The Weight of Smoke

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CHAPTER 1

The Return

The high-speed bus set him down at the junction on the S237 and did not wait to see where he went. Lin Bo stood with his bag against his chest and watched the tail lights shrink toward Heping, and then there was only the road and the smell.

He had known the smell would be waiting. He had not known it would be this one. Not the acid reek of the old furnaces, and not the sweet acrid burn of cable sheathing, both of which he had spent his twenties learning to describe without flinching. Something older and quieter, something the town did not burn but leaked. Wet concrete. Standing water. A diesel ghost from trucks that no longer came. His childhood, filed down to its residue.

The walk into town took twenty minutes, uphill and then down and then uphill, the road narrowing the way a throat narrows. On both sides the houses stood shoulder to shoulder, four and five storeys, each a fortress built to a different year's profit. He knew the pattern without looking. Ground floor four metres high. A roller shutter wide enough to take a forklift. Living quarters stacked above it like an afterthought. Some shutters stood open onto motorcycle workshops, blue light and the smell of rubber. Most were down. One had been painted with a phone number and a single character, 租, and the paint had run in the rain so that the character looked as if it were bleeding.

He moved the bag to his other shoulder and felt his left hand go off on its own, a small upward flutter under the thumb, the tendon pulling without instruction. He put the hand in his pocket.

At the old village core the alley tightened until two people could not pass without turning. Above him the balconies leaned toward one another and almost met, so that the sky was a strip of white between

the dripping eaves. Everyone here still called them handshake buildings, 握手楼 (*wo shou lou* - handshake buildings), though the joke had gone stale the way a joke does when it becomes the only way to describe where you live. A grandmother in a doorway looked up at him, took in the bag and the Beijing coat, and said the sentence the town had been saying to him for six years.

"Jiah bhuê?" she asked. *Eaten yet?*

"Jiah lo," he said, *eaten,* though he had not eaten and would not for hours yet. The rule held. Say you have not, and she is obliged to feed you, and then she will stand over you while you eat and ask about your mother. He was not ready to be watched.

She nodded as if he had told her something. Everyone here nodded that way. It was the nod a town gives its own, and it was not the same thing as a welcome.

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His mother was at the gate before he reached it. She had the phone in one hand and the latch in the other, and she did not embrace him. She looked at his face, then at his left hand, which was in his pocket, then away, at the gutter, at the neighbours' laundry on the line, at anything in the world that was not him.

"You are thin," she said, in Teochew, which was the language she kept for instruction and for complaint. Praise she gave him in Mandarin, and badly, as if it embarrassed her to be caught at it.

Inside, the ground floor still smelled of oil and cold stone. The roller shutter was down, and the great concrete room behind it held a tarpaulin, two stacked tyres, his father's old Honda, and nothing else. Twelve years ago the floor had held a hundred and forty tonnes of other people's electronics at any hour of the day. Men who were not relatives had slept along the wall in a row, like the leech field of a drain. Now it held a car and a tarp and the smell. His mother had scrubbed it three times after the inspectors came, and the concrete had not forgiven her.

His father sat in the back room with the television on and the sound off. He had been a large man and he was still a large man, which was the problem. The body had kept its size and lost the ma‑chine that moved it. He sat propped against three cushions with his feet on a stool, and when he saw Lin Bo he did not rise, and did not excuse himself for not rising. Years ago he would have made a joke of it. Now he only watched the screen.

“You came back,” he said.

“I said I would.”

“People say many things.” On the television a woman in a yellow jacket was pointing at a graph that neither of them could read. “Is the job real, or did they make it for you because of the school?”

“The job is real. Four thousand square metres on the far bank. Eighteen months. Government money.”

“Government money is real money until it is not.” He was quiet a moment. “Your uncle needs the job to be real. He has been telling people it is real.”

On the table beside him lay the pill organiser. His mother refilled it every Sunday night and had done so for so long that the plastic lids had yellowed and two of them no longer clicked shut. Lin Bo picked it up and read the week the way he read everything now, as a problem set. Amlodipine for the pressure. Allopurinol for the gout. Metformin for the sugar. A seventh compartment, unlabelled, held a white tablet he did not recognise, and he did not ask about it, because he already knew it would be something a neighbour had recommended, something bought for cash, off the 医保 (*yibao* - medical insurance) books, at a shop that did not issue receipts. His father had always trusted the neighbours more than the doctors. The neighbours had always been there.

“Did you renew the chronic scheme this year?” Lin Bo asked.

门特 (*men te*), his father said. The special disease designation. “Your mother did it. On the phone. With the woman.”

“With the app.”

“With the woman in the app. Fine. It is fine. The base takes it.” He waved one hand and dismissed the whole apparatus the way he dismissed weather. He had been dismissing weather his whole life and it had never once failed to arrive.

Lin Bo set the organiser down. He did not say the thing he had come prepared to say, which was that the reimbursement covered less than it used to, and that the gap would have to come from somewhere, and that the somewhere would be him. His father already knew the arithmetic. He was an old man in a house full of ledgers, and he had spent thirty years turning other people’s waste into a number, and he could read a change in the rules faster than any official. There was nothing to tell him. In this house a shortfall was like water on the floor. You did not discuss it. You stepped around it, and you waited to see how high it would come.

His mother came in with tea, which meant the previous conversation was over, or else was about to begin.

She set the tray on the low table and sat down. It was not the serious set, the small red-clay pot and the thin kettle and the little stove. It was the weekday pot and a scatter of thimble cups, three of them, always three, set in the triangle this house had used since before he was born. She poured in a low circle, close to the rim, and gave the last drops one to each cup. The smell came up off the steam, gardenia and a green edge of something like cut grass. 单丛 (*dancong* - the local oolong), the household lot, the cheap one.

“Drink,” she said. “You look like a man who has been living on aeroplanes.”

He drank. It was bitter and thin, and it tasted of the hills and of every summer he had spent in them and of nothing he could say to her. This was 工夫茶 (*gongfu cha* - the ritual tea service), and he had grown up inside it the way other children grow up inside a language, and he still could not have explained it to a foreigner. You did not

drink tea here to taste tea. You drank it so that the hands would have something to do while the things that mattered went unsaid.

"Twenty-eight," his mother said.

"I know how old I am."

"The Li family asked again. The daughter who teaches at the middle school. They asked in the spring, and then they asked again as soon as they heard you were coming."

"Did they hear, or did you tell them?"

She ignored this, which was itself an answer. The woman kept a list. It was not a secret list; it was the town's list, and he had been on it since he was twenty-six. 相亲 (*xiangqin* - arranged matchmaking). He had learned the word in Beijing, from classmates, who said it the way you say the name of an illness you are glad your family does not have. Here it was simply the name for what happened to a person at his age. Nobody met in a bar and fell in love. Families walked through each other's houses and compared birth-eights and decided. He had stopped calling it backward. It worked. It had worked here for a hundred years, and it had produced, among other things, his mother, who was standing in front of him holding a teapot and waiting.

"They want to know about the flat," she said.

"Which flat?"

"The one you will buy." She refilled the three cups, which was a small mercy, because a refill resets a room. "Not this month. They only want to know it is coming. That there is a plan. A woman's family will look at a man and see a salary. That is the world, and I did not make it. They do not see a—" She searched and could not find a word in either language that would not wound him, and used a smaller one. "A project."

His work was the only thing he had that was his. He had built it in Beijing out of the town's own poison, and it was the one sentence in a hundred that his professors had not been able to take from him. And here it was a project. The thing a man does who has not yet bought a flat.

“彩礼 (*caili* - bride price) is small here,” he said. He knew the facts. He had looked them up, the way he looked up everything, in a manner that made people in this town want to hit him. “Eight thou‑sand. Twelve. The Li family is not asking for lottery money.”

“Your uncle paid for everything,” his mother said. “Ask him what it costs to be a man. Drink your tea.”

He drank his tea, and she had a way of ending an argument by handing it to somebody else, and the somebody was always Uncle Wei, because Uncle Wei had paid for everything, and everyone knew it, and no one was ever permitted to say so.

At the door she stopped and turned, as though the thought had only just arrived. “Your cousin Ah-Sheng makes films now,” she said. “On the telephone. Of the old yards. He has a great many followers. He wanted to film your field.”

“He is not going to film my field.”

“That is what I told him. Tell him yourself, at dinner.” She went out, and through the wall he heard her set the tray down hard, which was how she said the last word.

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The 粿条 (*guotiao* - flat rice noodles) shop stood three streets down, at the corner where the alley opened onto the bus road. It had no name, only a red awning and a cook who had been boiling the same bones since Lin Bo was a boy. Beef bone first, then celery, then the sharp green bite of whatever had been cut that morning. He smelled it a full minute before he saw it, and his body did something his mind had not authorised. It became hungry and homesick and afraid, all at once.

Uncle Wei sat at the corner table with his back to the wall. He had held the good seat for thirty years, the seat that watched the door, because for thirty years there had been men who wanted to talk to him and men who wanted to avoid him, and from that corner he could tell the difference before they crossed the room. He was smaller

than he had been. The hands had not shrunk. They lay on the table on either side of his bowl, the knuckles pale and shiny where the acid had gone in and the finger pads worn smooth, and he picked up the chopsticks and broke them and lifted a knot of noodles without any sign that the hands had ever belonged to a man in pain.

He poured the tea without looking up. The cups clicked. He pushed one across the table with two fingers.

"Drink it," he said. "Then we can talk about the park."

Lin Bo sat, and it was the same thin dancong, the same town and the same leaf, and the shake in his hand quieted against the warm porcelain.

The bowl came. Fat noodles under a clear dark broth, a few slices of beef, a tangle of greens, and over the top, spooned from a jar on the counter, the fried garlic oil his whole childhood had been seasoned with. 蒜头膀 (*suantou lao* - fried garlic oil), rendered slow. The smell of it, warm and nutty and faintly sweet, laid itself over the broth like a hand laid on a shoulder, and for one second he was ten years old, and the town was the whole world, and nothing in it had yet been measured.

