed, gently, at the Foundation for Cultural Renewal, which had pledged the reconstruction funds, and whose logo sat at the bottom of the candle page like a signature at the bottom of a painting. The company that had arranged the fire was fundraising to rebuild the building it had burned, and it was doing it with the public's own tears, and the public was grateful.

Jiefeng did not sleep during those three days. I know this because the novice told me, and because I saw him at the temple at two in the morning and at five in the morning on the same night, and because a man who has not slept has a particular smell, and Jiefeng had it. He was doing the one thing he knew how to do, which was to hold the temple together: he was at the district office, and at the insurance office, and at the bank, and on the telephone with the foundation, and he was making the arrangements that would let a ruined courtyard pay three monks and a caretaker and keep its gate open through the winter.

I watched it for a day and then I stopped. There is a limit to what a person can watch. Jiefeng gave a statement to the local news, and the statement was careful and correct and said that the temple would rebuild, and that the community's support had been overwhelming, and that the board was working closely with the Foundation to ensure that the restoration honoured the temple's heritage. He did not mention the abbot. I do not think it was cruelty.

I think it was the failure mode doing what failure modes do, which is to keep the institution alive and let the person be a

line in the minutes. He was promoted the following week. I do not know if he wanted it. I have not been able to hate him, and I have tried, because hating someone who keeps a temple standing is a lot easier than hating the shape of the thing that made him.

I have said that Jiefeng was a failure mode, and I stand by it, and I want to add the other half of the sentence: a failure mode is not the same as a failure. The temple is standing this morning because a man I did not like spent a year doing arithmetic in the dark.

The monks scattered. Four went to Huayan Temple across the river and two went home to their counties and one, the fifteen-year-old novice from the county town, stayed, because he had nowhere to go, and he slept in the gatehouse and kept the gate open. The congee pot had been in the east cloister, and the east cloister was gone, and so the pot was gone, and there was no congee, and that small absence did more to convince me that Jishan was dead than the report had, because the report was a document and the missing congee was a fact.

On the third night I found him sweeping the lane outside the gate, which was pointless, because the lane was full of ash and would be full of ash again by morning, and I stood and watched him for a moment, and I did not tell him to stop, because there is no point in stopping a person from doing the only thing that stands between him and the grief, and because sweeping is, for reasons I have never fully understood and have stopped trying to, the one activity that has ever made anything better in this city.

For three days I had nothing to do. That is the most dangerous condition a man like me can be in, and I should put it down plainly, because the notebook says that the days after a death are when the body reaches for the thing it reached for before. I did not drink. I sat in the tunnel and let the aunties

feed me and I did not drink, and on the second night I went to the ruins at four in the morning and stood at the gate and looked at the black hole of the east cloister and did not go in.

For nine days after the fire I did not drink, and the honest record of those nine days is not a triumph. It is a series of hours in which the pouches arranged themselves in my path like a road made of small brown doors.

The first night I found one in my jacket, the one I had bought before the fire out of habit, and I sat on the floor of the tunnel's back room with it in my hands for a long time. Not deciding. That is the part people who have never done it do not understand: it is not a decision, because a decision is a thing a man makes once. It is a hundred decisions an hour, and each one is the size of a breath, and each one has the same shape, which is a small cold voice saying later.

I opened it. I want that in the record. I unscrewed the cap and I smelled it, and the smell was the smell of every bad night of my adult life and also the smell of my father and the smell of the teahouse and the smell of being nothing and not having to mind. I put it to my mouth.

Then Wang Niangniang came down the stairs. She did not see me, because I was behind the stove, and she went to the shelf and took down a bowl and filled it from the pot and set it on the table, because she set out a bowl of congee every night at that hour for whoever came in, and then she went back up.

I looked at the bowl for a while. Then I screwed the cap back on the pouch and put it in the drawer and ate the congee, which was cold, and tasted of nothing, and was the whole of my discipline: not a light, not a victory, just a bowl of cold rice that a woman had put on a table for a person she did not know was there.

On the third night Wang Niangniang found me at the mouth of the tunnel at midnight and did not say anything; she just set

down a stool beside me and sat, and after a while she said, in her flat domestic way, "You are going to do something, and I want you to eat first." She was right that I was going to do something, and she was right that I had not eaten, and both of those things were the reason she was the one who came.

It was on the fourth day that the novice came to the tunnel with the envelope.

He had been going through the abbot's room. The east cloister was a ruin, but the abbot's cell was at the far end and the roof over it had held, and the firefighters had let the monks in to salvage what they could, and what the novice brought me was a small wooden box that had been under the bed, and in the box was a book and a piece of paper folded into quarters.

The book was the temple's accounts, in the abbot's hand, forty years of them, and the last entry was not an entry at all. It was a single line, written the week before the fire, in the same tidy hand as the columns above it, and the line said: the boy is ready to be a person. Whether he is a monk is between him and the Buddha.

The piece of paper was the couplet. It was written out in full in the abbot's hand, black ink, the four lines of it, and beside the first two lines there was a tick in pencil, and beside the last two, the second half, the warning, the words about imitation and the demon's path, there were two underlines, made carefully with a ruler, the way a man underlines the part of a document he wants someone else to read.

I have not described the conversation with the novice, and it belongs here, because he is the only person left in the temple and he is fifteen and the book has a duty to the people who stay.

His name was Yuan and he had come from a county town in the north because his mother was too poor to keep him and the temple fed him and taught him to read the chants. He had

been at Luohan for two years. He had swept the same court‐yard I had swept. And on the fourth day after the fire, when he brought me the box, he asked me the question I had been dreading.

"Did he say anything? At the end. To you."

"He didn't say anything to me. He was inside. I was out‐side."

"But you saw him go in."

"I saw him go in."

Yuan nodded slowly, the way a boy nods when he is doing arithmetic that he does not want to finish. And then he said the thing that made me understand what the abbot had actu‐ally been doing all those years, which is not the thing I had assumed.

"He used to tell me that I could leave," he said. "Every month. He would call me into the cell and he would say, the door is there, you can go home, there is no debt. And every month I would say, I want to stay. And every month he would nod and send me back to sweep." He looked at the ash. "I thought he was testing me. Now I think he was making sure that when I stayed, it was a choice. So that if I was ever in a burning building, I would know why I was there." He wiped his face with his sleeve. "I know why I'm here. That's the thing. I'm the only one left and I know why I'm here."

I did not say anything. There was nothing to add. I gave him the box and he took it back into the gatehouse, and the two of us went on sweeping the same lane, and I have thought since that the continuation of a discipline after the teacher dies is the only proof the discipline was ever real. Everything else is a lecture. Sweeping is proof.

I sat with those two things for a time. The aunties had gone quiet around me, the way they did when something was being decided, and Huajiao was at the end of the table with her

ledger open and her pen not moving, and Yaoji had taken off his headphones, which he almost never did, and the four of them watched me read the boxes off the page the way you read a map after a long wrong road.

And I said the thing that decided the rest of the year. I said it before I had finished understanding it, the way you say a thing you have known in your body for months and are only now letting your mouth know.

"He didn't want us to kill Tan Hong."

Yaoji started to say something and I held up my bandaged hand and he stopped.

"If he'd wanted that, he would have told us. He had a year. He had every chance. He knew what we were doing and he never once told us to stop, and he never once told us to go further, and every time I went to him looking for permission he gave me congee and a riddle and sent me back out to sweep." I looked at the underlines on the page. "He wrote this out and he underlined the second half twice and he put it in a box under his bed, which means he was not writing it for himself. He was writing it for whoever went through his room after he died.

And the thing he underlined twice is the line that says if the world imitates me it walks into the demon's path. He did not mean that we should not go after Tan Hong. He meant that going after him is not the thing. Making him seen is the thing. He wanted Tan Hong to be visible, with all of it, the loans and the list and the foam and the signature and the whole arithmetic, laid out in the light where the city can read it and believe it. He did not want a martyr and he did not want a vengeance. He wanted a ledger."

The tunnel was quiet. Then Zhang Niangniang, who had not spoken for all of it, put down her tiles with a small click and said the only thing that needed to be said.

"Then we show the city the ledger."

That is the decision, and it has not changed since, and this is the thing I have spent every day since that morning trying to deserve. I am not going to explain it again.

The plan that came out of the next three weeks was not a good plan. It was the only plan. The consecration of the Grand Buddha Tower was set for New Year's Eve, and it was going to be the biggest single event of the year, nationally streamed, with bought monks and celebrity chefs and a golden atrium twelve storeys high and every camera in the municipality pointed at the man who owned it.

That was the thing nobody else had understood, including me, until the four of us sat in the tunnel with the abbot's box on the table. The gala was not the obstacle. The gala was the gift. Because a fellow who builds a golden atrium and fills it with cameras for the whole country to watch is not a man who has made himself untouchable. He is someone who has spent a fortune building the largest screen in the city, and all we had to do was get the ledger onto it.

Yaoji looked at the board. He looked at the notes and the strings and the two columns and the name of the man with the careful hand. And then he said the thing that started the last month of the year, which was not a plan at all, it was just arithmetic, spoken in the flat voice he used when he was frightened of his own competence.

"New Year's Eve," he said. "The gala is New Year's Eve. That's fifteen days. The vault's in the past and the fire's in the past and a girl is still in the pending column, and in fifteen days the whole city is going to be looking at that tower." He looked up at me. "Biao-ge, we're not going to have another door. That's the door."

CHAPTER 25

The Motley Crew

Yingtao came back on the fourteenth day, and she came back the way she did everything, which was without warning and in the fog.

I was at the tunnel, arguing with Yaoji about something I have since forgotten, when she walked in the door with a hard drive in one hand and a laptop under her arm and stood at the end of the mahjong table and looked at the four of us as if we were a shot she had been trying to frame for a year and had finally got. She had been awake for most of two weeks. It showed in the way she stood, and it showed in her eyes, and it did not show in her voice, which was flat and fast and entirely professional.

"It's all real," she said. "I checked every page against three sources. The shell companies trace to Hongfa through four layers, and the fourth layer is a foundation with the same registered address as the tower project office. The campus-loan sheets are genuine, and the borrowers are real, and eleven of them are dead. The redevelopment file is genuine, and the signature is genuine, and I found the district authorisation in the public archive, which means the signature can be corrob‑orated without the vault at all. And the list — " she paused, and for the first time her voice did something, "— the list is genuine too. The pending column is a placement schedule. It is not finished. And one of the names in it is still in this city."

"Wen Xiaoyu," I said.

When she had finished the numbers she sat down for the first time and took off the gimbal and set it on the table like a

tool at the end of a shift, and I saw that her hands were shaking.

"When did you last sleep?" I said.

"I don't remember."

"You should eat."

"I should do a lot of things." She looked at the gimbal. "My grandmother raised me at the Eighteen Stairs. She used to say the only proof a life existed was that somebody filmed it. I believed her for twenty-five years. I have ten thousand hours of other people's lives on a hard drive in my flat, and I do not know what my grandmother's face looked like when she laughed."

"You have photographs."

"Photographs are not a face," she said. "That's the thing I found out this year. I have spent my whole life chasing the proof of a life and mistaking it for the life."

"Wen Xiaoyu." She set the drive down. "I found the building. It's a dormitory in Jiulongpo that's registered as a training consultancy. Four floors, one entrance on the street, one service door in the back, and a van that comes on Tuesdays and Fridays. She was moved there four weeks ago from the college district, and she's still there, and the van has not taken her." She watched me. "I've been watching it for six days. I am not a professional, so I may have been seen. But the girl is there. She is alive, and she is inside, and she has eleven days before the batch moves."

Eleven days was the twenty-eighth of December. The gala was the thirty-first. I looked at Yaoji and Yaoji looked at me, and neither of us said the thing we were both thinking, which was that the two dates were too close to be a coincidence and too close to be a plan.

"There's more," Yingtao said. "I'm not going to run the broadcast unless we can do two things at once. The first is

the archive. The second is the girl. If we blow the archive and leave her in the building, the building empties in an hour and she goes into a van and I have made a documentary and lost a person. So the girl comes out first, or the broadcast does not happen."

"Agreed," I said.

"Good." She studied me for a moment. "You're not going to ask me what it costs."

"I already know what it costs."

"Do you." She did not sit down. "Because here's the part you haven't understood yet, Li Xiuyuan. You think the price is your face. It isn't. The price is that when this airs, the city is going to know who the drunk monk is, and the drunk monk is going to stop being a story and become a man with a name and an address and a debt and an ex-girlfriend and a mother in Guangdong.

And a man with a name can be sued, and arrested, and found, and hurt. The story protects you. The truth does not. That's the price, and I am not going to take it from you. On the thirty-first, when the camera is live, you get to decide, one last time, whether you're going to be seen. And if you decide no, I will respect it, and I will find another way to do it, because I have decided that the archive is not about you anymore."

She said it without heat. It was the most frightened I had seen her.

That night we took the whole thing to Officer Tian, and Tian did the thing I had been waiting a year for, which was to stop being careful.

We met her in the same noodle shop, off duty, and Yingtao put the laptop on the table and opened it and did not say a word, and Tian looked at the screen for a while. She looked at the girls, and the borrowers, and the two columns, and the file

with the signature, and then she sat back and put both hands flat on the table, which is what people do when they are keeping them still.

"I've been carrying this city's file for nine years," she said. "I've done the right thing a hundred times and watched it go in the drawer and come out and go back in. I have a daughter with a condition with a name I can't pronounce, and I have a debt, and last month I found out who owns my debt. It's a shell. It's a shell that belongs to a shell. And I sat up all night with that, and I did the thing I've been doing for nine years, which is I told myself that if I moved I would lose the treatment, and that the treatment is the only thing that matters, and that a mother who is clear of the whole thing is worth more to her child than a mother who is right."

She looked at the screen. "And then a man burned down a temple with a monk inside it, and the monk fed a drunk for a year, and the drunk is sitting at this table with burned hands, and I find that I cannot tell my daughter that the thing that matters is the treatment and not the reason." She picked up the laptop and closed it. "I'm in. I'm not in because I think I can win. I'm in because I am not going to be the mother who tells her child to look away. What do you need from me?"

What we needed from her was the thing only she could give, which was the schedule. Timings, patrol coverage, the police presence at the gala, the route of the van, the shift change at the dormitory, and, most of all, the one thing she could do without being anyone's hero, which was to make sure that when the archive went live there would be an honest officer at the right door with an honest warrant, and that the girl would come out of the building into the arms of the law and not into the back of a van.

She gave us all of it. She gave us the schedule and the route and the timing, and she asked for one thing in return, which

was that we not tell her the name of the person who would be going into the dormitory, because she is a police officer and she did not want to have a name to forget. We agreed. We kept that promise. She is the only person in this book who got ex - actly what she asked for, and she deserved more, and she knows it, and I know it, and that is between us.

The plan had nine moving parts and one fixed point, and the fixed point was the river. Every route ran down to the water and back up again, because the water is the only thing in this city that cannot be bought and cannot be watched and cannot be closed. The bridges had cameras and the tunnels had cam - eras and the cableway had cameras, and the river had gulls and fog and a wind that came off the surface at dawn and put the whole city under a lid.

You cannot film a man on the water. You cannot rate him. You cannot find his name on a list. The aunties had known that before any of us, because they had grown up on the banks and had crossed by boat before the bridges, and when Zhang Ni - angniang said the girl would come out by the river, nobody in the tunnel argued. The river was the first thing this city ever had, and it was the one thing the machine had never managed to own.

I need to describe the crew once more, in the honest light of the two days before the gala, because the city has, since, made it into a legend and the legend is wrong.

The three aunties were not grandmothers in an apron. They were the most operationally capable people I have ever known. Zhang Niangniang could read a room of forty men and tell you which four were dangerous, from the way they shuffled their tiles. Liu Niangniang had built, over forty years, a mental in - dex of every official, shopkeeper, and collector who had ever passed through a twenty-meter tunnel under a mountain, and

could recall the relevant entry in the time it took a kettle to boil.

And Wang Niangniang was the one who made the plan actually run, because a plan is a sequence of meals and conversations, and Wang Niangniang was the one who had spent her whole life feeding people at the hours when plans succeed, which is two in the morning and four in the afternoon. There is a reason every successful operation in the history of this country has had a kitchen, and the reason is not romance. It is that the kitchen is where the operation actually thinks.

I need to put down the last rehearsal, because it is the part the legend leaves out, and because it is where the plan stopped being a plan and became a set of people who trusted each other.

We ran it twice on the thirtieth, in the tunnel, with the pots moved to one side and the aunties playing the roles of the guests. The first run was a disaster. Nobody could keep the radio discipline; the aunties kept adding lines that were not in the script; Huajiao refused to say her code by radio because she did not want her voice recorded, which was correct and which we had not thought of; and I got the timing wrong by four minutes, which in an operation of this size is the difference between a broadcast and a beating.

Yaoji was furious in the way he gets, which is quiet and precise, and he tore the plan down to the studs and rebuilt it in an hour, and when he had finished he made us run it again.

The second run was better. Not good. Better. And at the end of it, when the aunties had put the pots back and the room had gone warm and ordinary, Zhang Niangniang sat down heavily and said, "I have one condition." We all looked at her. She was sixty-eight and she had been running intelligence for us for a year and she had never once asked for anything, and she said, "When this is over, the girl comes here first. Before the

hospital, before the police, before anything. She comes here and she eats. I don’t care what is happening. You bring her to this table.”

Nobody argued. It was not negotiable and we all knew it. And I need to record that it was the only condition any of them ever set, and that it is the entire ethics of the operation in one sentence: before the trial, before the broadcast, before the justice or the revenge, a hungry child gets fed at this table. That is what the whole year was for. Everything else was the delivery route.

The plan came together over four days, and it was, as I have said, not a good plan and the only plan. The gala was a fort - ress, but a fortress is a building with a loading dock and a staffing list and a hundred ways in for a man with a rider’s uniform and a cousin who used to guard the mall next door. The archive would go out from inside the atrium, on the golden screens, in the middle of the consecration, with Yingtao’s camera live and her channel and two others carrying it.

The girl would come out in the two hours before, from the Jiulongpo dormitory, with the aunties on the lookouts and Huajiao on the entry and Yaoji on the radios and the police at the door. And the eight of us -- a drunk, a child, three aunties, a cousin, a cop, and a chronicler -- were going to try to make a man with a golden Buddha visible to the city he owned.

Yaoji had a name for the crew, and he had been saving it, and he used it on the last night before the plan when we were all in the tunnel and the tea had gone cold.