He ate. It was very good. He did not say so.

"Two hundred thousand," Uncle Wei said, when the bowl was half gone. "That is the number. To stand inside the park you rent the bench and the space and the mask, and you put up the capital for the goods, and the goods are paid for before you are paid. The money goes out at the start of the season and comes back at the end, if it comes back. Two hundred thousand, and a card." He woke his phone and turned the screen across the table. A ledger app, columns of numbers under dates, the numbers red more often than black. "Twenty years I worked from this table. Twenty years, and now I cannot raise two hundred thousand to stand in a building and do the work I used to do in a yard. The building is safe. I know the building is safe. Safe is a fine thing for a man who has a card."

The screen dimmed and went dark and he did not wake it again. He ate. The chopsticks shook on the way in and the food did not fall, and Lin Bo watched him not drop it the way you watch a man hold his breath under water.

“You could work for me,” Lin Bo said. “On the field. There is money in the budget for a crew.”

Uncle Wei looked at him for the first time, and his face did the thing it always did, the thing Lin Bo had never learned to read. It was the face of a man looking up at a tower he had helped to build and could not afford to enter.

“You,” his uncle said, “are going to dig up the ground and make it clean. That is a good story for the newspaper, and it is on the far side of the river where nobody can see you do it. There is no money in clean ground. That is why they gave the work to the schoolboy.” He slid the teacup back across the table, which meant the offer was declined and would not be raised again. “But you came home. So. You will dig, and I will find my two hundred thousand, and we will see which of us is still standing when the season turns.”

“Where will you find the money?”

“People,” Uncle Wei said. He set down the chopsticks and folded his hands, and the way he said the word had a wall behind it, the way a doorway has a wall behind it when somebody quietly pulls the door to.

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The remediation plot lay on the far bank, past the wetland, in a field the government had fenced once and then apparently forgotten. Lin Bo walked out at four, when the light went long and the machines had stopped, and stood at the gate with the engineer’s clipboard and looked at the thing he had been given.

Someone had tried here before him. There were lines of banked soil gone green with weeds, the black plastic of an old liner peeling up from the ground like a scab, a shed with its door hanging from one

hinge. The plan in his bag described a demonstration site of four thousand square metres. Funding secured. Eighteen months. Objective, reduce bioavailable lead in the surface layer by forty per cent. A committee had approved the number. He had written the number himself, and on the page it had looked entirely reasonable. He stood in the actual field now and understood, as he understood every morning of his working life, the distance between a number and the ground it is written about.

The river ran along the western edge, and it was better than he remembered, and the plainness of that unsettled him. He had prepared himself for worse. The channel was clear. The town had put in a boardwalk and a row of young trees, and behind the trees stood the exhibition hall where they told visitors the story of the river's rescue. The story had reached him in Beijing, where it was told by people who had never smelled the water, and he had hated it there, and standing here he could not hate it, because the water was in fact clean, or clean enough, and the weeds were in fact alive. A boy went past on a bicycle with his phone propped on the handlebars, filming himself, and did not look at the river at all. Beyond the trees, up the opposite bank, the park sat behind its fence in the failing light. He could see the roof of the furnace, the sealed line where the boards went in and the copper came out.

They called it the 炼丹炉 (*liandan lu* - the alchemy furnace). He had heard the name first from a man in Beijing who had once audited the place, a man who did not believe in anything and had believed in this. Lin Bo had not found it funny then and did not find it funny now, standing in sight of it.

On the near bank, where the wild taro grew thick and a river-crew had been cutting back the water hyacinth that morning, an old man squatted at the water's edge with his sleeves pushed up and his forearms in the mud. He wore the grey overalls of the park's nursery, and

around his feet lay a ring of dead grass that had nothing to do with the season.

Lin Bo smelled him before he saw his face. 硫黄 (*liuhuang* - sul‑fur), the old rotten-egg reach of it, and under the sulfur something duller and greener, something burnt out of a pipe and left to sit. Mugwort, perhaps. The smell a temple keeps after a festival, once the incense has cooled and the ash has been swept into a corner.

“You are the water,” the old man said, without turning around. His Teochew was old and thick, and he spoke as though the sentence had been waiting at the bank for years. “You have come to wash the ground. The ground does not want to be washed. The ground wants to be understood.”

“I’m the soil, not the water,” Lin Bo said. “The water was somebody else’s project.”

“That is worse.” The old man drew his hands out of the mud and looked at them. They were clean, which was not possible. Lin Bo did not allow himself to notice that until much later, when he would go over the moment again and again and be unable to decide whether he had seen it at all. “Water moves on. Soil remembers. You have seen the smoke. You have not seen the fire.”

“Do you work in the nursery?”

“I keep the plants that live.” He stood, and his knees made no noise either, and he turned to look across the field at the fenced plot, and the river, and the far bank, where the light was going. “They have built a 外丹 (*waidan* - external alchemy) furnace over there,” he said, and nodded at the park. “That is an old word. An honest one. They call it recycling now, and it is cleaner than the old way, and it is still the same art. In my time we put our hands into the fire and died of what it made. Now the furnace is sealed, and the men wear masks, and the poison goes into the ground instead of the lungs. They call that progress. The poison is the same. Only the road to the body has changed.”

"There was another way," Lin Bo said. "I've read about it. The ones who gave up the furnace."

"There was." The old man looked at his clean hands. "内丹 (*neidan* - internal alchemy). The furnace carried inside the body. The fire made out of breath. When the metals kept killing us, some of us turned the whole art inward and refined the self instead of the stone. It was the same search and it was not the same search, and I have had a long time to think about the difference."

"How do you know it goes into the ground?"

"Because the ground is what I am standing on," the old man said, which was not an answer, and was also, Lin Bo would later think, the most exact answer anyone gave him all autumn.

"You should come out to the field and measure with us. If you have a hypothesis, we can test it. We have the instruments."

The old man considered this the way a man considers a bad hand of cards. "A name is a ledger," he said at last. "You would enter me twice. Once as the man and once as the thing he was. Let me be one or the other." He turned toward the nursery, and as he turned the smell of *liuhuang* came off him in a wave, like a door opening onto a hot room. "Come and drink your tea when you have finished meas‑uring me. I am curious what the machine will decide that I am."

He walked up the bank. Where he stepped, the dead grass did not spring back.

Lin Bo stood a long time with the clipboard he had stopped read‑ing. When the light was fully gone he walked the fence line back toward the road, and on the far side of the plot, in the last grey of the sky, he saw it. A thin column of smoke. Not from the park, which was dark and shut. From the corner of the remediation plot itself, the corner furthest from the road, where the old liner peeled up out of the dirt. It rose straight and small and patient, the smoke of a thing being cooked slowly, and it carried on the cold air the flat chemical sweetness of circuit boards warmed over a low flame.

He stood still and watched it. The shake came back into his left hand, harder now, and he put the hand into his pocket, and stood, and watched the smoke go up into the dark like a question he had already been asked and had not yet learned how to answer.

CHAPTER 2

The Measure

The van left them at the gate at half past six and did not come back for a second load. Five men and one woman got out into the wet grass and stood with their hands in their pockets, looking at the field the way a person looks at a debt. A friend of a friend had found them on a WeChat group the night before. One hundred and eighty yuan for the day, and a lunch.

Lin Bo handed out the string and the pins before anything else. The grid came first, before the augers, before the bags. He walked the boundary with the tape while the woman held the far end. Where the string crossed he drove a pin into the ground with the flat of his boot. The line went out across the wet field like a fence built by a man who did not believe in fences.

"Twenty metres," the woman said. She was about fifty and had the hands of a person who had done everything once and had stopped apologising for it. "That your rule or the government's?"

"The government requires a grid. The twenty metres is mine."

"Big," she said, which was not praise, and went back to her end of the tape.

By seven the light had come up off the river and gone flat and grey, the way it went here before the sun decided whether the day was worth the effort. The plot had been fenced once, a rusted wire run on leaning concrete posts, and inside the fence someone had tried before him and stopped. There were old beds of soil banked in rows and gone to weeds, the black plastic of a liner peeling out of the ground like a scab, a shed with its door off one hinge, drums stacked and abandoned. At the far corner, the corner furthest from the road, the soil was darker than the rest and turned over, and the smell off it was not the pond-and-rust smell of the rest of the field. It was a warm

chemical sweetness, faint and fresh, the smell of a thing cooked slowly.

He stood over it with the bag in one hand and the marker in the other and the whole day in front of him.

Then he did the thing he had been trained to do, which was to treat everything the same. He opened the bag and took the corner as point C-10. He turned the soil in and wrote the coordinates and the date and the depth on the label, then put the bag with the others. He did not write anything else. There was a rule for a place like that. The rule had a form, and the form would go into a system, and the system would ask a question. Some man would have to answer it, and that man would be his uncle. He told himself the sample would show what it showed. He told himself he was not deciding anything. Both of those things were true, and neither of them was the truth, and he understood the difference, and he went on.

The augers went in. The crew bored down through the topsoil to the thirty-centimetre line and tipped each core into the bucket. Lin Bo walked the grid and did the arithmetic he had done a hundred times on the train home and never once out loud.

The target was a forty-per-cent reduction in bioavailable lead. He had written that number himself. He had written it in a meeting room in Beijing where the air conditioning worked and the target had looked entirely reasonable to everyone at the table. He had written it knowing that lead is the one metal in the table the plants will not lift. Cadmium moves. Zinc moves. There is a stonecrop the size of a shoe, a plant for cadmium. It will pull a fifth of the cadmium out of a field in one season and store it in its own body. Then that body is a hazard too, and it must be burned and buried. There is a fern for arsenic, and a bush for copper. There is no plant for lead. Lead sits at the bottom of the list of things that move. It is nearly immobile, non-transferable into living tissue. It had been put into this ground by ten thousand men with coal stoves and buckets of acid and no gloves on. It would

still be here when Lin Bo's hair was grey, if he had hair, and when his children were grown, if he had children.

So the number was not a lie, because the word inside it was bioavailable. You could not take the lead out. You could make it sit down. You could lime the soil and lift the pH and bind the metal to the clay. Then the roots of the rice could no longer find it, nor the roots of the vegetables, nor the soles of a child walking barefoot across the corner of a plot. That was a real thing to do and it was a slow one, and it was the honest half of a promise he had made to a committee that had never heard the word and would never have to.

"You're not digging," the woman said, from beside the bucket. She said it without accusation, as a fact.

"We're not digging. We're measuring. The digging comes later, and there's less of it than anybody thinks."

"Then what's the fence for."

"The fence is for the funding," he said, and she laughed and did not stop looking at him.

At nine the grid man came. He was the man whose job it was to walk this parcel once a week and stand at seven points along the fence and put his face into his phone. He was young, twenty-five or so, in a windbreaker with a town logo on the shoulder and a phone on a lanyard. He was polite, and a little ashamed of being there, which Lin Bo understood better than he wanted to.

"Logging," the grid man said. "It's a log. Every parcel in the zone. Photo, position, time."

"Then log it."

He took his seven photographs. He was careful to keep the crew out of the frame and then careful to put them in. Lin Bo watched him decide, and understood that he was being turned into evidence of activity, which was the point of him and was also not unfair.

"Last week," the grid man said at the gate, not looking at him, "there was a light on this parcel at night. Twice. I logged it."

"Logged it with who?"

“With the system. It goes into the system.” He looked at Lin Bo then, and his face was doing something, and what it was doing was offering Lin Bo the easy thing to say. “It’s probably nothing. People fish.”

“It was me,” Lin Bo said. “I couldn’t sleep. I walked out and looked at the plot.”

The grid man looked at him for a moment longer than he had to. Then he nodded and wrote nothing, and walked back down the fence line with the phone swinging on its lanyard. Lin Bo stood in his own field and felt something go into his mouth and stop there.

At half past ten the crew stopped for food and Lin Bo stopped with them. The woman had brought four stacked tins from home in a blue plastic bag. Cold plain porridge, 白糜 (*muê*), the daily grain of the region, and with it the little dishes the town had eaten alongside it since before there was a town. Salted mustard cut fine. Preserved radish. Half a salted egg. A fistful of braised peanuts still in their skins. She set it on an upturned crate and gave him a bowl and a spoon before he could refuse. Refusing food here was not modesty but an insult, and he had learned it at his mother’s table before he learned the alphabet.

They ate, and the *muê* was cold and faintly sour and very good. One of the men was younger, in a delivery jacket with the platform’s logo scraped half off, and he ate standing up. Every forty seconds his phone buzzed in his hip pocket and he looked at it and did not answer. Lin Bo understood that he was on a shift he had not told anyone about. The field was the day and the phone was the night, and neither of them added up to a week.

“You’re the one came back,” the woman said. “The PhD.”

“From Beijing.”

“There’s a boy in my lane does the films. Ah-Sheng. He’s yours?”

“My cousin.”

“He filmed my yard,” she said, and she said it without anger and without pride, the way you would say a man came and measured the gate. “Forty thousand people watched my yard. I don’t know what they saw. My yard’s a yard.”

The man in the delivery jacket laughed, once, and did not look up.

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The park was two kilometres past the town, on the Huamei edge, behind a fence that had been built to be looked at. It began with a guard booth and a boom gate and a red board that read the day’s tonnages in characters that changed every few minutes. Beyond the booth a lane of trucks and electric cargo trikes waited for the yard to open.

Lin Bo showed his letter at the booth. The guard read it twice and telephoned somebody, and the gate lifted, and then he was inside the country of the future, which smelled of ozone and hot oil and wet concrete and not at all of smoke.

The yard was a field of white woven sacks. Men walked among them with scissors, slicing the sacks open and putting their hands inside to smell the contents. The sacks were phones and boards and towers of them, and over the whole yard hung an extractor’s flat roar. Everything was quicker here than it had been in the old yards, and smaller, and cleaner. In one workshop three men in respirators dipped other people’s boards into a pool of tin so hot that the solder let go in under a minute, and the white smoke went up a duct and away. Beyond it all stood the furnace, a sealed line and a silver chimney. It was a thing of pipes and plates with no fire visible and a fire inside it hot enough to take the boards apart metal by metal, and to recover the metals at ninety-eight parts in a hundred. The workers called it what the workers had always called it, the *liandan lu*, though they said it lightly now, the way you say a name you no longer be‑lieve.

He had come to leave the sample bags at the project office and to see the man who had signed his letter. Instead he stood in the yard and watched the trade that had been his town's trade made legal, fenced, and small, and understood that the fence was not there to keep the poison in. It was there to keep the price in. Everything sold inside was priced against a slip and a card, and everything sold outside was a crime, and the difference between a citizen and a criminal was a piece of paper he could not afford.

On the way to the office he passed the nursery, a chain-link pen at the edge of the yard where a few hundred trays of seedlings stood in rows. A man in grey overalls was watering them with a hose. The man did not look up as Lin Bo passed, and he smelled of *liuhuang* and mugwort and something older, and Lin Bo stopped.

"You found the smoke," the old man said, to the seedlings.

"I found a smell."

"A smell is a footprint with the boot taken off." He turned the hose aside. "The furnace is not always where they build the chimney. Drink your tea before you decide anything."

"You said you'd let me measure you."

"I said you could drink tea. I didn't say I'd stand still." He went back to the water, and the water went on falling, and Lin Bo left him there among the seedlings that lived.

Director Zhao's office was on the second floor of the management building and had a window that looked down on the yard, which was not an accident, and a tea table, which was not an accident either. The tea table was the most serious object in the room: a red-clay pot, three thimble cups set in the triangle the whole region set them in, a little stove and a thin kettle. Zhao was on the phone when Lin Bo came in, and he waved him to a chair and kept his voice low and reasonable. He did not finish the call until he had finished it. When he put the phone down he filled the kettle without asking, and the two of them watched it come to the boil, because that was the other

thing the stove did. It gave two men a minute in which not to have to lie.

Zhao said the name of the first pour, 关公巡城 (*Guan Gong xun cheng*), and cycled the pot low across the cups like a patrol going along a wall. He said the name of the second, 韩信点兵 (*Han Xin dian bing*), and let the last, darkest drops fall one cup at a time. Then he turned the cups toward the middle of the tray. It was dancong, the good lot, better than anything Lin Bo's mother kept in the house, and that was not an accident either.

"来，食茶 (*jiah dê*)," the director said. Come and drink tea. He meant that the meeting would be long.

"Lin Bo." He tasted the tea and set the cup down and looked at Lin Bo the way a man looks at a wager he has already placed. "How is the ground?"

"Contaminated. Contaminated the way the file says. Nothing surprising yet."

"There is always something surprising."

"There is always something in the lab. Surprising is a word the lab prefers not to use."

Zhao smiled at that, briefly, and the smile went away. "The plan says forty per cent. On your desk it says forty per cent bioavailable lead, eighteen months, four thousand square metres. In my report it says the pilot is on schedule and the town's green transition is producing measurable results. You understand my report is read in Shantou, and in Guangzhou, and in Beijing. It is read in the year the fifteen-five plan opens, the year they put our town's name in the same sentence as the park." He poured again. "I don't need a miracle. I need a number with a source behind it. You understand what I am saying."

"I understand I can give you a number and its uncertainty."

"Yes," Zhao said. "That one. That is the one I need most and the one they like least."

“There’s a problem,” he said then, “and the problem is the grandmothers.” He said it without irony. “Not a metaphor. The grandmothers of the lanes. They have a belief now that the green project on the far bank is going to fix the children. Not the water. The soil. The children. Their blood. There is a woman on the Huamei side who tells people that the new project will clean the blood of the town.” He looked at Lin Bo. “You could tell her the truth. It would not travel as far as her story. But you are the scientist. It is for you to say.”

“Lead doesn’t come out of a child because the soil got cleaner,” Lin Bo said. “It comes out of a child slowly, on its own, over years, if it comes out at all. The sample won’t fix the children. The children are twenty years from now. Somebody should tell the grandmothers.”

“Somebody,” Zhao said, and drank his tea. He did not say the name of the somebody, and the room held the name a moment and let it go. “My sister’s boy is eight-point-nine,” he said, to the tray. “It was eleven-point-oh. Three years. The doctor said it would come down by itself. It did. Nobody’s river did that, and no project did either. Time did it.” He turned the cup once and set it down. “So I know exactly what you are telling me, and I am telling you that a grandmother with a story is not the enemy of the truth. She is the only kind of hope the town has left, and hope is a resource I am not permitted to spend but am permitted to keep.”

Zhao looked out the window then, at the yard he could see and the yard he could not.

“There is another matter. Smaller.” He said the word smaller the way a man says it when it is not smaller. “Somebody is selling boards off the yard. At night. Not in the park. On the far bank. It has been reported to the grid twice.”

“Twice.”

“Twice.” He turned back. “I have two instructions from above and they do not agree with each other. The first is that I must not close down livelihoods with one stroke. The second is that I must not be found to have closed my eyes in order to make my report pretty. If

the thing on the far bank is real and I do nothing, I am the second man. If I go in with the police and there is nothing, I have frightened a village and made a mess and I am the first man. No instruction tells me which man to be." He refilled the three cups, all three, though one was already full. "So I am telling you, because the parcel is yours and your name is on it, and because I would rather you heard it from me than from the grid."

Lin Bo looked at the cups. Two were full and one was empty and the empty one was his.

"There's nothing on my parcel but soil," he said.

"Good," Zhao said, and filled all three, which was a way of not believing him without calling him a liar. "Then we agree, and there is nothing to write. The park is a fact. Everything outside the park is weather."

※

At home that evening there was a goose on the table.