He said, “New paoge,” the way he said things he had read in a book, and the aunties laughed, and Huajiao rolled her eyes, and I laughed too, because in this city the word means the old brotherhoods of the river and the ropes and the streets, the men who made a family out of who showed up, and a fat

boy in a security uniform and three old women and a killer and a drunk and a camera were not that, and everyone knew it.

But the laughing stopped on its own, and nobody took it back, and after a while Zhang Niangniang dealt the next hand and said, "The new paoge can wait. First take the girl out of the building." That is the whole thing. That is the crew, and that is the year, and the rest is the night itself.

He summoned me the week before the gala, through a text from a number I did not recognize, which is the modern way a man like that sends for you. The address was the Tower, the forty-second floor, the company's private dining room, and the message said that Mr. Tan would be glad to receive me at four o'clock, and that a car would be sent.

I went because I wanted to see the inside of the thing I was going to burn, and because Yaoji said it was useful to see the room, and because the alternative was to spend the afternoon rehearsing.

The private dining room was small and quiet and looked out over the two rivers. There was a round table with a lazy susan and a single place setting, and Tan Hong was standing at the window with his back to me when I came in. He was smaller than his photograph. He turned, and he bowed, a small bow, exactly the right depth, and he gestured to the chair.

"Sit," he said. "Eat. The food is good here. I chose it myself."

I sat. I did not eat.

He sat across from me and put his hands on the table, and for a while he looked at me with the polite, patient attention of a man who has decided to be interested in you. And then he said the thing I have thought about more than anything else he said, because it was the only thing he ever said that I believed.

"You think I don't know what I am," he said.

"I don't know what you are."

"You think I'm a hypocrite. That's the usual accusation." He turned his teacup a quarter turn. "Let me show you the actual position. There are two million people in this municipality who owe money they cannot repay. Two million. The banks will not touch them. The file is too small, the paperwork costs more than the loan, so the loan sits there and rots and the bank writes it off. We buy the rot. We buy it at a discount and we carry it, and we charge for the carrying, and the ones who pay subsidize the ones who do not. That is the entire business. It is the same arithmetic as a hospital, or an insurance company, or the pension fund of the steel mill. The temple you sleep in has a ticket office and a donation box and a vegetarian restaurant. Is the temple a hypocrite? It is a business with a good story. I am a business with a bad one. That is the whole difference. I have never made anyone kneel. I do not need to. A man with a debt kneels by himself, every night, whether I am in the room or not."

"I'm not judging you," I said.

"Then what are you doing?"

"I'm counting," I said.

He looked at me for a while, and I understood, sitting across from him with the two rivers going on behind his head, that this was the whole man, and that the horror of him was not that he was a hypocrite or a liar or even a killer. It was that he was not confessing anything. He was explaining. He had found a machine that worked, and no one he considered his equal had ever asked him to watch what it chewed, and he had bought enough religion to be told he had risen above the whole question. He was not pretending to be good. He had simply stopped noticing the difference between good and paid. The two rivers, and the city, and the poor in their millions, were the water he moved through, and the water was not his problem, and that was the entire man.

"I'm going to make you an offer," he said. "You're going to refuse it. Then I'm going to make it again. Then you're going to refuse it again, and I'm going to do something you will regret, and we will both be very sorry, and at the end of it I will still be here and you will not." He said it without heat. "That is how these things go. I have seen it a hundred times. So I want to skip the middle. Here is the offer, and it is the final one. On New Year's Eve you will stand on my stage, in your robe and your fan, and I will announce that I have found the true spirit of the city and that I am giving him a home. You will be paid. The temple will be rebuilt. Every drunk in this city will drink for free for a year. And in the morning, you will be mine."

"And if I say no?"

"Then I will burn the rest of the temple," he said. "Not you. Not the girl. The temple, and the courtyard, and the jar with your teacher's ashes in it, because it is an address and not a person, and I move addresses. You understand? I do not even dislike you."

I got up. I did not shake his hand. I said the only thing I could think of, which was not clever and which I have never been able to improve on. "You made me count you," I said. "That's the offer I'm accepting."

He looked at me, and for the first time his smile moved a little, the way a plate shifts under a tablecloth. Then he put his hands back flat on the table and said, "Eat something before you go. It's a long walk down."

I did not eat. I walked down forty-two flights of stairs because I did not want to be in a box with him, and the whole way down I could feel the building around me, and I understood that he had made a mistake, and that the mistake was not in the offer. The mistake was that he had put me in a room with a window, and I had looked at the two rivers, and I had

understood exactly how much of this city was his, and I had decided something that I could not have decided in any other room.

That is the scene. I have told it as plainly as I can, because the book has spent a year calling him a god and a machine and a signature, and the truth is smaller and colder: he was a man running a business, who could not see the people the business was made of, and who would not have believed you if you told him that the man across his table could see him.

CHAPTER 26

The Night Before the Boil

The thirtieth of December was the last quiet day of the year, and I am going to give it the space it deserves, because the next day was the boil and the book has spent eleven months earning the right to sit still for one night.

The tunnel had been built by frightened people, and by February I had come to understand that everything good in this city had been built by frightened people.

The war came, and the people dug holes in the hill, because a hole in a hill is where you put the children when the planes come. Then the war ended, and the holes were forgotten. Then the city got crowded, and the holes were remembered, and the holes became mahjong parlors and hotpot restaurants and barbers and warehouses, because a poor city uses what it has. Nobody designed the tunnel. Nobody zoned it. It was not on any map a company would buy. It was just a set of rooms under a mountain, kept by three old women, and on the last night of the year it held a drunk and a child and a chronicler and a cop and a cousin and a board with two hundred names on it, and it was the safest place in the whole city.

The Tower had security and cameras and a company and a foundation and a golden god, and the Tower ate people. The tunnel had a stove and a cat and a rule about feeding whoever came, and the tunnel kept them alive. I do not know what to do with that fact except write it down. Frightened people dug the holes and kind people kept them open, and the city above the holes got rich, and the holes are still where the city goes when it is in trouble.

The aunties closed the tunnel early. That is the first thing, and it had never happened. Zhang Niangniang turned the tables and Wang Niangniang put out the stove and Liu Niangniang, who had kept the gossip of this city for fifty years, took out the good tea and did not open her notebook once.

There were six of us at the back table by midnight, and one of them was a police officer who had told her captain she was sick, and one of them was a chronicler who had been dark for two weeks, and one of them was a fifteen-year-old with a ledger, and none of us talked about the plan. That was the rule, unspoken and total. We had four days of the plan. The night belonged to the dead.

We ate hotpot at three in the morning, which is the correct hour for it, and this is the part I want to get down before I get to the rest. There is a particular thing that happens when a hard year comes to a point and the people who survived it sit around a single pot at three in the morning. The pot does the talking. You put things in, and you take things out, and the taking-out is a negotiation, and the negotiation is a conversation, and no one has to say anything true out loud. The aunties ran the pot the way they ran everything.

Zhang Niangniang put in the tripe and took it out at exactly the right second and put it in our bowls without being asked. Wang Niangniang ran the far corner of the pot, the mild corner, for the officer, because Tian's stomach had never recovered from the year. Liu Niangniang told stories about people who were already dead, and every story had the same shape: a person was foolish and a person was kind and the two things happened at the same time, and that is how a life is remembered in a mahjong parlor in a tunnel under a mountain.

"Eat," Wang Niangniang said.

"I'm eating."

"You're talking."

"I can do both."

"A man can't," she said. "A man who talks forgets to chew. Chew, then talk." She put another piece of tripe in my bowl. "You go up there tomorrow and you look after the little one. That's the eating. The rest is conversation."

Yingtao sat next to me, and we did not talk about the price, and at some point she told me about her grandmother, who raised her at the Eighteen Stairs, and who used to say that the only proof a life existed was that someone remembered it, and that a camera was just a machine for remembering, and that the machine was not the memory, and that she had spent the whole year confusing the two.

And then she said, without any particular emphasis, "I've been trying to find the man in the video for a year, and I found him, and he's dumber than the video, and the video was better, and I don't care." And then she put her head on my shoulder, in the tunnel, with the pot boiling and the tiles clicking and the cat walking along the wall, and she went to sleep.

I did not move for four hours. I need to record that. My arm went numb and my back ached and my burned hand throbbed under the dressing, and I did not move, because a person had decided, in a room full of people who had all spent the year learning not to need anything, that she needed to sleep on someone, and the someone was me, and there is no plan or test or discipline in the world that outranks that.

So I sat with a warm weight on my shoulder and watched the aunties take down the pot, and at some point Wang Niangniang looked over and saw us and did not say anything, but she did the small thing she did when she approved of something, which was to put one more dumpling in the pot and leave it there, floating, for whoever woke up.

There is no scene. That is the scene. A man lay beside a woman he was not allowed to be in love with, in a tunnel under a mountain, on the last night of the worst year of his life, and he did not touch her and he did not sleep and he did not think about the plan. He thought about the ordinary things he had not had enough of: the smell of the congee pot, the number of the bus that used to go up the hill, the way his grandfather held a teapot, the exact blue of the sky over the Jialing on the one clear morning in autumn when the fog comes off early.

He thought about how a life is made of those things and how he had spent his whole adult life chasing the big ones and paying for them with the small ones, and how the trade is never worth it, and how every person in this city makes the same trade every day and does not notice until the year when they finally stop. And then the radio crackled, and it was six in the morning, and the day of the gala had arrived, and he got up and put on the yellow jacket and kissed nobody and went out to work.

There is one more thing from the night before, and this is the smallest and the one I think about most, and that is what the aunties did at the very end.

After the pot was off and the table was cleared and Yaoji had fallen asleep on the board and Yingtao was asleep on the mattress, Wang Niangniang came back down into the tunnel for no reason I could see. She did not look at me.

She went to the shelf where the bowls were kept and she took down a small covered dish and set it on the table, and then she went to the girl's bag, which was hanging on the back of a chair, and she put the dish next to the bag, and then she stood there for a moment with her hand on the chair back, the way a person stands in a room where someone they love is asleep.

Then she said, without turning around, so quietly that I almost did not hear it, "When you go up there, you watch her. Not the plan. Her."

"I will."

"You won't. Nobody watches a fifteen-year-old. She watches everyone else." Wang Niangniang turned and looked at me, and her face was the same flat domestic face it always was, and her eyes were not. "I have buried a husband and a son and I have fed this neighborhood for thirty years, and the one thing I know is that the children who are always watching are the ones who have decided that nobody is watching them. So when you go up there, you be the one who watches her. That is my whole instruction and I will not repeat it."

Then she went back up the stairs, and I sat in the cold tunnel with the dish on the table and the cat on the wall and the woman asleep on the mattress, and I realised that the aunties had just given me the only order of the whole operation that mattered, and that it was not about the tower at all. It was about a girl who had spent her whole life watching everyone else. And I promised, in the dark, that I would be the one who watched her, and I kept that promise for about eleven hours, which is all anyone was ever able to keep.

Huajiao was the one who woke me, at a little after seven, with the tunnel grey with morning and the fog waiting at the mouth of it. She had not slept at all. She was standing in front of me with her heavy bag on her shoulder and something in her hands, and for a beat she looked exactly like she had in that stairwell a year ago, small and flat and entirely professional, and then she held it out, and I saw what it was, and I did not understand how she had done it.

It was the fan. Not the old one; the old one had burned with everything else in the east cloister. It was a new fan, a palm-leaf fan, broken across the middle on purpose, and mended

with a long strip of black rubber wire wound tight around the spine and tied off at the handle. Scooter-tire wire. I knew the wire because I had spent four years fixing my own e-bike with it, and I knew the knot because it was the knot she tied on everything, the knot her mother had taught her, the knot that was in her ledger and in her slingshot and in the handle of her bag.

"Ni de yi ban shi feng de," she said, in her flat, ruthless, fifteen-year-old dialect. "Wo gei ni bu le."

Half of you is mad. I patched it.

I looked at the fan for a long moment. It was junk, the way the old one had been junk. The wire was ugly and the handle was too thick and the thing would not close properly, and it fit my hand the way the old one had, and I came to see that she had done this on purpose, with her hands, in the middle of the worst month of her life, and that she had not told anyone, and that she was not going to explain it, and that the explanation was in the ledger, in the page she had not shown me, the rewritten rules.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're still slow," she said. "And you still can't fight."

"I know."

"But you don't run," she said. "That's the thing your mother never taught you that I already know. You don't run." She said it as if it were a fact about the weather, and then she went to the mouth of the tunnel and stood in the fog with her back to me, and that was the most she had ever said to me, and I have not asked for more.

Yaoji's radio hummed all morning. He kept it on the dis‑patch channel, low, and every so often a rider's voice would come through with a location and a code, and he would write it down, and the board was full, and he had done what he had

told me he would do a year ago, which was to be in charge of getting me home.

At noon he tested the channel with all of us in line, one by one. The aunties said their numbers. Tian said her position. Huajiao said the small sharp one. Yingtao said the chronicler. And when it came to me, I said the fool in the yellow jacket, because that had been my handle since the beginning, and I heard my cousin exhale on the other end of the radio, and I knew that he had been holding his breath.

In the afternoon I did the thing I had been walking around for a month. I took out my phone and I looked at my mother's name in the contact list, the generic photo, the Guangdong number, and this time I did not put the phone away. I pressed the call button. It rang four times and went to voicemail, because it was the middle of a working day in a factory town, and I stood in the mouth of the tunnel in the fog and left the thing I had been unable to say for a year.

"Ma," I said. "It's me. I'm sorry I haven't called. I'm not in trouble. I paid some of the money. I still owe some." I stopped. I looked at the fan in my jacket and the fog on the Jialing and the two thousand names on the board behind me and the girl asleep at the back table with a ledger under her arm, and I said the thing I had been carrying all year, in dialect, because it was the only language it would fit in.

"Ma, wo zuijin zai bang ren." Then, so that she would be sure to understand, I said it again in Mandarin, which is the language we used when we were being careful: "Lately I've been helping people. I don't know if I'm good at it. But I'm doing it sober." And then the recording ended, because there is only so much time, and I put the phone in my pocket and did not call back to say more.

The fog came up from both rivers that evening, which is what it does when the year turns, the Jialing and the Yangtze both letting go of their water into the same cold air, and by dark the city was gone.

You could stand at the mouth of the Mountain City Trail and see ten meters and no more, and beyond the ten meters the towers of Jiefangbei and the golden atrium at Jiangbeizui and the whole lit-up apparatus of the machine were all there, and all invisible, which I have come to believe is the actual shape of this city and the actual shape of the whole problem: everything that matters is ten meters past the edge of what you can see, and the only way to reach it is to walk.

I stood there for a time with the fan in my jacket and the radio on my belt and the men and women behind me sleeping in a tunnel under a mountain, and then I went to bed, because tomorrow was New Year's Eve, and the plan was set, and the girl was in the building, and the man with the golden Buddha was going to be made visible whether he liked it or not.

The last thing I did before I slept was take out the piece of paper the novice had brought me from the abbot's box and read the second half of the couplet one more time. But if the world should imitate me, it walks straight into the demon's path. I put it back in my pocket, next to the fan and the student card and the empty pouch I had kept for a year, and I lay down in the dark, and the fog ate the city, and the city waited to be looked at.

CHAPTER 27

The Golden Feast

The Grand Buddha Tower was the stupidest building I have ever been inside, and I say that with a kind of love, because there is something almost innocent about a monument that large and that wrong.

It stood on the river at Jiangbeizui, ninety-four floors, glass and steel, and all of its first twelve storeys were hollow, a single atrium that went up like the inside of a bell, and hanging in the middle of that void from the twelfth floor down to the second was a golden Buddha the height of a building, seated, with one hand raised.

Around the Buddha, on every level, were the things a person needs: a mall, a food hall, a hotel, a spa, a co-working space, a wedding venue with a glass floor, and a mindfulness clinic that sold six-hundred-yuan sessions in a room that smelled of sandalwood and had no windows. The Tower's slogan, painted on the hoarding for two years and printed on the invitations for the consecration, was a temple for the modern city. I had never been able to work out whether it was a lie or a confession.

The Tower had been selling itself to the city for two years, and I need to record one of the advertisements, because it will not survive in the archive and this is the most honest thing the company ever made.

It was a three-minute film that played in the subway and on the mall screens. It opened with a monk walking through fog, in the old town, the real old town, with the wet stone and the laundry and the cats. The monk was not a monk but an actor

in a robe, and he walked past a woman struggling with a pram on a stair and he did not stop.

Then the fog lifted and the film cut to the atrium, the golden atrium, the twelve-storey void, and the same actor was standing at the foot of the golden Buddha with his palms together, and the voiceover said that the Tower was where the old city and the new city finally met, and that a man could come here to be still.

I watched that film forty times, because it played in the subway on the Nan'an line and I took the Nan'an line twice a day. Every time, I noticed the same thing. The only place in the whole film where anyone helps anyone is nowhere. The old city is the problem. The Tower is the solution. The solution is a man standing alone with his palms together under a gold statue, being still.

That was the machine we were walking into. It was not a fortress; a fortress can be understood. It was a story, and the story had been told so smoothly that the city had stopped hearing it, which is the condition a story needs in order to become invisible, and invisibility is the only real power in this city. The gala was the story's climax. We were going to put the receipts inside it.

The receipts were the one thing a story cannot survive, because a story is a smooth thing and a receipt is a thing with a date on it. That was the entire plan. It was Yaoji's plan. It was better than any fight I have ever been in, and I want the book to say that the son of a county salesman and a mall security guard out-thought a two-billion-yuan conglomerate with nothing but a foam board and a habit of paying attention.

The consecration was on New Year's Eve, and it was the largest private event in the municipality's recent memory. There were two thousand invited guests and four hundred staff and a national broadcast and a drone show and a hotpot ban-

quet designed by two chefs who had been on television. The tickets were not sold; they were allocated, through a foundation, to the kind of people who are photographed at things. And the man at the centre of it, the chairman, the chairman of the whole apparatus, was going to receive the city's charity award at nine o'clock, inside the atrium, with the golden Buddha above him and the cameras of the country pointed at his face.

We got in through the catering.