Not a whole one. A leg and a piece of the breast, cold and sliced thin, the skin dark and lacquered with the master stock. Beside it stood a dish of garlic vinegar and a plate of greens the mother had cut from her own small plot behind the house. 卤鹅 (*lu e*), braised goose. Nobody in that house ate goose on a Tuesday. Goose was for a mar‑riage, a god's birthday, or a son who had come home from far away, and this was all three at once. Lin Bo understood before he sat down that the meal would cost him something, and that the cost would not be money.

His father was in better colour than he had been and worse hu‑mour. Ah-Sheng had come, and had brought his phone, and had stood it against the rice tin so that it could watch the table. He had not turned it on, which was his way of saying that it was on.

"Twenty-eight," his mother said, over the goose, as though con‑tinuing a sentence begun four days ago. She was.

"I know how old I am."

"The Li girl's mother asked at the market. She asked what you will do about a place."

"A place."

"A flat." She laid a piece of goose on his rice without asking. "They are not asking for the money. They are asking for the plan. A woman's family can wait for a man who has a plan. They cannot wait for a man who is thinking."

Ah-Sheng laughed through his nose and stopped when the mother looked at him.

"And what does the PhD think," Ah-Sheng said, "about plans," and lifted the phone a centimetre off the rice tin and set it down again. Lin Bo understood that the whole evening was an audition for a camera that was not running.

Then his father, who had been eating slowly and listening to all of it, said, "Leave the boy. He came home. That is more than the goose cost."

The table did the thing the town's tables did, which was to laugh at the wrong moment and go quiet at the right one. The goose went around again. Nobody said the name of Uncle Wei, who was not there, and whose absence sat at the table like a fourth person who had been given a bowl and no chopsticks.

Lin Bo helped his mother clear, and refilled the pill organiser while she washed. He read the week the way he read everything now, one compartment at a time, and slipped the seventh tablet back under its unlabelled lid.

"He is worse at night," his mother said, not turning from the sink. "The hands."

"Which hands."

"His. He cannot open the jar any more, so I open it." She set a bowl down and did not look at him. "And you are the same. You think I don't see."

"I'm fine."

"You are the same," she said, and washed the bowl a second time, which meant the subject was closed.

※

He left the house at eleven and walked out along the bus road and over the wetland boardwalk to the far bank.

He told himself he was checking the pins, which were fine. The bags were in the shed and the shed was locked and the lock was his, and the key was in his pocket, and the key was what he told himself he had come to check.

From the boardwalk he could see the plot laid out in the dark, the ten cells of it, the string humming between the pins like a low note held. The river went about the river's business. The nursery was dark and the park was dark, and its furnace was dead for the night, its silver chimney a pale line against a paler sky with nothing at all coming out of it.

Except at the corner.

The corner furthest from the road, where the soil was darker and turned over and smelled of a thing cooked slowly, where he had taken point C-10 and written the coordinates and the date and the depth and nothing else. A light was on there. Small, careful, shaded on the road side, the light of a man who had learned that a lamp pointed at the ground is not a lamp pointed at the sky. Above the light there rose a thin column of smoke, straight and patient in the cold air, and it carried all the way across the wet field to the boardwalk the flat chemical sweetness of circuit boards warmed over a low flame.

His hand had started again, so he put it in his pocket. He did not walk toward the light and he did not walk away from it. He stood at the edge of his own field the way a man stands at the edge of a thing he has already done, and stayed until the wind turned the smoke away from him. Then he turned too, and went home, and did not write it down.

CHAPTER 3

The Renewal

Uncle Wei came for them at six in a cargo trike he had borrowed from a cousin of a cousin. The cab smelled of dust and cooking gas and the ghost of a hundred loads.

“Sit,” he said, holding the door open. “The bus is for people who still have time.”

Lin Bo’s mother had his father out of the house and down the steps before the sun had finished coming up. She carried a folder under her arm, buff and soft at the corners. Inside it were the cards, the copies, and the letter with the hospital’s red seal, in an order she could recite the way a precentor recites a sutra. She had carried that folder to the hospital twice a month since before Lin Bo went to Beijing. She knew the window numbers. She knew which clerk signed, and which clerk only looked at the signature and signed anyway.

His father did not want the chair. He wanted his cane and his own feet and his own way of walking, which was three steps and a rest. His mother did not argue with him. She did not agree with him either. She kept the chair half a step behind his shoulder, and at the second step he sat down in it, and nobody said anything about that. In that house the things that mattered were done and not said.

Wei drove. He had the hands of the old trade, the palms pale and smooth and shining with the shine that acid leaves on a man. He put those hands on the wheel of a trike that was not his and drove his brother-in-law to the hospital of a town that had been taken from him twice. A phone sat in the cradle with a ledger app open. The numbers in the app were red, and the red ones were all dates.

“How is the day,” Lin Bo said.

"Small." Wei meant the day. "The platform cut the rate again. A man hauls a tonne of cardboard across the river, and they pay him for the tonne and not for the river." He shifted down without looking. "You know what a tonne of cardboard is. You do not know what it pays."

"Tell me."

"Forty-two." He said it the way a man says the price of a thing he has stopped arguing about. "Forty-two the tonne. Minus the diesel. Minus the platform. Minus the three days they hold the money before they let you have it. Plus your uncle's back." He patted the wheel once. "The back is free."

Beside him his mother had begun the day's arithmetic out loud: the appointment, the window number, the name of the clerk. She went through all of it twice. She had not forgotten any of it. Saying it was how she kept it.

Out past the last of the *wo shou lou* the road crossed the old burning ground. It was a flat green field now, with a low wall along it and a board that named it a green space, and the air over it was only air. Lin Bo had stood in that field at nine with a stick, poking at a fire of cable insulation his uncle had lit at the edge of the water. The smoke off it was black in the middle and yellow at the rim. It smelled like a sweet thing spoiled, and it got into the washing on the line and into the rice in the pot and into the boys who stood too close. His uncle had worked the fire with a hook and no gloves. He had sung the whole time, some song off the radio, and the singing was the part Lin Bo remembered, because a man singing over a fire is a man who has decided the fire is normal.

The field went by and Lin Bo looked at it and found that he felt nothing much. He turned that over the way he turned over a sample that read clean, waiting for the second reading. He wanted to be angry. He wanted the field to mean something. It was a field with a low wall, and a boy had stood in it, and now the boy was a man in a cab with two hundred thousand on a phone in front of him. The town

had moved on by naming the ground green and putting a board on it. That was the whole of it, and he did not even slow down.

Three kilometres on, the park came up on the right, behind its fence. The board by the gate was running its numbers in the grey morning. A line of cargo trikes was already at the barrier, and the silver chimney stood up out of the roofs with nothing showing at its mouth. Wei looked at it and then looked away, and the look was not hatred. It was the look a man gives a house he used to live in. The park took in boards at the yard price and charged a rent per square metre that a man with one trike and one back could not reach. Wei had done the arithmetic on the rent the way he did the arithmetic on everything. He had come out the wrong side of it, and he had never once, in Lin Bo's hearing, called it unjust. He called it the rate. He called the platform the rate. He called the acid the rate. His whole life was a set of rates a man did not set and could not argue with, and he moved through them the way a boat moves through weather.

"They pay you on time in there," Wei said. "That is the only good thing I will say for it."

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The hospital was a white block on the edge of Chaoyang, with a queue at the gate before there was a queue inside. The queue inside was three queues braided into one. The mother walked into all of them the way she walked into her own kitchen. Lin Bo followed with the folder and the father and the chair, and between them they moved the morning along.

The renewal of the *men te* took four windows. At the first the clerk wanted the card, and his mother produced the card. At the second the clerk wanted the disability grade from last year. His mother produced a copy of the grade and the original of the grade. She had learned years ago that a copy alone was a way for a clerk to send you to the third window. At the third window there was a machine, and the machine wanted his father's face. His father could not hold his chin

still, so Lin Bo held his head between his two hands while the screen counted down. His left hand was not steady. His mother's hand came up over his and took the weight of it without a word, and the machine took the face, and the screen said yes.

The fourth window was for the doctor's signature. The doctor sat behind a door that opened and closed all morning like a mouth, and everyone who came out of it carried the same face. It was the face of a person who had waited and been told to wait again.

"Wait," his mother said, and they waited.

They sat on a steel bench in the corridor. The corridor was the town, which was to say it was mostly old people with folders and young people with phones, and the two kinds were the same people at two ages.

A family came past. A woman of about forty was pushing a man in a chair, and a boy of ten or eleven walked beside the chair with a folder of his own. The boy's folder had a corner folded down, the way a boy folds a corner when he has been told to hold it and has held it a long time. The woman stopped at the next window and argued, in the low angry voice people use at windows, about which card paid for what. The clerk turned a screen toward her so she could see the numbers, and the numbers were not in her favour, and she looked at them the way you look at rain.

"Every time," his mother said, quietly, watching her. "Every time they change the form and you have to learn it again."

The *yibao* paid for most of it. That was the part people from outside the province never believed. The medicine was cheap. The getting of the medicine was not. There was the trike to Chaoyang and back, and a morning lost from whatever a person did for money, and the paper, and the copy of the paper, and the little stamp the copy needed before a window would receive it as if it were the paper. His mother held all of it in one folder and carried the folder the way other women carried a child. It had taken her eleven years to become good at it. She was not paid, and she did not call it work.

His mother watched the arguing woman a moment longer. Then she said, to the corridor, without turning her head, “There is a girl. The Li family are 家己人 (*ga-gi-nang*),” which meant our own kind of people, from a lane like their lane. “You will meet her at your aunt’s. That is all I am asking. You will meet her.”

Lin Bo had done this arithmetic once before, at ten. It came back the way the body keeps a smell. The summer of two thousand and eight, the year he was ten, the village committees put out word that there would be a study at Shantou University, free. The students came in a bus and set up tables in the old primary school. There were forms, and a woman with a soft voice who took a drop of blood from his finger onto a strip, and a jar to pee in, and a questionnaire about how long he had lived near the workshops and whether he had ever helped at the burning. His mother had answered the questions for him, and she had answered them carefully. She thought the study was a kind of clinic, that something would be done. For one long summer something was done, which was the measuring.

He had gone back to that university at eighteen, into the same building that held the same data. He had worked a term in a lab two doors down from the cohort files, scraping soil onto glass slides for a graduate student. The room smelled of alcohol and cold. Somewhere in the cabinets a strip of paper from his own finger had a number on it that he was not supposed to see. He had not gone looking. He had told himself it was not his file. It was not, and it was.

There was an old man in grey overalls mopping the corridor, one stroke at a time. He came level with the bench and stood the mop up and looked at Lin Bo with the mild interest of a man who has seen him somewhere before.

“You are curing two things and signing for one,” he said.

The corridor was loud. Under the floor cleaner the man smelled faintly of *liuhuang* and mugwort, and then someone at the far end called for the cleaner, and the man went, pushing the mop ahead of him. Lin Bo did not get up to follow. Hospital corridors are full of old

men in grey, and this one had said the thing already sitting in Lin Bo's own head, which is the cheapest kind of ghost.

"Your turn," his mother said.

The doctor was young and kind and in a hurry. He read the father's history the way Lin Bo read a soil report, running a finger down the columns and stopping twice. Then he asked three questions that were really one question, which was how long the father had breathed the smoke of the trade.

"Ninety-five to two thousand and thirteen," his mother said. "Cable. Boards. The acid part, at the end."

The doctor wrote that down. Then he looked at the screen, and something on it made him pause, and he looked up at Lin Bo for the first time.

"You are the son from Beijing. Environmental remediation." He did not look away. "You are in the system too. Nineteen ninety-eight. The cohort. Fourteen-point-two."

Lin Bo did not answer him.

"They keep the old cohorts," the doctor said, to the screen. "Sometimes a person comes back and asks. Most never do. There is nothing to be done with an old number anyway." He tore the sheet off and handed it to the mother. "The designation is renewed. Two years. Do not lose the card."

Outside the gate the mother stopped at a 凉茶 (*liangcha*) stall. It was a wheeled cabinet with two steel urns and a hand-lettered board of what each tea cured, and she bought a cup for the father and a cup for Lin Bo and would not buy one for herself. The tea was black and bitter and tasted of things that grew in wet shade. The board above the urns promised it would clear the liver and settle the blood. The mother watched the father drink it. She watched him the way you watch a gauge.

"Did the doctor say anything," she said.

"He said the designation is renewed."

"He said something else. I saw his face."

"He said there is nothing to be done with an old number." Lin Bo held the cup. His hand moved once against the paper, small, and he put the other hand over it and drank. "It was about me. Not about him."

The mother was quiet a moment. Then she took the empty cup out of his hand and put it in the bin and said nothing, which was her way of saying everything, and they went to find the trike.

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Wei had done a haul while they were inside. The trike sat lower on its springs, with four bales of flattened cardboard strapped across the bed. A smell of wet paper came off them. Wei was leaning on the cab with his arms crossed and his eyes on the middle distance, the way a man stands when he has decided to ask for something and is still deciding.

They put the father in the cab and the chair in the bed and shut the door. Then Wei did not get in. He stood with his hand on the roof and his ledger phone face up on the hood, and the screen showed the number Lin Bo had seen in his own head all week.

"Two hundred thousand," Wei said. "You know the number already."

"I know it exists."

"It exists and it does not move. That is the thing about a number like that. It does not get smaller while you watch it." He turned the phone over. "I have a way to move it. Legally. This time legally." He said the word the way a man says the name of a medicine. "There is a company. Small. Registered. If it has a name on the paper that the park will sit down with, it can buy boards in the yard at the yard price. There is a margin in the yard, between what the yard pays and what a licensed buyer can get. Small margin. Steady. Legal." He looked at Lin Bo for the first time. "It needs a 法人 (*fǎ rén* - the legal person, the name on the paper). It needs a shareholder with a clean

card and a degree on the wall, so the park will open the file and not lose it under the desk. I have the hands. I do not have the name."

The mother was looking at the hospital doors. The father was asleep in the cab with his mouth open.

"You want my name," Lin Bo said.

"I want your name on a piece of paper. Nothing runs through your hands. Nothing comes to your house. You are the face. I am the work." Wei's voice did not rise. It did the opposite, which was how Lin Bo knew how much it cost him. "Your mother's folder is not going to get smaller. Your father's legs are not going to get better. This is the way a man turns a number around. There is no other way I have found, and I have looked."

"Let me think."

"You will think on the bus," Wei said. "The number will still be there." He got in and started the trike, and the mother got in beside her husband. Lin Bo stood in the road a moment with his hand that would not be still, and then he got in too.

They went the short way. It ran along the far bank of the Lianji‑ang, past the boardwalk and the young trees and the place where the river had been given back to the town. It ran past Lin Bo's own fence, the leaning posts and the rusted wire he had walked that first morn‑ing.

A truck was backed up to the corner of the plot. Not the park's truck. A flatbed, old, with its rear gate down. Two men were carrying something across the corner of the field in the flat light. The grass was pressed down in a line where things had been carried before, a line that ran from the fence gap to the shed and back.

Wei drove past at the speed of the road and did not turn his head.

Lin Bo looked at the truck, and at the men, and at the shed, and at the line in the grass. He could have asked. The trike was quiet enough that he could have asked, and Wei would have had to answer, and whatever Wei answered, the two of them would have to sit with it in the cab for the rest of the ride. So Lin Bo did not ask, and Wei did not

offer, and the mother in the back saw the corner too and looked at her hands. For a while nobody in the trike spoke.

At the house the men lifted the father up the steps and into the chair. Wei would not come in and would not take money for the diesel. He stood by the trike until the door was closed, and Lin Bo went out to him with a cup of tea.

"You keep the cup," Wei said.

"Uncle."

"On 重阳 (*Chongyang* - the Double Ninth), eat at your aunt's. Be nice to the Li girl. She is a good girl, and none of this is her fault." He took the cup and drank it standing and set it on the roof of the cab. Then he got in and put the red ledger on the cradle and started the motor. "And think about the paper," he said, through the open win‑dow. "The paper costs you nothing. It is the cheapest thing you will ever be asked for."

He drove off with the bales still on the bed, back toward the short way, toward the corner of the plot.

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That evening his mother made the father's *muê* soft and put the pill organiser on the table and went out to the lane to talk to a neighbour about *Chongyang*, which meant about the table and the seating and who would sit where. Lin Bo stayed in with his father.

Before the bowls were cleared her phone rang, and she stood in the doorway with it against her ear and her free hand over her mouth, which was how she took the calls she did not want the men to hear. It was the go-between, an aunt of a neighbour who did this work for half the lanes and took a red packet at each end. Lin Bo listened the way a person listens to weather through a wall, catching words and not sentences. The day, the hour, the number of people. The girl, the girl's mother, the girl's father who worked in Shenzhen and would come home for the holiday. Then her voice went down, because there are words a woman says quietly even in her own house. Long-term,

she said. Stability, she said. Then: what the man has. Then, after a while, and it took a while: it is early yet. She said that last one the way a person says a thing she has said before and will have to say again. When she hung up she stood in the doorway with her back to the room, and the room behind her was quiet with the television's soundless light, and then she came in and stacked the bowls.

The television was on with the sound off. On the screen a young woman was walking slowly through a yard of old circuit boards and turning for the camera, and behind her someone had hung a string of lights, and the caption along the bottom said something about the future.

His father watched it without watching it.

"Your uncle asked you for something," the father said.

"On the paper."

"On the paper." His hand found the arm of the chair and stayed there. "What will you do."

"Think."

"People always think." He looked at the screen. "Your uncle is not a bad man. He is a man with a hole in front of him and no other road around it. There was a time the whole town had no other road. Now there is one road, and it has a gate on it, and the gate opens for a card." He breathed. "You have the card."

"I have a name on a paper. It is not the same."

"It is the same," his father said, "to a man standing at the gate."

Lin Bo did not answer. He took the pill organiser and began to lay out the week, the morning tablets and the evening tablets, reading the lids the way he read everything now. There were four kinds and then there was a fifth kind with no name on the lid, a tablet his mother got from a woman she would not name. Lin Bo had stopped asking about that one and had started counting it instead. He put the seventh tablet back under its unlabelled lid and closed the box.

His father held out his hand for the water glass. His hand shook, and Lin Bo's hand shook when he passed it, and for a moment the

two hands shook at each other across the gap between the chairs. Neither of them said anything about that either. In that house the things that mattered were done and not said.

Then his father said, “The courtyard at your aunt’s has a big table. They will seat you next to her. Just eat.”

“I know.”

“Do not tell them about the office and the papers. Not there.”

“I know.”

His mother came back in with the cold air on her and the news that the aunt would kill a goose. The room filled up with the details of the meal, and the television went on turning its soundless lights, and Lin Bo watched it over his father’s shoulder and did not see it.

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Later, when the house was quiet, he took the key to the shed out of his pocket and laid it on the table and looked at it.

He did not go out to the field. He had decided that somewhere between the fourth window and the *liangcha* stall, and he had not said so even to himself until now. Knowing was a road with no other road around it, and there was already a man in his family standing on that road with a hole in front of him. He told himself he would look in the morning. He told himself a locked shed was a shed, and the grass was pressed down in a line for any reason, and a truck at the corner of a field in a town full of trucks was nothing at all. He sat with the key and said those things to himself in the order he wanted to believe them.

Then he put the key back in his pocket and left it there. He did not go to the window. He did not have to. He knew what was on the far bank, and where, and he lay in the dark with the key against his leg and did not write anything down.

CHAPTER 4

The Introduction

The festival came on a Sunday, and it came with a sound.

By eight the square in the old core was full. A stage had gone up overnight against the side of the 祠堂 (*citang* - the clan hall). On the stage a 潮剧 (*Chaoju* - Teochew opera) had begun that would not stop until dark. The lead instrument rose above everything, a high thin two-stringed thing, the 二弦 (*erxian* - the two-stringed lead), that seemed always on the edge of breaking and never broke. The old people in the square turned their faces up to it the way flowers turn. The young people lifted their phones.