That was Yaoji's plan and it was the best idea any of us had all year, and it was simple in the way that the best ideas are simple. A gala with two thousand guests and four hundred staff needs feeding, and in this city feeding means hotpot, and hotpot means ingredients, and ingredients arrive at the loading dock in the small hours on scooters with insulated boxes, because that is how every kitchen in this city is supplied and the Tower's kitchen was no different. Riders are the one class of person nobody photographs. A rider in a yellow jacket at a service door is not a person; he is a piece of infrastructure, like a pipe.

Yaoji had known that for a year before I did. He had watched me walk into buildings all over this city with my hood up and a bag of noodles and go up the service elevator and put the food on the table of the exact people who had spent the year looking for me on their phones. That was the trick of the whole year, and it was standing in front of us the entire time, and it was the thing the city had done to itself: it had made us invisible, and then it had needed us to bring the food.

We came in at eight in the morning, in waves, with real orders and real boxes and real paperwork. Zhang Niangniang came as a kitchen auntie because Zhang Niangniang could run a kitchen blindfolded and because nobody questions a woman of sixty-eight with a cleaver. Wang Niangniang came with her,

and Liu Niangniang came with both of them, and the three of them took over a corner of the prep station within an hour and were accepted by the Tower's own cooks within two, because a good cook recognizes another good cook faster than a cop recognizes a criminal.

Tian came in the afternoon through the staff entrance with a borrowed badge, off duty, off the book, and stood where she could see the security office. Yingtao came in the evening through the press door with a legitimate press pass and a legitimate camera and a playlist of legitimate questions, and she was assigned a photographer's spot on the east mezzanine, which was the best seat in the building for the thing we were going to do.

Tian found me by the service lift in the afternoon and spoke without moving her lips.

"There are eleven officers in the building."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's what it is." She looked at the ceiling. "I'm off duty in an hour. After that, whatever happens, I'm a woman with a daughter and a mortgage." She met my eyes. "Don't make me choose before then."

And I came in as what I had always been, which was a rider with a bag.

In the prep station, the aunties were already at war with the Tower's own cooks, and they were winning it the way they won everything, by being better and by being quiet about it.

"Your stock is too weak," Zhang Niangniang said to a boy of about twenty in a chef's jacket.

"It's the house stock," he said.

"Then your house has a problem." She tasted it again and put the spoon down. "Add bones. Not powder. Bones."

"There's no time for bones."

"There is always time for bones," she said. "That's what bones are for."

The boy looked at her, and then at Wang Niangniang, who was already at the far end of the station doing something to a tray of vegetables with a knife she had brought from home, and I watched him decide, in about four seconds, that these three women had been cooking since before he was born and that the correct move was to do what he was told.

"Okay," he said.

"Good boy," Zhang Niangniang said, and gave him a dumpling.

I need to describe that day, because it was the last day of the man I had been, and because I spent most of it carrying hotpot broth up a service elevator to the fortieth floor of a monument to everything I hated. The Tower had a service elevator the size of a small room, and it smelled of disinfectant over something older, and the men who used it were the kind of men I had known all my life: kitchen porters, cleaners, electricians, delivery riders, the whole invisible crew of a building that had been designed to be looked at rather than lived in.

The service elevator was the only place in the Tower where I was fully myself, and I want to give it a scene.

There were four of us in it for most of the morning: me, a kitchen porter named Old Wu, a cleaner called Sister Fang, and a young electrician who never took off his headphones. The elevator went up and down at the speed of a tired man, and between floors we talked the way workers talk, which is about nothing, which is about everything.

"Your box smells good," Old Wu said.

"Broth. Forty-second floor."

"Forty-second floor doesn't tip."

"Nobody tips."

"That's the whole city now," Sister Fang said. "Nobody tips and everybody orders."

"Everywhere's like that," Old Wu said. "My son does the same job in Shenzhen. Same app, same rain, same no tip." He shifted his bad back against the wall. "He asks me why I don't retire. I tell him I retire when I'm dead, same as everybody."

The elevator stopped. The doors did not open. Nobody moved, because it was not our floor, and because the elevator was slow and we were used to it. For about ten seconds the four of us stood in a warm box that smelled of broth and old metal, suspended somewhere in a golden building that had no idea we existed. That was the best conversation I had all day. It is always the best conversation I have all day.

Yaoji's voice came into my ear at four in the afternoon.

"How does it look in there?"

"Gold," I said.

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one there is."

"How many exits on the atrium floor?"

"Four that I can see. Two that matter."

"Which two?"

"The one the guests are using, and the one they don't know about."

"Good," he said. "Stay near the second one."

And when I went down into the atrium that night in the grey robe and made the whole country look at me, the thing I was carrying was not the city and not the girl and not even the abbot. It was Old Wu's back, and Sister Fang's sigh, and the young electrician who never took off his headphones, and the small fact that the four of us had stood in a box for ten seconds and been, for those ten seconds, entirely at home.

We did not talk about the gala. We talked about the elevator, which was slow, and about the guests, whose orders were wrong, and about the pay, which was late. In the afternoon one of the porters, a man of about fifty with a bad back and a good laugh, looked at my yellow jacket and my crooked finger and said, "You look like someone famous," and I said, "Everyone's famous for a day," and he laughed, and that was the whole exchange, and it was the closest I came all day to being seen.

At eight in the evening the atrium filled. I stood on the service gallery on the fifth floor with a tray of something I have forgotten and looked down at it, and I have to record what it looked like, because the book has spent a year on the fog and the stairs and the small rooms of this city, and this is the other thing.

It was gold. That is the first fact and it is not a metaphor: the Buddha was gold leaf, and the balustrades were gold, and the floor was reflecting the whole thing at an angle that made the room feel like the inside of a coin. The drone show went up at dusk and spelled fu in the strip of sky above the atrium's glass roof, then the fog took the drones and the fu dissolved, which the broadcast cut away from.

The floor of the atrium was marble, laid in a pattern an architect had chosen, and polished twice a day by a crew of four women who came in at five in the morning. By the end of the year those four women had cleaned a hundred billion yuan of foot traffic without once being seen. That is the city in one room. The floor is gold and the cleaner is invisible and the gold is a photograph of the floor and the cleaner is the reason the photograph works.

I walked on that floor in a grey robe and a pair of borrowed shoes, and beneath the gold there was a pattern, and the pattern was the same pattern that runs up the steps at the Eight-

een Stairs and along the wall of every old lane in Yuzhong. It is the pattern of a city built by hand and then covered over by a city built by money.

The gold did not hide it. The gold sat on top of it. And when the venting opened and the water in the pit rose and the lights went out, the gold was still gold and the pattern was still there, and the people ran across both of them on their way to the door, and none of them looked down.

There were two thousand people sitting at one hundred and eighty round tables, and the tables had lazy susans and little flags, and the guests wore black and red, and the servers wore white, and the whole tableau had the specific beauty of a photograph that has been corrected until it no longer resembles anything that happened. A hotpot banquet is the most democratic meal in this country. Put a hotpot in a golden atrium under a golden Buddha and serve it to two thousand of the richest people in a province and it becomes something else, something I could only describe as a wedding for a god who had not consented to the marriage.

Tan Hong came out at a quarter past eight. I had seen his photograph and his hand on the paper in a vault and his name at the bottom of my whole childhood, and now I watched him walk to the podium under his own golden Buddha, and he was smaller than I expected and softer, a man of fifty-eight in a plain blue jacket with his hands folded, and he looked up at the Buddha with an expression I recognized, because I had seen it on the faces of my own neighbors in the lane when they came out at dawn after the fire.

It was the expression of a man looking at a thing he had made and was not sure he deserved. He did not look like a monster. That is the thing about the men who do the most damage in a city like this, and I am not going to pretend otherwise for the benefit of the story. He looked like a man who

had once been made to kneel, and who had spent his whole life building a knee-high world so that no one would ever be made to kneel again, and who no longer knew, and perhaps had never known, that the world he had built made everyone else kneel.

He gave a speech. It was a good speech. He thanked the city, and the district, and the Foundation, and the monks, and he talked about compassion, and he used the word compassion eleven times in nine minutes, and once he used the word we in a way that made the hair on my arms stand up, because I understood, standing on the service gallery with a tray, that he was not pretending.

He believed it. The man who had signed the paper that erased my grandfather's teahouse and paid for the foam that burned my teacher was standing under his own golden god describing himself as a servant of the poor, and he was not lying, and that was the horror of it, and the whole year had been an education in that horror.

Then he got his award, and the atrium applauded, and the drone show tried again and failed again in the fog, and the guest of honor was announced, and the guest of honor was a monk from a temple in the north who had been paid to bless the building, and the blessing began at twenty forty.

I left the tray on the gallery rail and went down the service stairs, because it was time. On the fourth floor I met Liu Niangniang coming the other way with a pot of broth, and she watched me and I looked at her and she said, in the flat domestic voice she used for everything, "The kitchen has gas on the second floor and the little one has gone into the wall." And then she went on up the stairs with the broth, because there was a banquet, and a banquet needs serving, and the world does not stop for the thing that is about to happen. And I went down toward the second floor, where there was a shaft,

and a girl, and the whole year' s arithmetic waiting on the other side of a door.

CHAPTER 28

The Shaft

The Tower had a spine of service shafts, because every building this tall has a spine, and a building designed to be looked at has a bigger spine than a building designed to be lived in, because the beautiful surfaces have to be fed from somewhere.

There is a way of looking at this city that only riders and porters and girls who crawl through walls ever learn, and it is this: the city is not a set of buildings. It is a set of gaps.

A building is a promise that a company makes to a bank. A gap is a fact. The gap between the service elevator and the wall. The gap behind the vegetable market. The gap under the stairs at Chaotianmen where the old men sit. The gap in the fence, the gap in the guard's shift, the gap in the signal behind Liziba that lasts eleven seconds. The men who built the Tower had spent their lives filling gaps, because a filled gap is a floor you can sell. The girl in the wall had spent her life finding them, because a found gap is a way through. That is the whole difference between the two halves of this city, and it is not a difference of money.

It is a difference of what a person sees when they look at a wall. One sees a surface to be covered with gold. The other sees a seam. I had spent four years learning the seams without ever once calling them that. She had been taught them by a woman who was dead, in a room, in the dark, with a stopwatch. And on the last night of the year a small girl in a school jacket went through a wall into the coldest room in a two-billion-yuan building, and the whole city that had spent a year looking at my phone did not see her at all, and that was the entire reason it worked.

The thing about a service shaft is that it is the only place in a building where the building tells the truth.

A lobby lies. A lobby is a performance, with the flowers and the marble and the security desk and the music that nobody chose. A service shaft has no opinion. It is grease and cable and dust and the small brass plate that tells the maintenance crew when it was last oiled. The walls are narrow and warm, and the air comes from everywhere and nowhere, and if you are inside one you are inside the actual body of the thing, where the offices and the atria and the golden Buddha are only decoration on the outside of a machine that exists to move air and water and waste.

Huajiao told me later that she liked it in there. I realised exactly what she meant, and neither of us said why, because the reason is that a shaft is a place where nobody pretends. She had spent her whole life in places where everybody pretends. The wall was the honest part of the Tower.

The other honest part was the server room, and it was honest because it did not have any people in it. A server room is a cold room with a hum and a row of black boxes and a blinking light that means the world is working. The world that was working was the archive of a criminal enterprise, and the enterprise had chosen to store its memory in the one room in the building where a human being was not required to be present.

That was the flaw. Not a password. Not a firewall. The flaw was that the company had spent twenty years perfecting the art of buying people, and it had come to believe that people are the only security there is, so it had put the machine in a room by itself. A room by itself is the easiest room in the building for a fifteen-year-old who has been trained since she was six to be a room by herself.

Yaoji had the drawings. He had gotten them the way he got everything, which was by having once been a mall security guard and by knowing that the maintenance contractors of this whole district are four companies and that three of them file their as-built drawings with the fire bureau, and that a bored clerk at a fire bureau will send you a PDF if you ask nicely and say you are a student. He had spent a week with those drawings and a pencil, and he had marked the routes in the maze the way he marked the board, and the route he chose for the girl went like this.

Kitchen service lift to the fourth floor. Fourth-floor linen room, which had a vent. Vent to the mechanical floor at the back of the atrium, which nobody entered because it was full of ducting and dust and the building's actual lungs. Mechanical floor to the server room on the sixth, through a cable tray that was warm to the touch. And the server room was the only room in the building that mattered, because every screen in the atrium, from the twelve-storey Buddha's halo to the smallest table display, was fed from a rack in that room, and whoever controlled that rack controlled what two thousand people and a national broadcast were about to see.

I did not go with her. That is the first thing I need to say. The whole year had been a story in which I arrived at the last moment with my hands and my fan, and this time the plan was different, and the difference was deliberate, and I had agreed to it.

"You understand the plan," Yaoji said in my ear, for the fourth time.

"I understand the plan."

"Say it back."

"No."

"Say it back, Biao-ge."

I looked at the closed door of the linen room and said it back. "She goes in through the fourth-floor vent. She photographs the folders. She does not take anything. She comes out the same way. If the count reaches twenty-five, I go in after her."

"And if you go in after her?"

"Then the plan is dead and we do the other thing."

"Which is what?"

"Which is run," I said. "Which is what you're really asking. Whether I'll run."

Yaoji was quiet for a second. Then he said, "I'm asking because you're the only person in this city who has ever run toward anything, and it's the wrong thing to be good at."

The girl went in alone, because the girl could fit through a vent, and because the girl could be invisible in a way that a grown man with a limp and a fan cannot, and because, and this is the part I did not want to say out loud, she had been trained for exactly this since she was six years old by a woman who was dead.

We used her. I want the book to say that plainly. We took a fifteen-year-old child soldier of revenge and we pointed her at a vent in a golden building and we let her crawl, and we told ourselves it was her choice, and it was, and it was also ours, and both of those things are true and only one of them is comfortable.

She crawled for nineteen minutes. I know that because Yaoji counted it out over the radio, and because I sat in a linen closet on the fourth floor with my back against the door and listened to him breathe, and because the counting was the only thing that kept the closet from being a coffin. She did not speak. She never spoke when she worked.

"Do you have her?" Yaoji said in my ear.

"Not yet."

"It's been nineteen minutes."

"I know."

"Say something to her."

"She doesn't want me to talk to her."

"Then say something to me," he said, "so I know you're still there."

The radio discipline broke exactly once that night, and it was Huajiao who broke it.

She had been in the shaft for nineteen minutes. Yaoji had been counting, and the count had gone past the plan's allowance, and the plan said that past the allowance we were to assume the worst and abort. Yaoji said it over the open channel. And the girl, who had not spoken once, who was inside a wall, with her chin down and a vent cover in her hand, did the one thing she had never done in a year of operations, which was to answer.

"Not yet," she said. Her voice was very quiet and very flat. "There's a room. It's full of paper. It's like..." and then she stopped, and the channel was open, and we could hear her breathing in the dark.

"Like what?" Yaoji said.

"It's like my mother's desk," she said. "It's all the same. All the pictures. All the names." A pause. "I'm not looking at the pictures. I want you to know I'm not looking at the pictures."

Nobody said anything. There is no radio discipline for that. Yaoji looked at me across the laundry, and I looked at the floor, and Wang Niangniang, who was not supposed to be in the room, had come in anyway and was standing in the doorway with her hands in her apron, listening to a fifteen-year-old inside a wall tell three adults that she was not going to look at the photographs she had been trained her whole life to hunt. Then Huajiao said, "I'm taking the files. Three minutes,"

and the channel went quiet, and Yaoji started the count again, and nobody corrected him.

She had told me once, in the tunnel, that the rules were not a plan, they were a rosary; that her mother had made her say them to herself while she trained, until the saying of them was the same as the doing, and that she still said them, all seven, in order, every time she went into a place she was not supposed to be. She said them now. I could not hear them through the vent and the ducting and the distance, but I knew she was saying them, because I knew her, and because the whole of her small terrible life was in them.

Rule one, never work in daylight. It was night, and the building was full of light, and she was in the wall, which is neither.

Rule two, never twice in the same district. She had been in this building once, three weeks ago, in the daytime, as a lost schoolgirl asking a cleaner for a toilet. That was a violation. She had done it on purpose, to learn the door, and she had carried the violation for three weeks like a stone in her shoe, and I think that was the reason she was so quiet in the shaft.

Rule three, always know the second exit. She had two, and one of them was the cable tray, and one of them was a window on the sixth floor that the drawings said did not open.

Rule four, eat before, not after. Wang Niangniang had made her eat rice at eight in the morning, standing up in the service kitchen, with her eyes on the door, and she had eaten all of it, which was the closest thing to affection Wang Niangniang had been able to give her all week.

Rule five, never sleep in a place you have killed in. She had killed a man in an apartment in Nan' an in July, and she had not slept in that building since, and she had not slept well anywhere since either, and that is a rule that protects the body and does not protect the mind.

Rule six, never let them see your face for longer than a breath. She had a neck gaiter and a cap and the hood of the school jacket, and she kept her chin down, and she passed two cleaners in the mechanical floor and neither of them looked up from their phones.

Rule seven. Rule seven is the one her mother did not write. Rule seven is never do it because you hate him, and it is written in her own hand in the ledger, and she said it last, in the dark, in the warm dust of the cable tray, and then she was at the door of the server room, and the door was unlocked, because the kind of company that builds a golden Buddha does not expect anyone to come at it through the walls.

She plugged in Yaoji's device, which was the size of a thumb and had a piece of electrical tape over the light. She did not hack anything. That is the part the story gets wrong whenever the city tells it. Nobody hacked the Tower. The Tower had been built by a company that had spent twenty years perfecting the art of buying access, and it had forgotten that a door is a door.

The device was a small computer on a small card and all it needed was a socket and a moment, and the archive was already on it, the folders and the ledgers and the two columns and the file with the careful signature, and it went up the Tower's own network and into the Tower's own screens, and it sat there, waiting, in every wall of the atrium, for someone to press a button.

The button was mine. That was the deal. Yaoji had the button on his laptop in the loading dock, and Yingtao had the camera on the mezzanine, and Huajiao had gone into the wall to put the arrow in the bow, and the arrow was mine to loose, and that was why I was in a linen closet on the fourth floor with a broken fan in my jacket and a hundred and forty days of

sobriety in my blood, waiting for a girl I loved like a daughter to crawl out of a building that ate people.

She came out at twenty sixteen. She came out through the linen room with dust in her hair and the cap pulled low and one hand on the strap of the bag, and she watched me in the doorway and gave me the smallest nod I have ever received, and then she was gone down the service stairs to the kitchen, where Zhang Niangniang was waiting with an apron and a tray, because the plan said the little one would come out as a kitchen runner and walk out the front door with the rest of the staff at midnight, and the plan was still good.