The *Chaoju* was an old one about a son who carried his mother across a mountain on his back. There were three hundred people in the square and eight hundred phones, because the town filmed everything now, and because the families who had gone to Shenzhen and Bangkok and Toronto had paid for the stage and wanted to see it. The troupe's fee had come from a donation. The donation had come from a man in Singapore whose name was cut into the hall's stone a little deeper than the others, and whose photograph Ah-Sheng had already put on the account with a sad song under it. Nobody in the square thought this was strange. The gods were being paid, and the paying was being filmed, and the filming was being paid. It was all one economy now.

Ah-Sheng was there before Lin Bo. He had his phone on a long pole and he moved through the crowd with it. He had dressed for the part in a black jacket and a pair of heavy old shoes he had found somewhere. He filmed the hall, and the smoke off the offering tables, and the *Chaoju* singer's painted face. He filmed an old woman feeding a grandchild a piece of 红桃粿 (*ang tao kueh* - the peach-

shaped festival cake), dyed the pink of an old dye. Then he filmed the child spitting it out.

"You are early," Ah-Sheng said, without lowering the pole.

"Your grandmother asked me to carry the offerings."

"Everyone carries the offerings." He turned the phone on Lin Bo and held it there a beat. "Say something for the account."

"No."

"Come on. The one who came back from Beijing. People love that."

"People love the ones who stayed."

Ah-Sheng laughed, because it was funny, and kept filming, because it was content.

The women had been at the hall since six. His aunt had bought the three meats and the fruit, and his mother had made the cakes, and between them they had arranged the long table so that the grandfathers would see the best side of everything. There was a whole chicken poached pale. There was a piece of pork belly with the skin shaved and scored. There were the cakes on their plates and the oranges in their paper and a bottle of rice spirit with the cap unscrewed so that the spirit could breathe. Nobody had been taught any of it. The year a person turned fifty, the knowledge arrived, the way the knowledge in that town always arrived, without a teacher.

Lin Bo carried the tray up the three steps and set it on the table, beside the goose and the fruit. His aunt rearranged it the instant he set it down, which was her right. Inside, the hall was cool and dark and smelled of old wood and cold ash and the memory of ten thousand sticks of incense. The tablets stood in their tiers on the back wall, row over row. The newest had the good lacquer on it. The oldest had no gilt left at all, only the cut of the letters and the soot in the cut.

An elder came down the line of tables, an old man with a stick and his reading glasses pushed up onto his forehead. He stopped in front of Lin Bo and looked at him over the top of the glasses, though the glasses were not on.

"The doctor," he said. It was not quite a question and not quite a greeting. "Your branch has not put a name on the door since your grandfather. Now there are two on it. Come to the autumn rite. Say a few words."

A few words. The hall held a few words the way the river held a bridge. Lin Bo understood that he had just been handed something and asked to pay for it in the same sentence. He said he would try, which is the answer that costs nothing. The elder nodded as if a ledger had been signed.

Above them the *erxian* went up and up. A young woman in a costume crossed the stage with her sleeves full of air. The crowd made the low communal noise a crowd makes when it has decided to be moved.

Two grandmothers came to the table with a grandchild each. They had heard, they said, that the green project on the far bank was going to clean the children. Was it true. They asked it with real hope and their hands on the children's heads, and Lin Bo said what he always said. He said that clean ground was good for children, and that lead in a body did not wash out when the ground got cleaner. They heard the first half. They thanked him for the first half. The lead in the children was a thing they could not see, and the green on the ground was a thing they could, and they walked away with the grandchildren and the green in their eyes.

Half the lane behind the square was shut. The houses there belonged to families in Shenzhen and Hong Kong and one in Toronto, and they were good houses with good doors and good locks, and nobody had opened them since the spring festival. Their owners would come at New Year and photograph the lane the way a person photographs a thing he has decided to remember instead of a thing he does. The aunt kept the keys to three of them on a board in her kitchen, and she dusted the rooms once a month, and nobody had ever asked her to. In the square the *Chaoju* went on about the son carrying the mother, and the mother in the song got heavier with

every step, and every person in the square knew how the song ended and none of them looked away.

People had said it would rain. It did not rain. It was one of those October days the coast gives out now and then, dry and bright and cool at the edges. By ten the hill behind the town had a thin line of climbers on it, the old ones going up for the custom and the young ones going up for the photograph. The custom was to climb. The photograph was the point. Lin Bo watched the line on the hill and the *Chaoju* in the square and the red cakes on the table, and he could not tell which of the three was the ritual and which was the content. The town had stopped telling them apart. His aunt would have blessed all of it with the same words, 老爷保号 (*lao-ia-bo-ho* - "may the gods protect"), over the *Chaoju* and the hill and the phone.

※

The aunt's courtyard took the big round table and all its leaves, and by noon the table was full. The food came out in the order it always came. Cold dishes first. The goose in the middle, a whole one this time, and the aunt made sure Lin Bo saw her cut it. Soup last. The children ran under the table and were pulled out and put back. The elders sat at the inner end, by the wall, where a person sits when the family still wants to see his face.

The Li family came at half past twelve. The mother first, small and quick, in a jacket with a pin on it, and behind her the girl. Li Hui. She was taller than her mother and had her hair back, and she wore the plain careful clothes a person wears when she has been told to look like herself and has decided to look like nothing. She taught at the middle school. Lin Bo had last seen her at eighteen, three rows ahead in an exam hall, which is to say he had never seen her at all.

He was seated beside her, exactly as his father had said he would be, by a mechanism nobody would admit to arranging. The meal went on around them like weather.

"On the phone they have a name for the young ones like you," his aunt said to him across the goose, pleased with herself. "小镇做题家 (*xiaozhen zuotijia* - "small-town test-taker"). The ones who do the questions and test their way out. I saw it in a video. Very good video." She put more goose on his rice. "You are one. You did the questions. And now you are back."

Lin Bo thanked her for the goose. He did not tell her what the phrase sounded like when the people who used it were not being kind. She would not have believed him, and she had meant it kindly, and the goose was good.

Uncle Wei did not come. He sent a red envelope with a cousin, and the envelope was correct to the yuan, and his mother put it in her pocket without opening it in front of anyone, which was both a courtesy and a judgment. Nobody said his name at the table. The meal moved around the place where he would have sat.

His cousin Guoliang came late and parked where everyone could see the car, a white one, with the kind of plate the town reads the way it reads a face. Guoliang worked in the town office. He was thirty-four, he had a flat in Chaoyang and a wife and a boy and the settled good colour of a man whose life had been decided for him and who had made his peace with the decider.

"The park is having a good year," Guoliang said, over the soup, to the table. "First year of the fifteenth five-year plan. They want the numbers. All of them." He said it lightly, the way a man reports rain in a town where he owns an umbrella. "One of the projects on the far bank. A scientist. One of ours." He raised his cup to Lin Bo. "Bring us a good number, doctor."

"I will bring the number," Lin Bo said. "The good part is not up to me."

Guoliang laughed, and the table laughed with him, and nobody heard the sentence.

Li Hui heard it. She turned her cup a quarter-turn on the cloth, once, the small movement a person makes when she has heard the sentence and has decided, for now, to keep it.

Guoliang's wife was from Chaoyang and wore a good coat and asked Lin Bo three questions about Beijing, all of which had the same answer, which was that Beijing was far. His aunt's youngest boy was eleven and had a phone and was watching a man in a room with a hundred boxes explode them one at a time. When the boxes exploded the boy made no sound and did not look up. The table talked about a cousin who had bought a flat in Shantou, and the price, and what the price had been two years ago, and what it would be next year. The talk was the town's real liturgy, and Lin Bo listened the way he had once listened in lecture halls, taking the substance out of the noise.

※

After the soup the table broke the way the town's tables broke. The men went to the front room with the pot and the cigarettes. The women went to the kitchen. The children went to the courtyard and the phones. Lin Bo and Li Hui were left at the end of the table, side by side, no longer watched.

"They told you my name and my school," she said.

"They told me you teach."

"I teach English to forty-one thirteen-year-olds who would rather be asleep." She said it flatly, the way a person states the weather in her own town. "They told me you have a doctorate."

"From Beijing."

"And you came back." She looked at him properly then, for the first time. "Why."

Nobody asked him that straight. In the town it was understood that a person came back because he had failed to stay. The question was only ever the polite form of that, and he had learned to answer the polite form.

"There was nothing in Beijing I could fix," he said.

"That is a good answer," she said. "It is not an answer."

"No."

"Good." She turned the cup back the other way. "Then we can be two people at a table. That is all I am asking for today. Not a husband. A table."

She had a small gold ring on her right hand with no stone on it, and she turned it while she spoke, and Lin Bo did not think the turning was for him. He asked her what she did when the school let out. She said she drove her mother to the market and corrected pa‐pers and sometimes sat in the car down by the river and did nothing at all, and that this was the best hour of her day. She said it without self-pity, as a person reads out a timetable.

"Everyone thinks the ones who stayed are waiting," she said. "Nobody is waiting. We are just here, and it is small, and it is ours."

Then, because that was too much to leave in the air, she asked him whether the water in the river was safe, and he told her the truth, which was that he did not know, and she nodded as if he had passed something.

In the front room the men had the pot going, and the *gongfu cha* had begun its work of filling the silence with something a hand could do. Lin Bo heard the tap of the cups and the low rumble of the men and one of them laughing at something Guoliang had said. Above it through the wall the *erxian* was still going, thinner now, the way sound thins when it has been going all day.