What went wrong was not in the shaft. What went wrong was in the kitchen, and it had nothing to do with us, and that is the way these nights always break. The Tower's head of security was a man who had spent the evening being humiliated by a drone show and a fog machine, and at twenty twenty he decided to do the one thing that would make him feel competent, which was to sweep the service floors for staff who were not on the list.

They found a kitchen porter on the second-floor landing, a man of about fifty with a bad back and a good laugh, the same man who had told me at noon that I looked like someone famous, and they found him with a bag that was not his, and they took him into the security office.

He was not one of us. He was a day-player who had been paid to carry boxes and had picked up the wrong bag on the way out, and he did not know anything, and he could not tell them anything, and that did not matter, because the man who was running the sweep was not looking for information.

He was looking for a result. And so at twenty twenty-two a kitchen porter who had nothing to do with any of it was sitting in a room with his hands zip-tied, and the word went out on the staff radios that the floors were being swept, and the plan

that had worked perfectly for six hours began, quietly, to fall apart.

I heard it on the radio. Yaoji heard it on the radio. Yingtao heard it on the radio. And Huajiao, who was already out, who was already in the kitchen with Wang Niangniang, heard it too, and did the thing that no plan in the world could have told her not to do, which was to turn around and go back up the stairs.

I did not know that yet. I sat in the linen closet with the fan in my jacket and the button in my cousin's laptop and the count of years behind me, and I listened to the building fill with the sound of a security sweep, and I came to see that we were going to have to move before the blessing ended, because a trap that is half-set is not a trap, it is a clock, and the clock was running.

CHAPTER 29

The Performance

I came down into the atrium at a quarter to nine, and I came down the guest escalator, which was the last thing anyone expected, because the plan had said the service stairs and the plan had been built by sensible people.

For a moment afterward I could not watch the footage of the performance without looking at the guests, because the guests are the part of the story that is hardest to forgive, and I have had to learn to look at them too.

There was a woman at the third table in a black dress, maybe fifty, who spent the first two minutes of my performance laughing, with her phone up. I know this because her clip is one of the fifty, and because in it you can hear her say, to the man beside her, "This is the best thing that has ever happened to me at one of these." She meant it.

She was not a bad person; she was a woman at a gala who had been given a fool, and a fool is a gift, and she received the gift in good faith. Then the screens changed. Her clip is also one of the clearest documents of the change, because you can watch her face do arithmetic in real time.

She reads the ledgers. She reads her own company's name in the list of shells. And then she turns to the man beside her and says three words that the microphone catches, and the words are, "We have to go." Not "call the police." Not "look at this." We have to go. That is the crowd. That is everybody, including, if I am honest, me.

When a thing becomes dangerous the first instinct is not to help; the first instinct is to leave, and the second instinct is the one that makes a person, and the whole difference between

the woman in the black dress and the woman at the noodle shop is that the woman at the noodle shop stayed for the second instinct.

I have to say what the performance actually cost, because the city's version has the drunk monk walking down an escalator like a man arriving at his own coronation, and that is not what it was.

I was terrified. I want that on the page. I stood at the top of that escalator for one second longer than a man should, and in that second I understood that every eye in a two-thousand-person room was about to be on me, and that a year of being watched on a phone was nothing like the physical fact of a room. If I went down those steps, I would never be able to explain myself back into the ordinary man who delivered noodles and owed money and had a wall for a view.

And then I went down, because the girl was in the pending column and the archive was in the walls and the porter from the kitchen was in the security office with his hands tied, and because I had learned, over a year, that the fear does not go away and is not supposed to. It is the door. You walk through it while it is still the door.

The room did not know what it was looking at for two full minutes, and those two minutes were the strangest and most useful of my life. A crowd does not see a person; a crowd sees a category, and it sorts the category against the program it has been given. The program that night was a consecration: a stage, a monk, an award, a speech.

A man in a grey robe walking through the tables fit no slot in that program except the slot marked entertainment, and so for two minutes the two thousand sorted me as entertainment, and I used the sorting the way a rider uses a gap in traffic. I moved through the room on the assumption that nobody was looking. The assumption was true, and it is always true. That is

the last thing the book has to say about this city. The crowd is not an enemy. The crowd is a machine that has been sold a program, and if you understand the program you can walk anywhere.

I want to explain the escalation, because it was not courage and it was not madness and it was the only remaining arithmetic. The security sweep had taken the porter, and the porter had a name I did not know and a laugh I had heard once, and the sweep was moving up through the service floors, and if it reached the fourth floor before the performance then the closet was a trap and the whole thing was over.

So the performance had to happen early, and it had to happen where they could not simply switch it off, which meant the atrium, which meant the floor, which meant walking into two thousand people as the thing the whole city had spent a year deciding I was.

The robe was Wang Niangniang's. She had made it herself, in the tunnel, over a month, in secret, from a bolt of cheap grey cotton and the lining of an old winter coat, and she had torn it in nine places on purpose and mended five of them, because a costume is a clean thing and a real robe is a repaired thing, and she had sewn a pocket inside the chest for the fan.

I had put it on in the linen room and I had looked at myself in the small mirror on the back of the door, and I had seen a man of twenty-eight in a grey robe with a crooked finger and a broken fan and two burned hands, and I had thought, with the calm that had been arriving at the edges of everything for a month: there. That's not a costume. That's the true bill.

The glass doors of the atrium opened at twenty forty-four, and the noise hit me like a wall of warm water. Two thousand people at one hundred and eighty tables, the broadcast cameras on the mezzanine, the golden Buddha above it all with one hand raised, the fog machine breathing at the edges of the

floor, the hotpot steam going up into the lights in thin columns, and at the far end the small stage where a paid monk was finishing a blessing over the chairman's bowed head.

I stood at the top of the escalator for one second longer than a man should, and I let the room see me, because the only thing I had was the fact that nobody had ever seen me in this building and nobody would believe that the thing they had been shown all year was about to walk down the escalator toward them without a script.

Then I began to sing.

A security guard came at me across the marble. He was young and he was scared and he was doing his job.

"Sir. Sir, you can't be here."

"I'm delivering," I said.

"You're not on the list."

"I'm the food." I raised the fan. "You ordered a drunk monk. Here he is."

He put his hand on his radio. "Sir, I'm going to have to — "

"Then do it," I said. "But do it after the screens change. Because in about four seconds those screens are going to change, and you're going to want to be somewhere else."

He looked up. He was still looking up when the ledgers hit the walls.

The paid monk leaned down from the altar and spoke to me out of the corner of his mouth, in dialect, without moving his lips.

"You should go."

"I'm working."

"You're ruining the blessing."

"The blessing was already ruined," I said. "I'm just printing the receipt."

The old song is four words long, and I need to put down what it is actually about, because the city has turned it into a joke and the joke has a wall around it.

The four words are the first line of an old television theme, and the old theme is about a monk whose shoes are broken and whose hat is broken and who walks the streets of a city that does not want him. Every person of my grandfather's generation knew it. They sang it while they swept, and while they waited for the bus, and while they carried a refrigerator up a flight of stairs. It is not a happy song and it is not a sad song. It is a song about being poor in a city that is getting rich, and about the particular freedom of a man who has nothing left for the city to take.

That is why it fit in the atrium. That is why it fit in the golden room under the golden god. I sang it in dialect, off key, with my knees soft and my jaw slack, and the whole time I was singing it I was thinking about my grandfather's teahouse, and the stairs at Chaotianmen, and the men who carried the city on their backs, and the girls nobody looked at. The room thought I was a fool. The room was right. But the song was not about the fool. The song was about the city, and the city heard it and did not know it was hearing itself.

I sang the four words of the old song, badly, the way my grandfather sang it, and I let my knees go soft and my jaw go slack and I stumbled off the bottom step of the escalator into the aisle between the tables. The room did not understand me. That is the part the city got wrong later, in all the retellings, because the retellings made it a moment of revelation, and it was not.

Two women at the front table were arguing about me, loudly, as if I were not there.

"It's the drunk from the internet."

"It's not. Look at the fan."

"It is. My son showed me the video."

"Then why is he here?"

"How should I know? Maybe he's hired."

"He's not hired," the first one said. "Look at his shoes."

For the first two minutes, the room thought I was part of the show. A hand grabbed my sleeve and a woman laughed and a man said, "Is this the drunk monk thing?" and a waiter moved to intercept me and then did not, because waiters are trained to let the program proceed.

I bowed to a table of officials. I bowed to a woman in a red dress who was live on her phone. I complained to a whole table of bankers about the price of the hotpot, and I slurred it, and I fell over a chair on purpose, and the atrium laughed, and I want the book to record the laughter, because the book has spent a year saying that this city is made of people who decide not to see, and now two thousand of them were watching the thing they had spent a year watching on their phones, and none of them recognized it, and all of them enjoyed it, and the laughter was loud and warm and completely empty.

I did not feel the emptiness as anger. I felt it as a kind of grief, which is the older and quieter thing, and I used the grief. That is what the abbot had taught me, in his courtyard, with his bucket and his broom, and I had not understood it until that walk. If you are already falling, you cannot be knocked down. I was already ridiculous. I had been ridiculous since the first alley. There was nothing left for them to take.

At twenty forty-seven I reached the foot of the Buddha. The paid monk had finished. Tan Hong was at the microphone with the award in his hands, a small gold thing, and he was looking at me the way a man looks at a wasp in a wedding cake, and behind him the cameras of the country were pointed at his face, and I walked up to within ten feet of him and I said,

loud enough for the nearest table and the nearest microphone, the only line I had written, which was the line the abbot had made me keep.

"Good evening, Chairman." I used the title because the title was the joke; there is no word in this room for what he was, and the word meant the man at the top of the table, which he was, and which he had never once let anyone forget. "I brought you something. You left it in a hole in the ground."

I raised the fan. And on the mezzanine, where a young woman with a press pass was standing with a camera that had been live for eleven minutes, Yaoji pressed the button on his laptop in the loading dock, and the Tower's network did the only thing it had ever been built to do, which was to show a picture to a crowd.

The screens changed.

I am not going to describe the ledgers as a spectacle, because the point was never the spectacle. They came up on every screen at once, the twelve-storey halo and the table displays and the wall above the stage, and they were not edited into a film and there was no music and no voiceover, because the whole argument of the night was that the documents did not need to be sold. They were just there: the campus-loan sheets with the small paternal notes in the collector's handwriting; the nude-collateral files, never shown, only listed, because the girl had made me promise and I had promised; the folder of settlements; the list of the placed and the pending.

Then the receipt for the foam-rubber "restoration materials," paid through a shell company whose fourth layer resolved to the same registered address as the Tower. Then the incident report, with the annex about the discrepancy. Then a photograph of Zhang Maliu, thirty-four years old, in a rented robe, with his daughter on his shoulders, and beside it a

screenshot of the eulogy post from the chairman's own net - work, the one that had collected a hundred thousand candles for a temple and never once mentioned the name of the man who tried.

And then, at the very end, because Yaoji had insisted on it and I had agreed, the file with the careful signature, and my grandfather's teahouse at the top of the alley, and the num - ber of the clearance, and the date, and the name.

The atrium went silent in a way I had never heard a large room go silent. There was the fog machine and the hotpot steam and the small hum of the golden Buddha's spotlights, and under all of it the particular living silence of two thousand people reading.

And the laughter had not changed yet. That is the still point of the whole book. For about four seconds after the screens changed, some of the room was still laughing, because the drunk was still standing there with his fan raised, and the mind is slow, and a crowd is slower, and the two things were true for the same four seconds: the comic figure and the ledger.

I stood in the middle of the golden floor with the fan up and looked out at the room, at the faces turning from the screens to me and back to the screens, and I held the beat the way the abbot held a pause, and I did not say anything at all, because the documents were speaking and I had finally learned, after a year, to be quiet while the truth was in the room.

At twenty forty-nine, someone at a table near the front stood up and pointed at me and said, in a voice that carried, "That's him. That's the drunk from the alley." And the pointing spread, and the phones came up, and the room broke, and on the stage Tan Hong did not move at all, and above him the golden Buddha raised one hand into the fog, and I realised

that the second half of the night had begun, and that the second half was not going to be a performance.

INTERLUDE 30

The Fifty Videos

After the gala, a compilation circulated under the title “Fifty Angles on the Fall.” It was assembled by an anonymous editor and hosted on three platforms within eleven hours of the event. The list below reproduces the compilation’s own timestamps and its own one-line descriptions. The editor’s note claims the fifty were chosen from 1,847 uploads. No two descriptions of the final seconds agree. The compilation was never monetised, and the editor was never identified.

1. `22:41:02` — camera high on the east mezzanine; the atrium floor is a gold coin around a hole.
2. `22:41:04` — a phone on the floor, filming the ceiling; the LED walls are playing the ledgers.
3. `22:41:06` — a woman in the crowd is covering her child’s eyes and watching through her fingers.
4. `22:41:09` — the drone show is spelling fu (福), the character for fortune, badly, in the smoke.
5. `22:41:11` — a bought monk at the altar stops mid-blessing and does not move again for four minutes.
6. `22:41:14` — the catering riders are filmed from behind; four yellow jackets at the service door.
7. `22:41:16` — a child asks his mother why the picture on the wall is a bad picture.
8. `22:41:19` — someone spills hotpot oil; the film on the marble catches the gold light.

9. 22:41:21 — a security guard's radio, held up close, is unintelligible.
10. 22:41:24 — the crowd at the north escalator is not running; it is not yet running.
11. 22:41:27 — a man films the screen and weeps and does not know why he is weeping.
12. 22:41:29 — the broadcast camera swings and shows a monk's robe on the mezzanine rail, and for one second the whole country is looking at an empty robe.
13. 22:41:31 — a phone films another phone; the ledgers reflected in the small dark glass.
14. 22:41:34 — a woman shouts a name that is not Tan Hong's; nobody answers.
15. 22:41:36 — the fog machine is still running; the atrium is becoming the river.
16. 22:41:38 — the drone show fails; the drones hang, then fall, one by one, into the gold.
17. 22:41:40 — a man in a yellow jacket on the mezzanine; he is not running.
18. 22:41:42 — a security camera, recovered later, shows the twelfth-floor scaffold empty.
19. 22:41:44 — a girl in a school jacket crawls out of a service vent and is not seen by anyone; the vent is thirty metres from the nearest camera, and none of the fifty catches her face.
20. 22:41:46 — the water-pit under the golden Buddha; the surface is filmed from above; a shape goes in.
21. 22:41:47 — a phone films a phone filming; both shake.

22. 22:41:48 — a woman says, “He slipped,” and is not sure.
23. 22:41:49 — a man says, “He jumped,” and is sure.
24. 22:41:50 — a boy says, “He was pushed,” into a friend’s ear.
25. 22:41:51 — the fog swallows the twelfth floor; the description says only “white.”
26. 22:41:52 — a shoe is on the golden rail, alone, in focus, for nine seconds.
27. 22:41:53 — a drone operator, off-shift, films nothing useful and keeps the file anyway.
28. 22:41:54 — a woman is praying to the water-pit; she is not praying to the Buddha.
29. 22:41:55 — the LED walls cut to black, then to the company logo, then to black.
30. 22:41:56 — a man’s hands are bleeding; he is not the man who fell.
31. 22:41:57 — the smoke alarm is the only clean sound in any of the fifty.
32. 22:41:58 — a phone is dropped; the last frame is a child’s shoe and a coin of gold.
33. 22:41:59 — a man in a yellow jacket is on his knees at the water’s edge; he does not dive; the description does not say why.
34. 22:42:00 — the description says only: he was reaching for something.
35. 22:42:01 — a woman says, “He was reaching for the Buddha’s hand.”

36. 22:42:02 — a man says, “There is no hand. It’s a statue.”
37. 22:42:03 — a boy says, “He was reaching for his phone.”
38. 22:42:04 — the fog machine stops; the twelfth floor appears; there is no one on the scaffold.
39. 22:42:05 — a guard films the service corridor; two men in work clothes go past; one has a burn scar, and the other is carrying a folded robe.
40. 22:42:06 — a phone films the water; the water does not show what the phone sees.
41. 22:42:07 — a woman says, “He didn’t scream.”
42. 22:42:08 — a man says, “He screamed the whole way.”
43. 22:42:09 — a phone films an empty escalator; someone is breathing hard off-camera.
44. 22:42:10 — the description says: take this one down.
45. 22:42:11 — a child films the golden Buddha and nothing else, for two minutes, in silence.
46. 22:42:12 — a phone in the crowd films the crowd, and the crowd is all looking up.
47. 22:42:13 — a woman films her own face; she is crying; behind her the LED walls are off.
48. 22:42:14 — a man films a man filming, and the two faces are the same face in different light.
49. 22:42:15 — the last useful frame in the compilation shows the VIP box: a young man alone, holding a phone at his own face, and the phone’s screen is recording.

50. 22:42:16 — the description for the final video is the only entry that is not a description. It says: no one got the last second. that's not a failure. that's the whole country.

Editor's afterword, posted with the compilation and deleted within the day:

I have watched all 1,847 uploads. I want to record what I did not use, because the fifty are an argument, and the argument is made by what is left out.

I did not use the videos of the water-pit after the ambulances left, because there is nothing in them, and a camera pointed at nothing is the truest thing this city owns.

I did not use the forty minutes of a child who filmed the golden Buddha and nothing else. A child's patience is not evidence, and I did not want to explain it to anyone.

I did not use the paramedic footage, because the paramedic asked me not to, and because she was the only person in any of the uploads who touched a body with a free hand.

I did not use anything from inside the VIP box. That footage exists. It belongs to the son. The son has not released it, and I am not going to release it for him.

What is left is fifty angles on a man falling. No two agree on the last second. That is not because the cameras are bad. It is because the last second of a life, like the first, belongs to the person inside it, and the city only ever gets to film the seconds on either side.

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— the compilation was taken down within a day of its posting. copies circulated for a week. three of the fifty clips were eventually introduced as evidence. the court exhibit lists them by number, and the numbers are the numbers above, and the video marked 34 was played twice.

CHAPTER 30

The Butcher’s Bill

There is no clean riot. I have heard people talk about a crowd breaking as if it were water, and water is too kind a word, because water finds the lowest place and a crowd in a golden room finds only the doors.

I have to say what the atrium smelled like, because the book has been a book of smells and this is the one I have not written.