Lin Bo took out his phone to check the time and found the group chat from Beijing sitting at the top of the screen. A postdoc had put up a photograph of a paper in a journal with a green cover, and three people had written congratulations. The paper was about a soil amendment Lin Bo had helped test for six months in a greenhouse outside the fifth ring, and its authors did not include his name. He had known that. He had signed the sheet that said he was content with the order of the authors, because in the order of things he was the man who carried the soil. He put the phone away and the tea

went round. Somewhere in Beijing a green journal was lying on a table in a corridor and a man was being congratulated, and it was a good paper, and it was his work, and it was not his.

Li Hui's mother raised the flat. She raised it the way a person raises a thing that cannot be raised, sideways, in the middle of a sentence about the weather, so that it could be put back down without anyone having to look at it.

"Chaoyang is not so expensive now," she said, to Lin Bo's mother, pleasantly. "A boy who works can get one at seven, eight thousand the square. Ninety squares. A boy with a good job." She smiled. "Not that we are asking. We are the clear stream. Everyone knows it."

"We are the clear stream," Lin Bo's mother agreed, and they smiled at each other across the soup, and the two smiles were doing arithmetic.

The *caili* was nothing, everyone said so, and it was true. Li Hui's mother said it twice, that they were not selling a daughter, that the gift was a gift, that eight thousand eight and the four golds was plenty and most of it would go back to the young people. It was the other number that had no name and everyone put a number on it anyway. Ninety squares at seven thousand five was six hundred and seventy thousand, and a third of that down was two hundred and twenty-five thousand, and his mother had looked all of it up and did not say any of it at the table. None of it was the *caili*.

Li Hui looked at her mother the way a person looks at a wall she has looked at all her life. Then she looked at Lin Bo, and for a moment the two of them were on the same side of something, which was the last thing either of them had been told to expect.

※

At the gate, on the way out, his mother took his arm, because she had decided this was the day it would be said, and there was no more point in the pretend of the other days.

"It is moving," she said. "Her mother is satisfied. After the New Year, we send the gifts and we fix the day. All you have to do is not lose it." She watched his face for a change and did not find one. "You will not embarrass me."

"I heard you."

"Good," she said, and let go of his arm, and went to help his aunt with the bowls.

※

He left the courtyard at four and walked the boardwalk to the far bank.

The lime had come on Saturday and was stacked at the gate: twenty bags, fifty kilos each, white and heavy and waiting. The trays of seedlings had come with it, shallow black plastic, hundreds of small cuttings of the stonecrop that would take the cadmium and leave the lead, because nothing took the lead. He had no crew. It was a holiday and he had not booked one. So he spread lime on the first two cells by hand, in the long late light, with a shovel and a plastic bucket, because he wanted to feel the ground move under his own arms, which was a bad reason and he knew it and did it anyway.

The ten cells had been staked out with string on his first morning, C-1 to C-10, and the string was still there, sagging. The bamboo pegs had been pulled up and pushed back in by something that was not the wind. He worked cell by cell with the bucket. The lime went down white on the dark ground and the ground drank it. By the time he reached the end of the second cell his shirt was through, and the sun was on the far bank, and the river had gone the colour it goes at five in October, which is the colour of weak tea. Nobody came to the plot. The boardwalk had a few walkers on it and they did not look at the field, because a field is the one thing in a town that nobody looks at. Across the water the park's board ran its numbers to an empty quay.

He walked the plot once with the bucket empty, from the gate to the far corner and back, and counted the cells the way he had counted

everything since he was a boy. Cell five was low. Cell six was the old sorting floor, where the boards had been stacked, and cell six would stay high for a decade. He knew all of it already. He had known all of it for a year from a letter and a map, and the knowing on paper had done nothing, and the walking of it did nothing either, and still he walked it, because a man who is going to be blamed for a number wants to have stood on every cell of the ground the number came from.

The ash did not come up. The metal did not come up. Nothing came up but the smell of wet lime and the cold of the river and the ache coming into his back. The ground took what he gave it and stayed exactly as it had been, which is what ground does, and what the report in Beijing would never say.

He stopped at the fence and checked his phone. The lab had sent the first round.

He read the ten cells the way he read everything, left to right. Eight of them sat where he had told the model they would sit, and two did not. Cell nine was high and old, the long dirty signature of the nineties, lead and cadmium and the rest of it laid down by the men who had worked before him. That was expected. That was the file. The model had a word for it.

C-10 was not expected.

The lead there was the same as the cells around it, which was the old lead, the town's lead, ten thousand fires' worth. Under the lead there was a second thing, sitting higher in the topsoil than the rest, and the second thing was tin. Tin, at ten times the background of every other cell in the plot. Tin all through the top ten centimetres, bright and recent, sitting on top of the old lead the way a new lie sits on an old one.

Tin is solder. Tin on a board is a joint. Solder is what a person heats when a person takes a board apart, and the smoke that comes off it smells like a thing cooked slowly. Lin Bo had put his bag in that corner and written the coordinates and the date and the depth, and

nothing else, and the ground had taken his sample and answered him anyway.

He had the sheet open on his phone with the chain-of-custody number at the top and the date he had taken the sample and his own name in the box marked collector. The sheet would go into the project file. The project file would be read by the province and by the ministry and by whoever came after him. There would be a second round of samples before the year-end report, on the same grid, in the same holes, and the second round would say the same thing or worse. A number does not get quieter by being asked again. It gets louder, and it gets a date.

He stood in the corner with the phone in his hand. The shed was ten metres off and locked with his own lock. The wire at the fence hung off its post where someone had hooked it back. In the pressed grass a single white thread of a woven sack had come loose and stayed.

He read the number again. He was the only person for fifty kilometres who would read that number the way it was meant to be read. There was one place inside his fence that would grow tin, and one man who would put it there. The thing that had been a door he could keep shut was now a thing written into the ground. The ground did not know how to keep a secret. It only knew how to hold one, and give it back to whoever dug.

His hand had started, and he put it in his pocket, and did not go to the shed. He went home in the last of the light, and the paper at his aunt's had his name going onto it, and the lime sat in twenty white bags at the gate of a plot where the other man had already been. He walked the whole boardwalk back knowing that he had stopped being a man who did not know.

CHAPTER 5

The Furnace

The ceremony was at nine, and by seven the park had been washed.

There had been a crew on the yard since dawn with hoses and brooms. They had swept the drainage channels and stacked the woven sacks square. Somebody had run a cloth along the rail of the weighbridge until the steel came up cold and blank. The extractors on the roofs were switched off. It was the first time Lin Bo had heard the yard without them, and the quiet was the loudest thing in it. The *liandan lu* was still going, because nobody stops a furnace for a ceremony. Its pipes had been polished. The men kept away from them the way men keep away from a sleeping animal.

At half past seven a man from the committee walked the yard with a list. A young woman from the publicity office walked behind him with a camera. Wherever the camera pointed, the workers had been told to look busy and to wear their respirators properly. Two of them were smoking behind the acid store. A third had his mask hanging under his chin like a bib. The committee man stopped in front of him and said nothing at all, which was the whole correction. The man put his mask on.

“Phones off the line,” the committee man said to the yard. “From eight.”

A man on the sorting line laughed and did not put his phone away. The committee man did not make him. The man on the sorting line had a card and a bay and a vote in the community. The committee man had a list.

By the gate the renters were coming in for the day’s trading. They came on their electric trikes with the sacks stacked high, and the committee man met each of them at the boom and turned them back politely, because the yard was closed for the morning. Most of them

went. One stayed. He was an older man with a bent back who had driven two hours for the day's prices, and he sat on his trike with both hands on the bars and watched the awning go up.

"You can come at one," the committee man told him.

"At one the price is down."

"At one the yard is open."

The old man stayed where he was. He was still there at nine, parked at the edge of the compound, too far to hear the speeches and close enough to see them. Nobody made him leave. To make a man leave, a person must first decide that the man is a problem, and the old man on the trike had been careful to look like furniture.

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Ah-Sheng was there before Lin Bo. He had come in on the village minibus, and he had his phone on the pole, and he was walking the edge of the awning the way a man walks a fence. He had already filmed the banner and the flags and the folding chairs. Now he was filming the renters at the gate.

"Four hundred people in the room," he said to Lin Bo, without lowering the pole. He meant the livestream. "They liked the fish last week. Today they get a ceremony."

"Do they like the ceremony?"

"They like the thing under the ceremony." He panned the phone across the parked cars. "Nobody believes the speeches. Everybody watches to see who gets out of which car. It is the same show at every company in the country."

Then he turned the camera on Lin Bo, and Lin Bo put a hand up, and Ah-Sheng laughed and swung the pole away. The stream kept rolling. Somewhere in the county a hundred men were watching a boy from the village walk backwards with a phone.

The guests came at nine. There were four black cars and a white one, and they parked in a row by the weighbridge where the camera could get them. The village had brought forty people in on the

minibus, most of them old, most of them women, and seated them in the front rows under the red awning. Somebody handed out little flags.

The banner over the awning said 美丽中国 (*meili Zhongguo* - "Beautiful China") across the first line. Under it, smaller, were the name of the project and the words 开工仪式 (*kaigong yishi* - the start-of-work ceremony). The paint was still wet at the corner of the last character. A boy from the committee kept his finger away from it.

Lin Bo stood at the side with the poster he had made. It was the ten cells drawn to scale, with the sampling grid over them and one line printed at the bottom: forty per cent reduction in bioavailable lead over eighteen months. Somebody had set a plastic seedling on the table in front of the poster as a prop. He moved it back an inch, and the woman from publicity moved it forward again, and after that he left it.

His mother had wanted to come. He had told her it was a working day and there would be no place to sit. She had said she understood, which in her language meant that she had heard him and disagreed and would wait. He thought of her on the folding chair that was not there, and then he stopped thinking about it, because the car doors were opening.

The district 领导 (*lingdao*) arrived last. He was a man of about fifty-five in a dark jacket with no tie, and the yard came to attention around him without anyone being told. A woman from the province walked at his shoulder with a folder and said little. Zhao walked on his other side and said a good deal.