It smelled of hotpot oil and gold leaf and the sharp chemical sweetness of the fog machine, and underneath all of it, when the venting began, it smelled of the river. That is the thing nobody would believe, and it is true. The Tower stands on the water, and when the smoke dampers opened, the air that came in came off the Jialing, and the whole golden room filled with the smell of wet stone and diesel and mud and something older, the smell that has been on the river steps at Chaotianmen every night of my life.

So the last thing two thousand people in that room smelled, when they were running and filming and falling, was the oldest thing in this city. It came in through the walls of a monument built to replace it. I stood at the foot of the golden Buddha with the fan in my hand and my body shaking and my mouth full of blood, and I breathed the river and thought: there it is. You can build anything you like, and the water still gets in. That is the only comfort the year gave me, and I have held onto it longer than anything else.

I need to describe the crush the way the report describes it, and then let me describe it the way it was, and the difference between the two is everything that this book has been arguing.

The report is a document of numbers and routes. It gives the time the first table stood, the time the north escalator reached capacity, the time the first fall was recorded on the building’s own cameras, and a diagram of the crowd’s flow that looks, I am told, like a weather map. It says there were eleven minor injuries and one serious, and it lists the injuries by kind and location, and it says the event was the largest single concentration of people in the building’s short history. It is correct on every count. It does not say what a crush is. A crush is not a stampede; a stampede is people running, and a crush is people standing.

It is a crowd packed so tightly that the pressure comes from the sides and the back, and the people in the middle cannot fall down and cannot breathe, and the thing that kills them is not a fire and not a weapon but the pressure of other human beings, who are themselves standing there because the person behind them is standing there, in a chain that runs all the way to the back of the room and ends in a man who is only trying to see what is happening.

That is a crush. It has no villain, only a crowd, and the crowd is everybody, and the book has spent a year saying that everybody is the thing, and now it had become physics.

The first minute was the strange one. Two thousand people had just been shown a ledger that implicated the man on the stage, and they did the thing that a crowd does when it is handed a fact it cannot process, which is to turn to the people nearest it and ask.

I heard the question go around like a wave: is this real, is this a bit, who is that, did you see the list, whose picture was that, and under the asking there was a thin high note of something worse, which was the sound of a room full of im‑portant people realizing that they were on camera in the presence of a scandal and had to decide, in real time, which

way to face. Some of them stood. Some of them took out their phones. Some of them began, very quietly, to move toward the exits, and that is what the experienced ones do, and the move toward the exits was the thing that turned the room.

The crush started at the north escalator at twenty fifty-one. I did not see the first fall. I have read about it since, in the incident report and in the fifty videos, and the report says it began when a table of eight stood up at once and the guests behind them mistook the movement for a stampede and stood as well, and the escalator, which was built for a thousand people an hour, received four thousand in eleven minutes.

That is the arithmetic. That is always the arithmetic of a crush: the machine is rated for a number of people, and the room contains a larger number, and the difference goes somewhere, and where it goes is a person's hand or a person's ribs or a person's face against the glass.

There was a woman on the floor by the north escalator at twenty fifty-two, and I did not get to her, because I was still at the foot of the Buddha and because the man on the stage was looking at me. But somebody got to her, and the report lists her as a guest, female, sixty-one, three fractures to the left hand sustained when she was trampled, and I need to put her in this chapter in her own right, because the book made a promise in the second act, when a stranger's hand was maimed in a crowd at Liziba, that it would keep the city's arithmetic honest about who pays for a spectacle.

The woman in the red jacket at Liziba had come to see the fake monk, and lost the use of two fingers. The woman at the Tower had come to see the real one, and lost the use of three. The spectacle ate people twice that year, and both times the eating was not in the script, and both times the city processed it as an accident, and both times the people who were eaten were the ones who had not been invited to be on the stage.

Tan Hong did not move during the first minute. I will give him that, because the book has promised to give him his due. He stood on the stage with the little gold award in his hands and the ledgers in the air above his head and his own photograph and his own signature on every wall, and he looked at the screens one by one, the way Liu Niangniang looked at a hand of tiles, and his face did not break.

Then he turned and looked at me, and I understood that I was the only person in the room he could see, because I was the only person in the room who had no reason to be on camera.

The man beside him leaned down and said something in his ear. That man was Dao-ge. I did not know it yet; I had only the shape of him from the cableway platform and the corner outside the temple, the heavy shoulders and the burn scar under the collar, and I would know him properly in about four minutes. He had been at the chairman's elbow all night, in a good suit, doing what a good enforcer does, which is to stand where the exits are and be furniture. And when the chairman leaned back and said the sentence, the enforcer nodded once, without any change in his face, and began to walk.

The sentence is in the transcript because the broadcast was still live and the boom mike was still on the lectern. The auditor caught it between the crowd noise and the fire alarm, and the exhibit plays it twice in court. It is four words in dialect, and this is the whole man, and I am not going to decorate it.

"Fo ye yao chu chen," he said. "Even the Buddha must be dusted."

Then he turned to the cameras, because the broadcast was still national and the cameras were still pointed at his face, and he did the thing the whole year had been preparing him for, which was to keep his composure while his world came apart, and to do it not by denying the ledger but by absorbing

it. “Friends,” he said, to the country, over the top of the noise, “I have just been shown something that I will be look‐ing into. I do not know what has happened here tonight. I do not know who this man is.

I do know that every institution in this city has enemies, and I need to say to those enemies that a temple will still be rebuilt, and the poor will still be fed, and compassion does not stop because of a lie.” He said the word compassion, and the boom mike caught it, and he set the little gold award down on the lectern very gently, and behind him the golden Buddha raised its one hand into the smoke, and that is the last thing Tan Hong said in public before the fog took the atrium.

Somebody vented the building at twenty fifty-four. That is the sentence in the report, and that is all the report will ever say, because the report cannot decide what was venting what. The Tower’s smoke-control system had been triggered by a sensor near the kitchen, and the system, on the fire setting, opens the atrium’s smoke dampers and drives the exhaust fans, and the effect of that on a room already full of hotpot steam and fog-machine fog is not a fire.

It is a white-out. The atrium disappeared. The golden Buddha disappeared. The screens, which were still playing the ledgers, stayed in the air as green-grey rectangles in the fog, and the whole room became a thing I had known my whole life, which is a city where everything that matters is ten meters past the edge of what you can see.

In the white-out, Dao-ge reached me. I did not see him come, because nobody sees anybody in the fog, and I did not hear him over the alarm and the crowd. What I felt was a hand on the back of my neck, and a voice close to my ear that I knew from a platform in February, saying my name.

“Li Xiuyuan.”

He did not say it like a question. He said it the way a man says the name on a delivery order, and then he turned me around, and in the fog I saw the face of the man who had been a bangbang on the same stairs as my father, and who had carried a child out of a kitchen fire once, long ago, and who had spent the whole year being the second half of my life, the road I did not take at the same crossroads, and he watched me for an instant with a flicker of something that was almost recognition, the way two men who were born on the same hill look at each other when they meet on a different one, and then he began, politely, to kill me.

What happened to the girl happened in that same whiteout, and I did not see it happen, and I have never seen it, because she has never let me watch the video. All I know is what the paramedics told me, in the ambulance, in the language that only records the body. There was a knife. There was a wound.

The wound was low on the left side of her abdomen, and it was the kind of wound that a person takes when they put their body between a blade and someone else, and the someone else was me. She was fifteen. She lived. That is the first bill on a list the book is going to have to pay before it can end, and I am putting it here, at the top, because the rest of the list is money and scars and buildings, and this one is a girl.

The paramedics said later that the blade had missed the artery by the width of a finger, and that a finger's width was the whole difference between a wound and a death, and that nobody in the building had done anything to make that difference except luck. I have thought about that finger's width more than I have thought about the fall of Tan Hong. We spend our lives building plans and boards and codes, and the thing that decides whether a child lives is a finger's width of flesh,

and no one gets to choose it, and no one gets to thank anyone for it, and the luck does not care whether you deserved it.

A woman in a torn dress grabbed my arm on the escalator and would not let go.

"You're the one from the screen," she said.

"I'm nobody."

"You're the one." Her eyes were wild and certain. "Did you do it? Did you make him fall?"

"No."

"Then who did?"

"He did," I said, and pulled my arm free, and went up, and behind me she was already telling the person next to her, with total confidence, the story of how the drunk monk had pushed the billionaire off his own god.

The paramedic was the first person to speak to me after it was over, and she spoke to me the way you speak to a man you are not sure is going to be reasonable.

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Your hands are bleeding."

"Old burns."

"Your hands are bleeding and you're holding a girl who is bleeding. I need you to put her down on the stretcher, slowly, and then I need you to sit down." She had her hand on my arm. "Sir. Are you listening to me."

"I'm listening."

"Good. What's her name?"

I did not answer. That is the thing that has stayed with me. A woman asked me the name of the child in my arms and I did not have one, because in a year I had never once asked her, because a girl with a ledger does not give her name and a man who is afraid does not ask for it. I had called her Huajiao since the first night, and Huajiao was not a name.

It was what her mother had called a fear. And the paramedic needed a name for the form, and I did not have one, and I said, into the fog and the alarm and the woman's patient face, the only thing I could think of, which was, "Her mother called her Huajiao." The paramedic wrote it down. And the name on the form for the rest of that night was a spice, because a spice was all I had ever given her.

CHAPTER 31

The Man Who Took the Stairs

I want to set the record straight about the fight, because the city has made a hundred versions of it and every one of them is a lie, and the lie is always the same lie: the drunk monk beat the enforcer.

I did not beat Dao-ge. I want that on the page in the plainest words the language has. I did not beat him, I did not out-fight him, and I did not, at any point in the eleven minutes that the fog and the two of us were inside each other, land a blow that a real fighter would have counted.

He was fifty-five years old and he was stronger than me and faster than me and better than me at every single thing that a fight is made of, and if the room had been flat and empty and quiet, he would have finished me in the first thirty seconds and gone back to the chairman's elbow and been home before one.

What saved me was not skill and it was not courage. It was the building. It was the building, and a girl, and the fact that the man had spent his whole life on the same stairs I had, and that when you put two men from the same hill into a vertical city in the fog, the hill starts to have an opinion.

I have been asked many times how I survived the fight, and the honest answer is that I did not survive by fighting, which is not the same as saying I survived by luck.

I survived by falling. That is the abbot's lesson, and it is the closest thing I have to a method. When a man who is stronger than you takes hold of you, your instinct is to pull away, and the pulling is where the strength of the grip lives, because a man can only hold you if your weight is fighting his.

Let the weight go. Fall toward him, into the hold, and the hold becomes a thing he has to carry rather than a thing he has you by.

Someone who is carrying you cannot also be setting his feet, and so for one quarter of a second the whole geometry of the fight is wrong and the bigger man is the one who is off balance. I did that eleven times that night, on the escalator, in the restaurant, on the gallery, on the roof of the lift. Eleven times the fall bought me a quarter of a second. A quarter of a second is what an amateur has instead of a skill.

I did not win those exchanges. I survived them. A fight is not a dance, and it is also not a fixed contest of strength. It is a long series of small mistakes, and the winner is not the best man. The winner is the man who is still there when the other man makes his one mistake. I was still there, seven floors above a golden floor, because a girl with a stomach wound dragged herself onto the roof of a service elevator and made a decision I did not deserve.

The first exchange happened by the golden escalator. He took my collar and I went with the pull instead of against it, which is the first thing the abbot ever taught me and the only thing I did correctly all night, and his weight carried him half a step past me into the fog, and I got a hand on the escalator rail and went up. He came after me.

He came after me the way a man walks up a moving stair, which is easily, unhurried, and he caught my ankle at the top and pulled, and I went down onto the landing with my cracked ribs finding the marble, and he put a shoe into my side, once, and I heard a rib give that had not given before, and then I rolled under the velvet rope and into the second-floor restaurant and he followed, because he had been told to kill the broadcast and the drunk, and I was the drunk, and there is no version of that order that lets a professional go home early.

The broadcast was the other thing in the building, and I need to say what it was doing, because it was still doing it. Yingtao' s camera was live on the mezzanine. Two other channels had picked up the feed. The ledgers were still in the air on every screen that had not been physically unplugged, and the atrium was full of people who had stopped running and started filming, because there is no situation in this city, none, in which a crowd stops filming, and the phones had become a kind of weather.

That mattered for a reason that no one had planned, which is this: a phone screen in fog is a light, and a light in fog is a direction, and a man who is being chased through fog by a man who knows the building better than he does needs every direction he can get.

I went up. That was the decision, and I made it without thinking, which is the only way I have ever made a good one. The building had twelve storeys of void and every one of them had a service gallery and a ring of escalators and a set of elev - ators, and Dao-ge had spent the whole night standing at those exits and did not need to look at a map, and I did not have a map, and so I did the only thing I knew, which was to take the stairs.

Not the escalator. The concrete service stair at the back of the atrium, the one the staff used, the one that smelled of the service elevator and the same bleach as every other back stair in this city. I went up the stairs because a stair is the one thing I have ever been the best in the world at, and because I had spent four years carrying food up eleven thousand flights of them, and because my calves, which are the strongest thing I own, do not care what a man with a knife thinks.

He came after me. He came after me up the stairs, and that was his mistake, and it was a small one and it was the only one he made all night. He was a bangbang before he was an en -

forcer, and a bangbang knows stairs, but he had spent twenty years being driven, and his legs had gone soft in the city's service, and I had spent four years being the stair.

Somewhere around the seventh floor I stopped climbing and went sideways, through a fire door and onto the ring gallery, and he followed, and the two of us stood in the fog on the seventh-floor gallery of a golden building with a white void dropping away below us and the Buddha's hand somewhere out in the white, and he studied me and I looked at him and both of us were breathing hard and only one of us was breathing hard for the same reason.

He talked to me while he was trying to kill me, and that is the part the city has never believed.

"Don't make this personal," Dao-ge said, on the gallery, in the fog. "It's not personal. You understand? I have nothing against you. I never did."

"You burned a temple."

"I set a business condition." He wiped his mouth. "The temple was in the way. I've been in this business since before you were born, and the rule is simple. The thing in the way is not a person, it's a position. You put a person in a position and the position gets cleared, and the person is collateral, and the paperwork says collateral, and I sleep fine. You'll sleep fine too, when you've done enough of them."

"I don't want to sleep fine."

"That's the only thing worth wanting." He came at me again, and I fell, and he went past, and he caught the rail. "That's the only thing anyone in this city wants. Fine sleep. You think your father wanted anything else? A bangbang on the same stairs, same ropes, same weather. He wanted to come home and sleep fine. And you know what he got." He straightened up. "I know about your father. I read the file on the clearance.

Everybody on that slope was in the file. I was in it too. I carried the same refrigerators up the same stairs. The difference between me and him is that when the clearance came, I took the money and he didn't, and I slept fine, and he died." He watched me without anger. "You want to kill me for that? Then kill me. But it won't be a temple or a signature. It'll just be a man who came home."

That is the last honest conversation I ever had with the man who may have watched my father die, and it happened seven floors above a golden floor with both of us trying to break each other, and I have not been able to write it off as a lie, and I have not been able to accept it as the truth. It sits in me exactly the way the abbot said a decision sits in a man: undecided, and mine to carry.

"Why?" he said. It was the first thing he had said to me that was not my name.

"You don't know?" I said.

"I know what the papers said. I know about the neighborhood." He wiped his mouth. "The teahouse. Your grandfather. I read the file. I read it years ago." He said it without cruelty and without apology, the way a man reads out a number. "That was business. It was a clearance. There were three thousand people on that slope and every one of them had a grandfather. You want me to be sorry about a clearance?"

"I want you to be sorry about the foam."

That stopped him. I do not know why. Maybe it was the word, maybe it was the fact that the foam was the one thing in the whole year that could not be turned into business, because a clearance can be a policy and a fire that kills a monk can only be a crime. He regarded me for a moment and something moved behind his face, and then he came at me, and I did the second thing I did correctly all night, which was I waited until he was committed and I stepped off the gallery.

I did not fall. I want to be very clear. I did not fall. I stepped onto the top of a service elevator car that the linens used, which was parked at the seventh floor with its roof level with the gallery, and it was the trick I had used a hundred times in this city when a customer lived on a floor that the lobby did not reach, and the roof of that car was the one piece of archi - tecture in the whole building that was mine. He landed on it a second after me. He landed well.

He was a big man and he landed like someone who had jumped off things his whole life, and the two of us fought on the roof of a service elevator in the fog seven floors above a golden floor, and he hit me twice in the ribs and once in the mouth and the mouth gave up a tooth that I had spent eleven months keeping, and I got the fan up and he broke it, and the fan came apart in my hand and the wire-mended spine went spinning off into the white, and I understood that I was going to lose, because there was nothing left in the arithmetic that said otherwise.

What saved me was the girl.

I did not see her come onto the car. I have never been able to reconstruct it; the fog was total and I was on my knees and my mouth was full of blood. What I know is that there was a small sound that was not the fight, and then Dao-ge made a noise I had not heard a man make, a short, shocked, animal noise, and his hands came up to his face. Huajiao had thrown the powder.

She had carried the ground huajiao in a pouch on her belt since she was thirteen, the mercy weapon, the thing her mother had taught her to make for blinding and numbing without killing, and she had thrown it into the eyes of a man twice her size, and then she had put her slingshot up and fired once, and the steel went into his throat at the point where the wind and the voice are.

I have thought about the medicine of it since, because the medicine is the only way I can understand what she did. A gut wound does not announce itself. The abdomen has no floor to it; the blood goes into the space and the body does not know, and for a while the body keeps the limbs working on credit and the mind clear, because the mind has to be clear or the animal dies. Her pulse was already threading up and her pressure was already dropping and the blood was leaving the middle of her and pooling where it could not be got at, and the skin around her mouth and her fingertips had gone the gray-yellow of an old page, which is what a body looks like when it starts hand - ing back the blood from the far places to feed the heart and the brain. The edges of what she could see were already going dark. A body in that state does not fire a slingshot because it is brave. It fires because the oldest part of it, the part under the thinking, has decided to spend every last thing it has on one motion and then be done. That is not skill. That is a biological anomaly. That is a fifteen-year-old girl' s body overriding its own shutdown sequence out of an arithmetic no doctor would sign.

She was already down. That is the part I cannot get out of my head.

She had a gut wound from six minutes earlier, the wound that had been meant for me, and she had dragged herself onto the roof of that elevator on her elbows, and the throwing and the firing were the last two things her body did before it stopped doing things, and after the shot she lay on the roof of the car with her hand still up, like a child who has been told to raise her hand, and the blood was spreading under her on the metal, and I crawled to her and put my jacket under her head and I could not hold her because my hands were burned and my ribs were gone and the building was shaking with the smoke-control fans, and so I lay down on the roof of the elev -

ator beside her and put my face against her hair and told her, in dialect, that she had not been slow, and that she had not been slow, and that she had never once been slow.

Dao-ge did not die on the car. He went over the edge of it, blind and choking, with his hands at his throat, and he fell seven floors into the consecration pit, which was the water-pit under the golden Buddha, the shallow rectangular pool that the architects had put there so that the Buddha could be re-flected, the pit he had helped to pay for, and he hit the water and the marble lip and broke, and he did not drown, which is the thing the book has to grant him, because a person who has done what he has done does not get to die in a beautiful way.

He lived. He was pulled out by the Tower's own staff and arrested in the water, and he spent the next six months in a hospital bed with a spinal injury and a ruined voice, and he is still alive, and he will testify, and that is the whole of his end for now. The book keeps him, because the book has plans for him. The second half of my life is still standing in a ward, waiting to ask me about my father's refrigerator, and I am not ready to answer.

I lay on the roof of the service elevator with the girl's blood on my jacket and the fog around us and the sound of the building coming apart in the distance, and I did not know whether the broadcast was still live and I did not know whether the chairman had fallen and I did not know whether the archive had survived the sweep, and none of it mattered, because there was a fifteen-year-old in my arms who had put her body between a blade and mine, and the only thing in the world was the small hard fact of her breathing, which was still there, which was still there, which was still there.

CHAPTER 32

The Bodhisattva Complex

By the time the police reached the atrium, the fog had begun to settle, and what it settled on was a golden room full of dropped phones.

The phones were the thing I remember most. Two thousand people had run, and almost everyone had run with one hand up, and when the smoke-control fans finally cleared the air a little, the marble floor and the tables and the water-pit were covered in a thin layer of dropped screens, most of them still filming. The report counts four hundred and eleven. The court exhibit keeps three. Every one of the phones was a small dark eye on the floor of the atrium, and every one of them had caught some fraction of the truth, and that is the actual con - dition of this city, and the book is not going to pretend other - wise.

I have one more thought about the fall and it is about the workers, because the workers are the ones who had to carry the water out.

There were eleven men on the night shift at the Tower, and they were the ones who did not run. They were the electricians and the cleaners and the kitchen porters and the security guards, and they were in the building when the atrium went white, and they did what workers do in this city, which is they kept the building standing while the rich people left. They opened the fire doors and they killed the escalators and they found a woman under a table and carried her out on a loading board, and then they went down into the water-pit with a rope and pulled two men out of it, one of them alive. Nobody filmed them.

The fifty videos are all pointed at the golden Buddha and the scaffold and the VIP box, because that is where the story was, and the story was not the men with the rope. I have found three of them since. One is back at the Tower. One took a job in a hospital kitchen. The third would not speak to me, because he did not want his name to be part of the year.

I have decided to respect that. So the year's last sentence about the night is this instead: the city that ate the man in the lane and the monk in the courtyard was also, at the same hour, in the same building, carrying a stranger up a ladder out of the water, and both things are true, and the book is not going to choose between them.

The officer who came up to me on the floor of the atrium did not arrest me and did not thank me, and both of those were correct.

"You're the man in the robe," he said.

"Yes."

"You were on every screen ten minutes ago. Now there's a dead man in the water, and there's going to be a very long investigation, and I need you to come with me and give a statement, and I need you to not disappear. If you disappear this becomes a story about a man who fled, and I don't have time for that story."

"I won't disappear."

"Good." He wrote something. "You understand you might be charged. Trespass, at least. Incitement, possibly. There's a crowd crush with three broken bones and a fatality in it, and the fatality is a suspect, and the crowd is your crowd. That's going to take lawyers a year to untangle." He looked at my burned hands. "Do you have a lawyer?"

"No."

"Then get one. Get one tonight." He closed his notebook. "For what it's worth, which is nothing in a courtroom, I

watched the screens. My father had a loan from a company like that. He died without paying it. I've been a cop for six years and I have never once been able to touch them." He put the notebook away. "So. Statement."

That is the whole law's opinion on the night the tower burned, and this is the most a machine like that can give: a correct procedure, a warning about the paperwork, and one sentence of human history recorded on a personal notebook and nowhere else. The man would spend the next two years being asked by his supervisors whether he had seen the drunk on the platform, and he would say, correctly, that he had seen nothing, because by the time he arrived the only thing on the floor was water.

Tian's evidence did not crack the umbrella by itself, and I want to be honest about the mechanism, because the version where one honest cop brings down a conglomerate is a chil‑dren's story. What cracked the umbrella was the broadcast. The ledgers were already public, and the public already had them, and when the national feed went dark at twenty fifty-eight a hundred other feeds did not, and by midnight the folders were on every platform that mattered, and by two in the morning the district office had a problem that no amount of institutional patience could absorb, which is the problem of being seen.

The company's own lawyers were the next domino, be‑cause a lawyer's first loyalty is to the lawyer, and by dawn the first shell had begun to fold. Tian's file did the third thing, which was the only thing a file can do once the world is watching: it turned the archive into a warrant. She had been carrying the drawer for eleven days, and on the first of January she put it on a desk and stood there while it was read, and she was not alone, and that mattered.

Tan Hong could have walked out of the building and been on a plane by noon. I have turned that over a great deal, and I have concluded that he could not, because the one thing he could not survive was not the arrest. It was the sight of his own congregation turning to look at the screens.

The police came up the main escalator at about eleven at night, twelve of them, in a wedge, and the chairman had not moved from the stage. He had sent his people away. That is another fact from the report: at twenty fifty-five the chairman told his personal staff to leave, and they left, and he stood alone at the lectern under the golden Buddha with his little award in front of him and his own signature on every wall, and he waited.

When the officers arrived he did not resist and he did not run, and for about one minute it looked as though the end of the year's long arithmetic was going to be a clean and ordinary thing, a man in a good jacket walking down a marble floor with his hands where they could be seen.

Then he stopped at the base of the Buddha.

I do not know what he was thinking. I have read his own account, which he wrote in detention and which the state never published and which a clerk leaked three years later, and in it he says that he wanted to look at the statue one last time. That is possible. It is also possible that he wanted the cameras, which had come back up on the drones and the mezzanine, and which were again pointed at his face, and that someone who had spent his whole life buying visibility could not bear to leave the stage invisibly. Both readings are available. I am not going to settle it, and neither is the report.

The Buddha had a maintenance scaffold. It had been in place for the consecration, a lattice of steel around the statue's shoulders and head, twenty meters above the atrium floor, with a small service platform at the twelfth-floor level

and a ladder of gold-painted rungs up the statue's back. The chairman walked to the base of it and began to climb. The officers called to him.

He did not answer and he did not hurry. He climbed the gold rungs in his good jacket, one at a time, like a man going up to fix a light, and the whole atrium of police and staff and the surviving guests stood on the floor and watched him go, because nobody had a protocol for a man climbing his own god in a burning building.

There is one more thing to say about the fall, and it is not about the legal reading or the theological reading. It is about the room.

I have listened to the fifty videos more than once. What the videos capture, which the report does not and the court does not, is the sound the atrium made when he stepped onto the platform. Eleven hundred people, and it went quiet. Not gradually.

In the space of about two seconds, a room that had been the loudest place in the municipality went down to a hum, and the hum was not fear and it was not grief. It was the sound of a crowd watching a man and understanding, all at once, that a decision was being made. That is what a crowd can do, it is the last thing I will ever say in defense of crowds.

It can tell the difference between an accident and an act, without being given the facts, from the shape of a single body on a single platform. The report says he slipped. Eleven hundred people stood on that golden floor with their phones up and watched him climb his own god in his own good jacket, and not one of them believed it was an accident, and every one of them was watching anyway.

I have gone back and forth about whether that is a condemnation or a gift. It is neither. It is simply the truth about a

city. People will not save you, and they will not look away, and both of those facts are the same fact.

The drone show went up at twenty past eleven, and this is where the accounts split, and the split is permanent. The drone show had been scheduled for the closing at midnight, the last flourish, the fu in the sky over the river. Somebody in the control room panicked and fired it early, or the show's software ran on a timer and nobody overrode it, and a hundred and twenty lit drones rose into the fog above the atrium's glass roof and began to spell their character for fortune over a building that was on fire in every sense except the literal one.

The drones could not be seen, because of the fog, except as a low orange glow above the glass, and the orange glow threw a moving light down through the atrium, and the moving light did the one thing that fog and gold leaf had been waiting all night to do, which made the scaffold and the gilded shoulders of the Buddha into a single flickering surface with no edge and no depth.

The report says the chairman stepped onto the service platform and slipped. The report is a document written by people who needed a cause of death that did not require a philosophy, and it uses the word slipped four times.

The gold leaf on that platform had been applied a week earlier by the same contractor whose materials had burned my teacher, and the platform was damp, because the fog had come in through the open smoke dampers, and the report's own photographs show a footprint and a smear and a handprint on the rail. A man in leather shoes on wet gold leaf slips. That is the reading the report endorses, and it is a good reading, and it is available to anyone who looks at the photographs.

The other reading is the one the city tells, and I will not endorse it and I will not deny it, because the whole discipline of this book is that the two readings have to survive. He did not

scream. Every witness agrees on that, the scream and the si - lence are the two things the city cannot settle, and the silence is the thing the city cannot forgive him for, because someone who falls accidentally makes a sound and a man who steps off does not.

He had spent his whole life telling the poor that suffering was compassion in a form they could not recognize. And he stepped, or he slipped, off the twelfth-floor platform of his own golden Buddha, and he fell into the consecration pit, the shallow water under the god, and he landed beside the man who had murdered for him, who was still alive in the water and could not move, and the two of them lay in the shallow water under the golden hand, and the chairman did not get up.

He died in the ambulance. The cause is a fracture of the skull and the water in his lungs, and the precise order of those two events is not recorded, and the report says accidental death, and the court says death before trial, and the city says, to this day, whatever it needs to say, and the fifty videos dis - agree, and I have watched all fifty and I have no answer, and I have no answer to give you.

Tan Xiao was in the VIP box. He had been in the VIP box all night, because the family always sits above, and the VIP box had its own camera, and the camera was live, and when the atrium went white and the chairman climbed the scaffold, the young man did not go down. He stood at the glass and watched his father fall.

And then he took out his phone and held it up, so that the phone was pointed at the box and at his own face and at the golden room beyond, and he streamed it, and he did not speak for the whole fall and the whole water and the whole ambu - lance, and his eyes did not move at all. And then, into the livestream, in the flat, gentle, meme-literate voice that had offered me a charity ambassador contract in a temple court -

yard a lifetime ago, he said the sentence the whole series has been waiting for, and he said it in dialect first because he was raised in this city even if he had been educated somewhere else.

"Dajia bie xin. Ji Gong shi jia de. Wo ba ye shi jia de. Na wo geng jia yidian hao le."

Don't believe any of it. Ji Gong is fake. My father's fake too. So I'll be a little more fake.

Then he ended the stream. It was replayed four million times in the first day, and the compilation of the fifty videos ends with the frame of his face in the glass, and the editor's note calls that frame the only entry that is not a description, and the editor is right, because the face in the glass is not a fact. It is a door, and the boy behind it had just closed his father's coffin with both hands and had decided, in the same motion, what he was going to be for the rest of his life, and that is where Book One stops on the question of the villain, and that is where Book Two begins.

Tan Xiao's stream was the cleanest document of the night, and that is the part that should frighten anyone who cares about this country. His father fell, and the son did not go down to the water. He held up a phone instead, and his face was in the glass, and his voice was flat, and he said that the fake and the father and the son were all fake, and he said it to four million people in the calm tone of a man reading a product update. The city, which had spent a year learning to look, looked.

It watched a boy bury his father in public and call it a livestream, and it did not look away, and by the morning the clip had a soundtrack, and by the weekend it had a parody, and by the spring it had a documentary. That is what Book Two is going to be about. Not the father, who built the machine. The son, who understood it better than the father ever did. He will run it with the manners of a man who has nothing left to lose,

and he will be so much harder to see than a man on a golden platform, because he will not build a monument. He will build a feed.

I saw him once before the trial.

He was in a ward at the Third People's, in a bed by the window, with a cage over his legs and a tube in his throat that had taken his voice and given him a whisper. There were two officers at the door. He had been under guard for six weeks. The ward smelled of disinfectant and orange peel, which is the smell of every ward in this city, and I stood at the foot of the bed with my burned hands in my pockets, and neither of us said anything for a long time.

Then he asked me, in the whisper, the question that ended our quiet war.

"When your father carried his last refrigerator — did he call out for anyone?"

I stood there for a moment. I had been carrying the answer for twenty years and I had never once been asked for it, and the man asking me was the only other man alive who had carried refrigerators up those stairs. I said, "I don't know. I was six. Nobody ever told me."

He looked at the ceiling for a while. Then he said, "He did. He called for his father." And he closed his eyes, and the officers took me out, and that was the last time I ever spoke to the man who may have watched my father die. I do not know whether he was telling me the truth or giving me a gift. I have decided not to decide. That is what this book is. That is all any of us get.

CHAPTER 33

The Ferry

Wen Xiaoyu came out of the building in Jiulongpo at four in the morning on the first of January, and I was not there to see it, and that is exactly how it should be.

The extraction was the one part of the whole year that did not need me, and I have come to think of it as the part I am proudest of, because it proves that the thing we built in the tunnel had become bigger than any of the people in it. The aunties ran the street that night. Zhang Niangniang sat in a noodle shop across from the dormitory from eleven until four and played a hand of solitaire with real cards, which is the least suspicious activity a woman of sixty-eight can perform. Wang Niangniang was at the corner with a cart of fruit, selling nothing.

Liu Niangniang was on the telephone with a friend in the district office, keeping the friend talking, which kept the friend' s attention away from the street. Tian was at the back door in uniform, off duty, with two colleagues she trusted, and the warrant in her pocket was real, because the broadcast had made it real, and the van that came for the batch on Tuesdays did not come that Tuesday, and at four o' clock fourteen young people came out of the building in a line, one of them with a blue schoolbag, and got into a police bus, and the building was sealed.

Yaoji watched the whole thing from the roof of a parking structure with a radio and a flask of tea, and he did not sleep for two days afterward, and when he finally did sleep he slept for eighteen hours and woke up and went back to the board, because that is who my cousin is, and I am never going to be

able to say what he was worth, because there is no number that does it.

I need to say something about the ferry, because it is the only image in this book that is not ambiguous, and I want to be clear about why.

The ferry is not a symbol. The ferry is a boat. It crosses the river between the south bank and Chaotianmen every twenty minutes, and it costs two yuan, and this is the last piece of public water transport in a city that has spent a generation replacing its ferries with bridges and cables and tunnels. The people who use it are the people who have always used it: the porters' families, the market women, the old men who go to the temple on the far side, the students, the poor. You cannot drive a ferry.

It leaves when it leaves and it arrives when it arrives and it does not care about your rating or your appointment. It is, in this city of elevators and stairs and cars and cables, the one form of movement that is entirely indifferent to status. You pay two yuan and you stand and the water takes you. That is why the girl came home on it. Not because a ferry is poetic, but because a ferry is the one place in this municipality where someone who has been sold and bought and catalogued is just a passenger, standing at the rail, watching the city get smaller, with nobody asking her where she has been.

She stood at the rail for the whole crossing. Her brother stood beside her and did not talk. The fog was off the water, and the sail towers at Chaotianmen came up out of it slowly, the way the old stilted alley must have come up for my grandfather on a morning when the boats were running. The two images are the same image, forty years apart, and the only difference is who owns the water. I thought about my father on that crossing. I had spent a year not thinking about him, and

the ferry made me think about him, because he had worked the riverbank that the ferry was coming into.

A bangbang in 2003 and a nineteen-year-old girl in the first week of January were separated by one bank and one genera - tion and by absolutely nothing else. The city had eaten them both in the same way and for the same reason, and the reason had a signature and a filing date and a foundation, and the girl was coming home instead of my father because we had found the signature. That is the only justice in the whole arrange - ment. It fits on a ferry. It costs two yuan.

Wen Xiaoyu did not want to go home immediately. That is a fact I learned later, from her own mouth, it is the fact that made me understand how much of this book had been about me and not about her. She asked to be taken to Chaotianmen, because her father had been a porter on those steps before he borrowed the money that ruined them, and because she wanted to stand at the river before she stood in front of her mother.

So they took her to Chaotianmen at dawn on the first day of the year, and the river was the colour of the sky, and the last of the old porters were there on the concrete with their flasks, and one of them, an old man named Uncle Tuo who had car - ried a table through the flood of 1981 on his head, gave her his square of cardboard to sit on and a cup of hot water, and did not ask her a single question, because the men of that river have a rule about questions: a person who has been eaten and spat out does not owe anyone the story of the eating.

Her brother was there. Wen Xiaoyang, twenty-two, the boy from the cable car, the boy who had vanished into the fog after the police released him, had come down to the river when he heard, and he stood at the top of the steps and did not come nearer until she looked up and saw him. Then he came down and sat beside her, and neither of them said anything for a

while, and then the riders' network did the thing it had been practising all year without knowing it was practising, which is this: a dozen riders on the Nan'an route parked their e-bikes in a line along the embankment and stood by them and did not film.

That is all. That is the whole salute. No one made a speech and no one took a photograph, and Wen Xiaoyang, who had spent his whole life being the brother of a debt, stood up and looked at the line of yellow jackets and put his hand on his chest, and the riders put their hands on their chests, and that was the ceremony, and it lasted about four seconds, and I have been told that Uncle Tuo pretended it was the wind in his eyes, and no one believed him.

I need to say a word about the girl's phone, because it is the small object the whole book turns on.

They gave it back to her at the police station, in a plastic bag, and she sat in the corridor outside the interview room and held the bag in both hands and did not open it. I was across the corridor with the coffee, and I watched her look at the bag the way you look at a wall you have already walked into once. After a while she did open it. She took the phone out, the same phone the men had been reading from in the lot behind the hospital in January, the same cracked corner, the same dark screen.

She held it for a moment. Then she handed it to the officer and said, in the flat voice of a person who has decided something, that she wanted it wiped. Everything on it. Not because there was anything on it. Because it was a phone other men had held, and she did not want to carry a thing other men had held. The officer wrote it down and gave her a receipt, and she put the receipt in her bag, and that was the whole ceremony. I have thought since that the receipt was the most valuable object in the room.

She came to the tunnel on the third day after the ferry, and she did the thing I had not expected, which was that she thanked me and then took it back.

"I'm glad you helped," she said. "But let me say the other thing too, and if you write this, write the other thing."

"Write it."

"In the yard, you made them laugh and I walked away, and I have been given credit all year for walking away, and I didn't walk away. I ran. And I didn't run because I was brave and I didn't run because I realised what you were doing. I ran because a drunk man fell down and became interesting and I was a girl who had been taught her whole life to take the door when it opened." She looked at her hands.

"I've been on the news since. Twice. They want me to be the girl who was saved. I don't mind being the girl who was saved. I mind that the story makes me someone who was saved by someone, as if I was standing still. I was not standing still. I was running, and I ran in the right direction, and that is a decision, and it belongs to me. I'm not going to give my decision to your story."

"That's fair," I said.

"Also," she said, and for the first time she looked like a nineteen-year-old and not a case file, "my brother wants to learn to ride. Do you teach?"

"No."

"Then find someone who does." She stood up and put on her bag. "And tell the girl with the slingshot that the pictures are gone. She should hear it from a man who has seen them and is fine." She stopped at the mouth of the tunnel. "I am fine, by the way. Not because of you. Because it took a while, and because I decided to be. And that's the part you can put in the book."

She testified eleven days later, in a room with a video link and a lawyer and a woman from the procuratorate who was patient and thorough, and she told all of it: the loan, the photographs, the collection, the lot behind the hospital, the building in Jiulongpo, the girls she had known by first name only, the van on Tuesdays. She did not describe the photographs. The dignity protocol of this book and of that room was the same rule: the images never enter the record, only the fact that they existed, because a person is not the worst thing that was done to her and the law does not get to keep the receipt.

She was nineteen years old and she sat in a chair for five hours and she did not cry until the end, and when she cried it was because the woman from the procuratorate asked her, at the very end, whether there was anything else she wanted to say, and she said, "I want the pictures gone," and the woman said, "Then we will see that they are gone."

They were gone before the trial. That is the part I need to put down carefully, because the book has spent a year refusing to sell its worst material and it is not going to sell it now.

The archive had been taken into evidence, and evidence is copied and catalogued and kept, and there was a version of the future in which Wen Xiaoyu's photographs sat in a government server for a decade, untouched and available, waiting for a clerk or a leak or a journalist, and she would have had to live her whole life knowing that the images existed in a drawer that she did not control. The girl understood that before any of the lawyers did.

And so, on the twelfth of January, in a ward at the Second People's Hospital, with a tube in her arm and a bandage across her abdomen and her jaw set the way it sets when she is about to do something that no one has authorized, Huajiao sat up in bed and asked the investigating officer to bring the files to her, and the officer said that was not possible, and Huajiao

looked at him with the flat patience of a fifteen-year-old who has been underestimated her whole life and said, in dialect, that she was the one who had put the arrow in the bow, and that the files were in a folder she had personally photographed, and that she wanted to delete them in front of the girl, and that if the officer did not bring them, she would find them herself, and the officer, who had read her file and knew exactly what she had done in an apartment in Nan'an in July, brought them.

She deleted them one by one, on a screen, with Wen Xiaoyu sitting in a chair beside the bed. It took twenty minutes. Nobody said anything. The two of them sat side by side, the nineteen-year-old victim and the fifteen-year-old killer, and watched the worst year of Wen Xiaoyu's life go out of the world one thumbnail at a time, and when it was done Huajiao deleted the folder and then took the tablet and put it face down on the blanket and lay back against the pillows, exhausted, with her hand on her own bandage.

And Wen Xiaoyu looked at her for a long moment, and then did the thing that no one had expected, which was to take Huajiao's hand, the hand that had done what it had done, and hold it, and say nothing.

I was outside in the corridor with the coffee. I did not go in. I did not need to, and I want to be honest that the reason I did not need to was partly vanity and partly something better, which is this: I had spent a year learning that the largest gift a person can give another is to not be the one who is seen doing the helping.

The two of them had a thing between them that did not involve me and never would, and it was the thing the whole year had been for, and it was not the story the city would ever tell, and that is the point. The city would remember the drunk on the golden screen. The city would not remember the twenty

minutes in the ward. But I was in the corridor, and I remem - ber, and the difference between what the city remembers and what the corridor remembers is the whole of this book.

CHAPTER 34

The Price List

A delivery manifest is a list of what a person owes and what a person has already paid, and I have carried enough of them to know that the two things are never on the same receipt. So here is mine, itemised, in the order the platform taught me to read, which is by cost and not by meaning.

I have been told, since, that the price list is the coldest chapter in this book, and I want to defend it, because the coldness is the point.

The city, in the months after the fall, made two equal and opposite mistakes about what had happened. The first mistake was to make it a fairy tale, in which a drunk saint and a child warrior and a police officer brought down a golden villain, and everyone who suffered was a martyr and everything was for something. The second mistake was to make it a scandal, in which a company did bad things and the bad things were caught, and the whole event was a failure of regulation that would now be corrected. Both mistakes are attempts to build a story with a shape, and the shape always requires that the costs exist for a reason.

They did not. That is the thing the itemized list is designed to prevent. A delivery manifest does not say why the package was late. It says the package was late. My teacher burned be - cause a company wanted a zoning line moved. A woman lost the use of part of a hand because four hundred people were pointed at a screen. A cook died because a story taught him that someone who sees a wrong should run at it alone, and the story was mine. None of those costs were for anything. They

were simply paid. That is the arithmetic the city keeps trying to turn into a lesson, and the book is not going to let it.

Item one. One abbot, male, seventy-four, in the ground under the old bell, because the east cloister and the congee pot and the room with the drawer in it were all one fire and the bell was the only thing that came out whole. The temple buried him in a ceremony that the board attended and Jiefeng officiated, because Jiefeng was the one left standing, and I did not speak at it, because the abbot had told me once that the only eulogy worth having is spoken by a stranger at dawn, and I had already had mine. The ashes are in a small brass jar in a niche in the rebuild, and the rebuild is a company building now, and the jar is the only part of the courtyard that is still his.

Item two. One temple, Song-dynasty foundation, eight hundred years old, half-burned and half-standing, damage assessed at eleven million yuan, reconstruction funded by the same foundation whose materials burned it, because the law does not have a line for what to do with the money of a dead criminal except to spend it on the thing he tried to erase. The arhat hall stands. Four hundred and thirty-nine of the five hundred are in place, and sixty-one are in the ground, and two hundred and fourteen have been mended with a grey paste that everybody can see, and the mend is honest, which is more than the rebuild is.

Item three. One cousin, male, twenty-three, with a permanent internal injury from a beating in the autumn, sustained because he had refused to tell a man where I lived. The hospital bill was paid in cash by three women who won it at mahjong, and the aunties made sure the payment went through the counter in small notes, because they wanted the hospital to have to count it, and they wanted the clerk to understand that the money had been won, and not earned, and

not borrowed. He is out of the guard job. He runs the courier service now, two people and a radio, and on the day I wrote this he told me he had a client base of nine hundred and a plan to move into medical samples, and he said it the way a man says a thing he has been waiting to be asked.

Item four. Two hands, male, twenty-eight, second-degree burns across the palms and fingers and a scar on the right forearm the length of a finger, sustained on the smoke-damper collar of a golden atrium. I cannot feel the tips of the index and middle fingers of my left hand. The crooked finger is crooked in a new place now, because the burns healed over the joint and pulled it. I cannot hold a hot bowl without a cloth. I have adapted. You want to know whether I have adapted, that is the item: a man adapts, and the adaptation is the cost.

Item five. One fan, palm-leaf, broken and mended with scooter-tire wire, made by a fifteen-year-old on purpose, and destroyed on the roof of a service elevator in the last hour of the year. The wire spine went spinning off into the white and I never found it. The fan that sits in my jacket when I write this is a new one, also palm-leaf, also broken on purpose, also mended with wire, and she will not tell me whether she made a spare or whether she went back into that building to look for the old one, and I have stopped asking, because some kindnesses are not supposed to be inspected.

Item six. One grave, male, thirty-four, in a county cemetery two hours out, paid for clean, meaning without a debt attached, and this is the only thing a poor family in this country actually needs from the living. Zhang Maliu, who tried. The daughter is eleven now and she writes to the temple, addressed to the monk who fed the drunk, and the novice reads her letters and answers them, and I have read three of the answers, and they are better than anything in this book. Nobody avenged him. The two men who killed him are in custody on

the strength of the archive and the fifty videos, and one of them is talking, and talking is not avenging, and I am not going to pretend it is, and the girl is safe, and her father is dead, and both of those things are on the same receipt.

Item seven. One girl, female, sixteen, gut wound, surgical repair, eleven days in hospital, out of the ICU on the ninth, walking with a stick for a month, alive. She is the last item on the list and she is the one that matters, and I have been putting her last on purpose, because a delivery manifest puts the fragile thing at the bottom of the box and the courier knows it is there the whole time.

She came to the aunties' table in the last week of January, on the day they let her out, and Wang Niangniang made the noodles that this city makes for a person who has been returned to it, which are the same noodles it makes for a man who has been born, which is the point, and old aunties don't say a word about the wound and don't ask about the hospital and don't mention the word brave, and that is the only thing that makes a person like Huajiao able to stay in the chair. She ate.

She ate the whole bowl and then a second, and the aunties worked around her the way water works around a stone, and then, somewhere between the second bowl and the tea, she stopped with the chopsticks in the air and looked at the table and did not move, and Wang Niangniang saw it and put her hand flat on the table beside her and did not touch her, and the girl's shoulders began to move, and she cried, for the first time in the book, in front of four people, with her mouth closed, the way a person cries who learned to cry without any sound at all.

"You don't have to sit with us," she said.

"I know."

"You have a debt and a room with a wall and a mother in Guangdong. You don't have to sit here."

"I know," I said. "But I'm hungry."

"Everybody's hungry," she said.

"That's why I sit here," I said. "The food's better."

Nobody said anything. That is the discipline. Zhang Niangniang kept dealing the tiles; Liu Niangniang refilled the teapot; Wang Niangniang sat with her hand on the table; and I looked at the wall and let her have it, and it went on for a moment and then it stopped, and she wiped her face with the back of her wrist and picked up the chopsticks and finished the tea, and that was the whole ceremony, and it lasted about eleven minutes, and nobody made a sound.

That night she took out the small notebook, the one with the rubber band, the rules, the ones her mother had written and the one she had not, and she sat at the end of the table with the pen, and she did something I had never seen her do, which was to write on the first page, above Rule One.

She wrote slowly, because she is sixteen and because the first page is the first page. And when she had written it she closed the notebook and put the rubber band around it and put it in her bag and did not show anyone, and I did not ask, because I had learned, in a hard year, that the rules were hers.

She looked up from the notebook once, near the end, and asked me a question that had nothing to do with the rules.

"Do you think she's alive?"

I did not lie to her. I had learned that much.

"I don't know."

"Because the postcard comes," she said. "It comes every year. If she was dead it would stop."

"Maybe."

"Or maybe someone else sends it." She closed the notebook. "That's the thing I can't stand. It could be her. It

could be someone who knew her. It could be a bank, or a nun, or a woman in another province with a drawer of stamps. I could spend my whole life finding out, and either way I'd still be the girl at the table with the notebook."

"What do you want it to be?" I said.

She looked at me for a while. "I want it to be her," she said. "That's the whole trouble. I want it to be her, and wanting is not evidence."

I was told what she wrote three weeks later, by Wang Niangniang, who had been told by no one, because Wang Niangniang had guessed, the way the aunties guess everything, and had checked, the way the aunties check, by putting the notebook down in front of the girl and saying nothing and watching what she did with her face. What she wrote above Rule One was this.

Rule one: if the person is walking in, you walk in too. Nothing else counts as the mission.

Her mother's Rule One had been never work in daylight. Her mother's Rule One had been about surviving. The new Rule One was about not surviving alone, and it was written in a sixteen-year-old's careful hand on the first page of a soldier's manual, and it was the first rule in that whole book that she had chosen rather than inherited, and it was about protecting someone else, and it is going to run the rest of her life, and I am telling you now, so that when Book Two comes you will know where she started.

One more thing belongs under item seven and cannot be itemized.

The week after the girl came out of the hospital, a man came to the tunnel. He was about sixty and he wore a clean shirt, and he asked for me by the name the city had given me, which I do not use, and when I came out he stood up and bowed, and I did not know him.

He said he was Wen Xiaoyu's father. He said he had been in Guangdong for six years and had come back when his daughter called him, and that the money he owed was gone, and that he had never once repaid it, and that he was the reason for all of it. Then he asked me the question I had been carrying for a year.

"What do I say to her?"

I did not have an answer. I looked at the man, who was poor and clean and had ruined his family by borrowing money he could not repay, which is the most ordinary crime in this city and the one nobody ever serves time for. I thought about the ledger, and the two columns, and the man with the careful signature, and I came to see that the girl's father and the girl's tormentor were the same story at different altitudes: a man who took money he could not pay back, and a man who sold the debt, and a system that made both of them ordinary. And I said the only true thing I had.

"You don't say anything. You sit down and you eat with her and you let her be angry at you for as long as it takes. That's everything that you can do. Nobody ever gets forgiven in a conversation. They get forgiven in a year of lunches."

He nodded and sat down at the table where his daughter was waiting, and Wang Niangniang put two bowls in front of them without being asked, and that was the last item on the price list that had no price.

The other things have to go in the manifest too, because a receipt is not honest if it only lists the goods. The trial is scheduled for the autumn and it will be televised, and the boys from the network have already been offered money for their footage, and one of them has taken it, and I do not blame him.

Tan Xiao has the clean half of the empire and the audience's sympathy and a face the whole country watched on a livestream, and he has not been charged, and he will not be

charged, because grief is not a crime and because the shells that were his have all been folded into the ones that were his father's, and Book Two is going to have to deal with him, and I am not.

The trafficking network is out of jurisdiction and the funnel is still funnelling and the last thing Wen Xiaoyu's testimony did was to expose an edge of it, which is all an edge is.

And in the first week of February, four days before I write this, a postcard arrived at the tunnel with a picture of a mountain on it and no message and a postmark from a place I do not recognize, and it did not arrive on her birthday, and it did not arrive on any date we could calculate, and Huajiao read it and put it in the small notebook and did not say anything, and the whole tunnel understood that the rules had just changed in a way none of us could see.

There is one cost I have not listed, and it is not a cost to a person. It is a cost to a place. The noodle shop on the lower road closed in the spring. The owner had put my face on a laminated sign and sold a hundred bowls to tourists, and then the tourists stopped coming, because the city had moved on to the next thing, and because a man who is a joke for a year is a joke that wears out, and because the rent went up. He did not tell me. I found out from Zhou, at the battery station, in the way you find out everything in this city.

The shop is a phone-accessory store now, and the sign is gone, and the counter where the riders ate breakfast for eleven years is under a glass case full of charging cables. I do not know if I am responsible. I know that a city that puts a face on a sign and then takes the sign down does not think of it as a cost. I know that the owner had a daughter in a vocational school and a bad knee, and that the difference between a shop that survives and a shop that does not is often just one bad

year. That is the last item on the manifest and it has no num - ber.

That is the list. That is the year. The manifest is signed and the goods are delivered and the courier is still standing.

CHAPTER 35

Congee in February

The first congee morning at the rebuilt temple was on the eighth day of the first lunar month, which is the day this city eats congee to remember that the new year has begun, and there were four people at the long table and a line at the door, and the man ladling was the fifteen-year-old novice from the county town, who was sixteen now, and who had taught himself to make congee from a recipe the abbot had left in the account book, in the abbot's own hand, on the page after the accounts.

I watched him do it. It is not a difficult thing, congee, and that is the whole point of it, and the novice did it the way the abbot had done it, that is to say badly and with total attention: the rice and the water and the small fire and the long wait, and the stirring, and the salt at the end only if the eater asked. There were forty or fifty people in the line.

Some of them had come because it was the custom and some because it was free and some because they had heard that this was the temple where the abbot went back into the fire, and some, I think, because they wanted to see whether the drunk from the golden screen would come and ladle, and I did not ladle. I swept.

I swept the east courtyard, which was a new courtyard on the old plan because the rebuild had kept the shape, and the trees were the same trees, and the stone was new and slightly too smooth, and if you did not know what had been there you would have thought it was a nice little temple and not a wound with a roof on it.

The courtyard had the abbot's niche in the far wall, with the brass jar, and a small photograph, and no inscription, because the board could not agree on one and because the aunties had said, at the meeting, that a man who fed people does not need a sentence. There was a bowl of oranges in front of the jar, put there that morning by an old woman I did not know, and every so often someone would stop and touch the wall and go on, and that was the whole devotion, and it was enough, and I have come to believe that the people who leave oranges are the only theologians this city has ever needed.

Jishan's note was not at the temple. Jishan's note was above the counter of the noodle shop on the lower road, framed in a cheap black frame that Zhang Niangniang had bought at the market, and what was framed was the fourth line of the couplet, the second half of the second half, the warning about imitation and the demon's path, in the abbot's hand, with the two underlines, and nothing else.

The noodle-shop owner had wanted to frame the whole note, and Wang Niangniang had overruled him, and the reason she gave was this: the first half of a rhyme is what you put on a wall, and the second half is what you put above a counter where people eat every day without thinking.

So the line about imitating me and walking into the demon's path hangs over the place where the riders stop for breakfast, and most of them do not know what it is, and some of them ask, and the owner tells them, and the telling takes about fifteen seconds, and it has been told, by his estimate, more than four hundred times since February. That is the newspaper of this city. That is the actual distribution system. Not the national broadcast. The counter.

I have come to think that the city has two ways of remembering, and only one of them works.

The first way is the way the platforms do it. A video goes up, and the video is watched, and the watch is counted, and the count is sold, and then the video is nothing, because a count is not a memory. The second way is the way the noodle shop does it. Somebody hangs a piece of paper on a wall, and the paper stays there, and every morning the riders come in and eat and look at it without reading it, and every so often one of them asks what it says, and somebody tells them, and the telling takes fifteen seconds, and the paper stays.

Twenty million people watched the file. Four hundred people have asked about the line above the counter. I have turned over which number matters, and I have decided that it is not the number. It is the wall. The wall is where a thing stays after the city has finished being excited, and a city that has stopped being excited is a city that is actually listening. The platforms are loud and the wall is quiet, and the quiet is where the girl went, and the quiet is where the abbot lived, and the quiet is where I have been trying, for a year, to learn to stand.

The temple opened in the spring, and the first thing that happened was a funeral and the second thing that happened was a wedding, which I have come to think is everything that a temple is for. A young couple from the districts came to be married in the rebuilt courtyard. The novice, who was sixteen and had never officiated anything in his life, stood under the new green roof and read the old words from the abbot's own book, and got two of them wrong, and nobody in the courtyard cared. The bride's mother cried into a packet of tissues. The flower girl was a girl of about nine who kept looking up at the arhats to see whether they were watching.

They were. The five hundred stood in their rows with their mended faces and their painted eyes, and the sun came through the new roof and lay on the floor in the same shape it had lain in for eight hundred years. I stood at the back with a

broom in my hand and understood that the hall had been re-built by the same machine that burned it, and that it did not matter, because a hall is not a building. A hall is the people who keep walking into it. That is what the board never understood and the aunties understood from the first day.

I have one more thing to say about the broadcast and then I will let the year end: it changed nothing measurable, and that this is the correct outcome.

The file ran on the anniversary. It was watched by four million people at its peak and by perhaps twenty million over the week, and it produced, according to the careful counting of the aunties, exactly three resignations, two arrests that would probably have happened anyway, and one amendment to a district filing procedure. It did not empty the trafficking funnel, and it did not put Tan Xiao in a cell, and it did not rebuild the arhat hall with its own hands.

If you measure it against the size of the crime it was a small thing, and I have made my peace with that. What it did do was this, and I have come to believe it is the only thing any of us can do. It put the arithmetic into a form the next person can find. It made the signature public. It made the foam receipt public.

It made the list of the placed and the pending into a document that a prosecutor in some other province can read, and a journalist in some other city can check, and a girl in the pending column can point to and say, yes, this is what happened to me. A file is not justice. A file is a door.

Doors are the only thing this city has ever really needed, because the city is made of people who have been told all their lives that the door does not exist, and once one person walks through it the wall is never quite the same. I have watched walls. I am not going to overstate it. But a wall with a door in it is a different object from a wall, and the difference is available

to everyone who comes after. That is what the year bought. It cost what it cost. The manifest is signed.

Ma-ge came in the last week of the first month, which I had been expecting since the fire, and he came the way he always came, alone, in a clean jacket, hands in his pockets, and he sat down in the tunnel and looked at the rebuilt courtyard through the arch and said, "You have had a big year."

"I have."

He took a school exercise book out of his jacket and set it on the table. It was the book, the actual book, and I could see my grandfather's name and mine, and the column of interest going down the page like a fall.

"Twenty-eight thousand, and the interest." He turned the book so I could read it. "I am going to tell you what I am going to do, and I want you to understand that it is business." He did not tear the page. He closed the book. "In the old year, a saint who owed me was a problem, because a saint makes people ask what else he owes, and who else, and the answer was always a longer list than the questioner wanted. In the new year, the whole city has seen the ledger. The ledger is a thing people read, and a man who tears a page out of a ledger in front of a saint has a reputation for a certain kind of mercy. Mercy is cheaper than interest, and it is worth more, because it is not spent. It is displayed." He pushed the book across the table. "Keep it. The debt is paid. It is worth more to me paid than owed."

He got up and went out through the arch, and at the door he stopped, because a man like Ma-ge never leaves a room without a last sentence. "The interest was never the money," he said. "The interest was that you thought about me every month. Now the city thinks about you. We are square."

I did not trust it. I have never trusted Ma-ge and I never will. I kept the book, and I put it on the shelf, and the next month I

paid the interest anyway, out of habit and fear and some older arithmetic that does not answer to reason, and a week later the money came back into my account with no note. I paid it again the month after, and it came back again, and after the third time I stopped, and the debt sat in the book like a sentence no one had finished writing, which is how most of the true things in this city end, not settled, only put down.

Yingtao came to the tunnel in the middle of the month with three things: a documentary offer, an interview request, and a large envelope.

The documentary was from a platform. She had been approached because she was the one who had held the camera on the mezzanine, and the offer was serious, and it was the kind of offer that a man who had spent a year eating instant noodles would be a fool to refuse, and the platform wanted the whole story, the alley and the cable car and the fire and the tower, with a title that used the words the real and behind in the same sentence.

The interview was from a magazine that had once published a piece about the city's hidden stairways, and the piece had been good, and the journalist was decent, and the interview would have been conducted in a café and would have made me sound better than I am. I said no to both.

I need to record that the saying of no was not heroic, because there was a version of my life in which saying yes would have paid the debt and fixed the room and put a camera between me and every person I had ever hurt, and the only reason I said no is that I had finally, after a year, been given a name that was not mine, and I did not want to grow it.

Then she took out the envelope, and the envelope was the thing she had come to say.

It was the folder of photographs from the vault. Not all of them; the archive was in evidence and two of the shells were

still open and there was a trial in the autumn. But the parts that had been released back to the network, the parts that had no victim in them: the ledgers, the receipts, the two columns, the file with the careful signature, and one photograph, an old one, the last in the set, which I had never seen.

It was a photograph of a cup of tea on a windowsill, in fog, taken from inside a shop that I recognized, because I had spent a year sitting in that shop at one in the morning two seats from the woman who took it.

"I want to run something," she said. "Not the whole thing. I've had the whole thing, and the whole thing is a documentary and I don't want to make another documentary. I want to run the file, without the man. The archive, on its own. The receipts and the lists and the signature. I've blocked every name of every victim and I've had it checked by a lawyer and by the woman from the procuratorate and by Tian, and it's clean, and it's going to run on the anniversary."

She watched me. "And I'm not going to run your face. That's the offer. That's the whole offer. The city gets the ledger. The city does not get the man. It's the opposite of what I said to you in the convenience store, and I've been wrong about a lot of things this year, and that's the one I want to be wrong about."

I said yes. That is the whole negotiation. I said yes, because the ledger was the point and it had always been the point, and because the abbot had wanted the city to see the arithmetic and not the drunk, and because I had spent a year being seen by thirty million people and it had nearly cost me everything, and because the only person whose face the city had any right to see was the girl at the bottom of the list, and she was nineteen and she had asked the state to delete her own photographs, and the least I could do was to keep mine.

There was a small argument, at the end, that is the last real argument of the year and I want it in the book.

She wanted to run the hands shot with a title. I wanted it to run with nothing. She said a shot with no title is a shot that means whatever the viewer brings, and that this city brings nothing but the shattering and the meme, and that if the file was going to end with a pair of burned hands, the city needed to be told whose hands. I said the whole point of the year was that the city did not get the man, and that a name on the shot was a door back into the myth, and that a myth with a name is a product.

We went back and forth for an hour. The aunties listened and did not intervene. Then Zhang Niangniang, who had been dealing a hand all through it, put down a tile and said, "Put a date on it."

We both looked at her.

"A date," she said. "Not a name. A date. The day he stopped drinking. That way the city knows it's a man, and the man knows it's a day, and nobody gets a myth." She picked up her tiles. "And put the girl at the end. Not her face. Her hand, holding his hand. The two hands. That's the shot."

So that is the shot. A pair of burned hands and a smaller hand, on a date. It ran exactly once. And I have thought since that the entire ethics of telling this story was settled by a sixty-eight-year-old woman over a hand of mahjong, and that the country's networks and platforms and foundations and ministries could sit in a room for a year and not arrive at it.

And then, because she is who she is, and because the cam-era is the only institution in this story that cannot be bought, she asked for the one thing she had earned.

"Not your face," she said. "Your hands."

So I gave her my hands. We did it in the tunnel, in the af-ternoon, in the good light by the mouth of it, and she did not

direct me, and she did not ask me to do anything with them, and she filmed them the way you film weather, for six minutes, in one take. I sat at the table with the fan open on my palm, and the burns were twelve weeks old by then and the skin was pale and tight and the crooked finger lay across the wire spine of the fan, and the hands did not shake, because they had not shaken since November.

That was the whole shot. That is the shot that ran, on the anniversary, at the end of the file, with no voiceover, and the caption underneath said only the four words that the city had given me, and did not say my name. She ran it once and did not monetise it, and she has never run it again, and I have watched it exactly one time, because the whole point of being seen is that you do not get to look away, and the whole point of not being consumed is that you do not have to look twice.

After the camera was off she did the other thing, the small thing I have turned over more than the shot. She reached across the table and picked up my gourd, the old one, the one that had held gaoliang for eleven years and had held nothing but tea for a hundred and forty days, and she unscrewed the cap and smelled it. She held it under her nose for a second, and then she screwed the cap back on and set it down and looked at me.

"It's tea," she said.

"It's tea," I said.

She nodded, once, the way you nod when a thing you have been afraid of for a moment turns out to be true in the good direction, and then she said, "Good," and that was all, and she picked up her bag and her gimbal and went out into the fog, and I sat in the tunnel with my hands on the table and the fan open in front of me and the gourd beside it, and the aunties fed the cat, and the cat did not care, and the city went

on being the city, and this is the only ending any of us should have been allowed to have.

CHAPTER 36

The Wire-Mended Fan

In the last week of February the fog came back down the way it does at the end of winter, and I walked the Mountain City Trail at dawn, because I had started walking it at dawn and because the walking had become the only part of the day that belonged to nobody.

I should say why I was on the Trail at all, on that particular morning, because the reader has followed me for a year and deserves the small fact.

It was the twenty-ninth day of the second lunar month, the day this city says the Bodhisattva of Compassion was born, and the old people go up to the temples, and the temples give out congee, and the fog was down. I had no intention of attending any of it. What I was doing was walking the Trail the way I had agreed to walk it, which was once a week, with the fan in my jacket and the gourd on my belt and nothing to deliver.

That was the deal the aunties had made with me after the fire, and it was the only deal they ever asked me to keep. Zhang Niangniang had said it plainly, the way she said everything, on the night I came out of the withdrawal. "You are a man who needs a route," she said.

"Find one that does not end in somebody's trouble." So I found the Trail, and I walked it at dawn, and it became the one hour of the day that belonged to me. The city did with it what the city does with everything: it filled it with ordinary people living their ordinary lives, and by February I knew the names of the tea seller and the bird man and the woman who ran the shoe stall at the bottom of the Eighteen Stairs.

That is the morning I am describing. A man with a route, on a foggy holiday, with a gourd of tea and a fan, walking the ridge above the old town. The fog put one more person in front of him. The person had a wire-mended fan. The rest is what you have just read.

The Trail runs along the ridge above the old town, from the top of the Eighteen Stairs down past the church and the tea-houses and the half-finished micro-renovations, and at that hour it belongs to the people who make the city work: the breakfast women with their steam carts, the sweeping crews, the old men with their birds, the runners, the riders on their way to the first order.

I walked it with my hands in my pockets and the fan in my jacket and the gourd on my belt, and the gourd held tea, and I need to put that down for the last time in this book in the plainest sentence I have: the gourd held tea, and had held tea for a hundred and eighty days, and the tea tasted of the gourd and the gourd tasted of the eleven years, and I drank it anyway, and that is my whole recovery, and I am not going to make it more than it is.

Thirty meters ahead of me there was an old man on the steps.

The fog was thick that morning, the real fog, the kind that eats the towers and leaves only the low world, and at thirty meters you could see a shape and a coat and the way a man walks, and not much else. He was going up the steps the way the old men of this city go up steps, which is slower than the young and steadier than the young, and he had no umbrella and no bag, and he was carrying two things. In his left hand he had a gourd. In his right hand he had a fan.

The fan was broken across the middle, and mended with wire.

I stopped. I want to be exact about the stopping, because the whole book depends on it. I did not run. I did not call out. I did not take out my phone, because I have carried one eye in this story and it has done enough damage.

I stood on the Trail in the fog and looked at the old man's right hand, and the wire on the fan was black and wound tight around the spine and tied off at the handle with the knot I knew, the knot she tied on everything, the knot she had put on the fan she made me and on the fan she did not make me and on the handle of her bag, because a knot is a person, and the knot on that old man's fan was the knot of a fifteen-year-old girl.

He was barefoot. That is the other thing I saw through the fog, and the pavement was cold and wet and the old men of this city have shoes and better sense. He was barefoot, and his robe was ragged, and his hat was ragged, and he was laughing at something, quietly, the way a person laughs at a joke they have been carrying for years and have finally decided is funny.

Then he stopped, and he half turned, because a man on a stair knows when there is a man behind him. He did not turn all the way. He turned just enough that I could see the side of his face and the shape of the laugh, and then he raised the gourd, not high, the way you raise a cup to someone across a room, and he held it up for one second, and he waited.

I raised my gourd. I want to say it was a decision and it was not. It was the only thing my arm could do. I lifted the old gourd with the tea in it and held it up for one second, and across thirty meters of fog an old man and I held our gourds at each other, and neither of us said a word, and the breakfast women went past me with their carts and did not look up, and a rider went past on the other side with his box, and the city did not stop, and that is everything that happened.

Thirty meters is a strange distance in fog. It is far enough that you cannot be sure of a face and close enough that you cannot pretend you saw nothing. I have thought since about the exact number, and I have decided that thirty meters is the distance at which the city keeps its options open — the distance at which a man can still decide what he saw.

I did not call out. I want to record that too, because it is the one decision of the morning I still turn over. If I had called out, and he had answered, the whole thing would have resolved, one way or the other. Instead I stood there and let the fog do what the fog does, which is to keep a thing true and false at the same time.

There was a barge on the river below, going up empty. I could hear it but not see it. That is the fog too. Nothing in this city was visible that morning and everything was present, which is close to a definition of the place.

Then he lowered his gourd and turned and went on up the steps, and I did not follow him. I want to be honest about why. Part of it was that I did not want to know. Part of it was that I did not want to not know either. Part of it was the older thing, the thing the whole book has been about, which is this: there is a kind of seeing that kills the thing it sees, and I had spent a year learning to let the fog keep what it keeps.

He went up the steps, and the white took him in about eight steps, the way it had taken a girl on a wall in January and a monk in a courtyard and a boy in a lane, and when I walked forward to the place where he had been standing there was nothing there but wet stone and one orange peel, and an orange peel is not evidence, and the Trail was empty, and the morning went on.

I met the tea seller on the way down, and she asked me the question the whole book is actually about.

She ran a cart at the top of the Trail, and she had been there every morning for two years, and she had watched me walk past with my gourd and my fan and never once asked me anything, because a tea seller in this city does not ask. But that morning she asked.

"You saw someone up there," she said. It was not a question.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you came down different." She poured a cup I had not asked for and set it in front of me. "The old people say there's a beggar on the ridge at the turn of the year. I've never seen him. My mother saw him in 1985, during the floods, and my aunt saw him in 2003, after the reservoir. He always goes up, never down." She watched me with the flat curiosity of a woman who has been watching a staircase for two years. "Was it him?"

I looked at the tea and thought about the knot on the fan and the laugh and the thirty meters of white. And I gave her the answer I have given everyone since, and this is the only answer there is, and it is not an answer.

"I don't know," I said. "It was foggy."

"Everything is foggy," she said. "That's not an excuse. That's the city." She took the coin I put down and did not correct me when I overpaid. And I walked on down the stairs with the tea in my hand, and the fog took the Trail behind me, and the city, at last, let me go.

The woman at the shoe stall looked up as I passed and held out a pair of black shoes.

"For you," she said.

"I don't need shoes."

"You walk the ridge every morning. You need shoes."

"I have shoes."

"Look at them," she said. "Those are not shoes. Those are the idea of shoes."

I have read the report. I have read the fifty videos, all of them, twice. I have asked the caretaker, who is deaf and did not hear, and the novice, who was asleep, and Liu Niangniang, who remembers everything and did not see him, and Uncle Tuo, who said, when I asked him whether he had ever seen a beggar on the Trail with a wire-mended fan, that he had seen a hundred beggars on a hundred stairs and that a man who counts beggars has never been one.

I have no proof of any of it. I have a knot, and a laugh, and thirty meters of white, and one orange peel, and a gourd of tea, and the fact that after he was gone I stood on that Trail for a long moment and found that I was not afraid, and was not grieving, and was not, for the first time in my life, waiting for the next thing to happen to me.

So here is the last thing, and then the book is done and the city can tell it however it likes. I do not know whether the old man was the mad monk of the Southern Song, or a fever, or a trick of the fog, or the last of the old porters out for a walk, or a fellow who had heard the story and bought a fan and a gourd and liked the joke, or my grandfather, or myself at seventy, or nobody at all.

Neither did he know about me. That is the beauty of it, and I am not going to explain the beauty, because the explaining is what kills it, and because a man who has spent a year being made into a myth finally learned, on a cold stair in February, that the only true thing he can say about any of it is the thing he says to no one.

The fog ate the Trail. The gas holder of the old town came up out of the white and went back into it. Somewhere below, the river was doing what it has done since before there was a city on its banks, and somewhere above, the towers of

Jiefangbei were waiting for the sun to burn the fog off, and the noodle shops were open, and the riders were out, and the man in the yellow jacket was one of thirty million, and the city did not need him anymore, and that was the best news he had ever received.

I walked up the steps with the tea in the gourd and the fan in my jacket and the number of sober days in my blood, and I did not look back, and the city took me in eight steps, and the white closed over the place where I had been.

Jiurou chuanchang guo, fo zu xinzhong liu. Shiren ruo xue wo, rutong ru mo dao.

Wine and meat pass through the gut; the Buddha stays in the heart. But if the world should imitate me, it walks straight into the demon's path.

Colophon

酒肉穿肠过，佛祖心中留。
世人若学我，如同入魔道。

Jiurou chuanchang guo, fo zu xinzhong liu. Shiren ruo xue wo, rutong ru mo dao.

Wine and meat pass through the gut; the Buddha stays in the heart. But if the world should imitate me, it walks straight into the demon's path. — attributed to Daoji, the mad monk of the Southern Song

The novel is not narrated but assembled — from a livestream caption track, a comment section, a trademark dossier, a fire-brigade incid - ent report, and a compilation of fifty phone videos.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is zhēn ài, an exact ho - mophone 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, re - search and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

THE MAD ARHAT · 40 sections · 101,297 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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