The woman from publicity had a plan for the day on a sheet of paper in her hand. She moved the folding chairs by four centimetres so that the shadow of the awning fell on the fourth row instead of the third. She put the two grandmothers with the smallest children at the end of the front row, where the camera would find them on the turn. She asked the leader's driver to move a car, and the driver moved the

car, and the row of black cars came straight. None of it was a lie. It was a photograph of a thing that was really happening, taken from the one angle where the thing looked like itself.

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The speeches went the way speeches go. A man from the park committee read from a page. The woman from the province said that the river had been given back to the people, and that the ground would be next. Then the leader spoke for six minutes without notes. He spoke about the fifteenth five-year plan, and the province, and the town's long road, and he did not say the word waste once, which was a skill. He said *meili Zhongguo* twice. Each time, a few people in the folding chairs nodded, because they had heard the phrase on televi‑sion and it had come to mean the general direction of better.

Then Zhao spoke. He held the microphone the way he held a teapot, from the top, and he used the phrase "a number with a source" twice. Lin Bo, standing at the side with his hands behind him, understood that he was the source. Zhao looked at him once while he said it, the way a man checks a wall he means to lean on.

Then it was Lin Bo's turn.

A woman from publicity had put three sentences on a card and folded it and given it to him. He read it twice. The first sentence said the project would make the soil safe for the children of the town. The second said the team was confident. The third thanked the leader‑ship. He folded the card and put it in his pocket, and a small muscle in Zhao's jaw moved.

The microphone gave his voice back to him half a beat late. Every sentence he spoke came to him again as a question.

"Thank you," he said. "I am the project lead. What we are doing is called stabilization. We are not washing the land, and we are not taking the metal out of it. We are raising the pH and binding the lead in place, so that less of it can get into a body. The target is forty per cent less bioavailable lead in eighteen months. If we reach it, the soil

will still be dirty. It will be less dangerous. Those are two different words."

The awning was quiet. At the back a child said something and was hushed.

"The plants in the trays are for the cadmium," he said. "There is no plant for the lead. Anyone who tells you the green will clean the blood is selling you something."

He stopped. He had not meant to say the last sentence. He had said it, and it was true, and it sat there in the hum of the amplifier. Then the man from the park committee began to clap. The clapping spread, out of duty at the front and out of habit at the back. The leader clapped twice and put his hands in his pockets. Zhao clapped four times and looked at the ground.

Old Ge was in the third row. He had not clapped. He sat with his clean hands on his knees and watched Lin Bo the way he watched the water. Lin Bo found him in the crowd and held there a moment, and the old man did a small thing with his head. It was a nod, or it was the beginning of a nod, or it was the wind.

After the applause the woman from publicity came up with her clipboard. She asked him, very pleasantly, whether he would say the three sentences again for the paper, the ones on the card, because the paper had missed the beginning. He said he would not. She said of course, and wrote something down, and by the afternoon the town's website would carry a paragraph that thanked the leadership, named the forty per cent, and did not contain the word blood. He had known it would. He had said the thing anyway, and the knowing and the saying had lived in him at the same time all day, and he could not decide which of them was the coward.

※

After the speeches the leader poured the first bucket of lime.

They had staged it well. A half-cell of ground had been raked and marked at the edge of the plot, and there was a new galvanized

bucket and a shovel with a red bow on the handle. The leader took the bucket and tipped it. The white lime went down onto the dark earth and made a small cloud, and the cameras clicked a dozen times. Then a woman from the paper asked him to do it again, because the sun had been behind his shoulder the first time. He did it again and laughed. They gave the shovel to Lin Bo and photographed him with it while the leader shook the hand of the man beside him.

When it was over, the folding chairs emptied across the yard toward the canteen. The old people carried the little flags the way a person carries a thing he has been given and does not yet want to throw away. Two grandmothers stopped Lin Bo at the edge of the plot. Between them they had three children. The eldest was about nine and had already learned to stand still for a camera. The middle one was five and had a bag of puffed rice and would not share it. The smallest was on the first grandmother's back in a cloth. One of the boys had a scar on his wrist from a scald, old and pale, the kind a child gets in a kitchen where the pot sits on the floor.

"You said it at the microphone," the first grandmother said. "About the blood. Say it again, slower."

He said it again, slower. The ground could be made less danger‐ous. The children could still have lead in them from the years before. The lead had gone in through hands and dust and water, and it would not come out because the ground got greener.

The grandmother listened to all of it. Then she said, "But the ground will be clean."

"Part of it. Mostly less dangerous."

"Less dangerous." She tried the phrase the way a person tries a shoe that does not fit. She looked at the field, and at the lime going white on the corner of the ground. He watched her decide, in front of him, to keep the part she had come with. "It is still better," she said. "Better is better."

Then she took the children and went to the canteen, and Lin Bo stood with the new shovel in his hand and did not know whether he had helped her or taken something from her.

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Zhao found Old Ge by the nursery and brought him over to the leader.

The old man came slowly. He stood with his hands at his sides and did not offer them. The leader had heard about him, or had been told to have heard about him. He said something warm about the years the old man had given the trade and the years he now gave the park, and he said the paper would like his photograph, and the old man said no.

"No?" the leader said, still smiling.

"I am not in the photograph," Old Ge said. "The photograph is for people who are going somewhere. I am here."

The leader laughed, because there was nothing else to do with it, and turned to Zhao. Zhao stepped between them with the ease of a man who has stepped between things all his life. He explained that the old man was the park's best grower and did not like cameras. The leader said fine, fine, and was led away. Then the small crowd around the exchange found other things to look at, and Zhao stayed a mo‑ment. He looked at Old Ge the way a man looks at a locked drawer he has decided not to open today.

When he had gone, the old man turned to Lin Bo.

"They wanted me on the paper," he said.

"Why did you refuse?"

"Because I would have said yes." He picked up his bucket. "Then I would have been on the paper, and the paper would have been on me. And when the number comes out bad, the paper will want a name, and a name is a ledger."

He walked off toward the nursery. Behind him the dead ring in the grass moved with him, one step at a time, all the way to the beds.

※

The banquet was in the canteen, at four round tables pushed together. It was better food than the canteen ever served on a working day. There was a whole cold poached fish, 鱼饭 (*yu fan* - the cold fish of the Chaoshan table), with the skin shining and a dish of bean paste beside it. There were prawns and a plate of goose and a soup that had been on the stove since the night before. The *gongfu cha* went round the way it went round everywhere. The leader's driver poured it for the leader, and Zhao poured it for the woman from the province, and the *dancong* came up in the small cups with its smell of orchids.

Lin Bo was seated between Zhao and a man from the district's environment bureau. The bureau man asked the questions bureau men ask, which were about the timeline and the cost per mu and the sampling interval, and Lin Bo answered in the flat voice he kept for officials. Then the man leaned in and asked the real question, which was whether the number would be ready before the year-end report.

"Sampling finishes in November," Lin Bo said. "The chemistry takes four weeks. The number will be ready."

"But will it be good."

"That depends on what you are calling good. Forty per cent of the bioavailable fraction is the target. If the lime holds and the pH stays where we put it, we can get there on the lead. The cadmium is slower."

The bureau man nodded as though this were the answer he had asked for. Lin Bo understood that he had been asked a different question and had failed to hear it, and that Zhao had just done something with the teapot to cover the gap. Across the table the leader was asking the committee man about the river. The committee man was doing 打太极 (*da taiji*), turning the question in his hands and handing it back, and the leader let him, because it was the holiday season and the report was not due.

His cousin Guoliang was at the next table, in a dark jacket, working the room the way he worked the yard. He came over once with a cup and touched it to Lin Bo's. He said the project looked good on the town, and that the town office was behind it, and that a man from the town office would sit in on the year-end review. He said the last part lightly, the way he said everything that mattered. Then he went back to his own table and made the woman from the province laugh twice, and Lin Bo watched him do it and thought, without heat, that Guoliang would be a director one day and would still be parking his car where everyone could see it.

Zhao poured Lin Bo a cup. "You did well," he said, quietly, under the noise of the table."I said what I said."

"You said it plainly. That is what I am saying." He set the pot down and turned it, and when he let go, the spout did not point at Lin Bo, which was a courtesy. It did not point at the leader either, which was a calculation. "People remember plain," Zhao said. "The trick is to be plain about the part they can use."

Lin Bo's phone buzzed in his pocket. It was his mother, and he stepped out with it onto the canteen steps, and she wanted to know whether there had been a photograph and whether he had worn the good shirt. He told her there had been a photograph. She told him that the Li family had called, and that the go-between had asked whether the young man was well, and that she had said he was well. Then she asked whether he had eaten, and he said he had, and she said good, and neither of them said anything about the thing that was actually being said. When he hung up, the yard was empty of guests and full of its own noise again, and the extractors had been switched back on.

※

Lin Bo left the park at three and walked the boardwalk to the far bank.

The day had gone soft and grey, the way the coast goes when it has finished being October. There were more walkers than usual, because of the holiday, and the young trees were lit green, and the river was the colour of old glass. Two men were fishing off the stone edge with their lines in the water and their eyes on their phones.

He came to his own fence and stopped, because the gate was open.

It had been chained and padlocked since the day they strung the cells. The lock was his. He had carried the key in his pocket all week while the thing at the corner sat in his sample, and in the lab's result, and in the second round no one had run yet.

Now the chain hung down the post in a loop. The gate was pushed back into the grass. Inside the fence, up the pressed line that ran to the shed, a flatbed truck stood backed in at the door with its tail down. There was a diesel smell on the afternoon, and two men were lifting a grey pallet of something onto the bed.

Uncle Wei was standing at the tail of the truck with a clipboard and a pen, counting.

He looked up when Lin Bo's shadow crossed the gate. He did not startle, and he did not hide anything, and that was worse than if he had. He was wearing a clean shirt and the flat cap he wore when he meant to look like a man doing business. The acid shine was on his hands in the grey light. He looked at his nephew across thirty metres of his own ground with the calm of a man who had decided, some time ago, how this would go.

"Come to check the fence," Wei said. It was not a question.

"It's my fence."

"It is." He said it to the clipboard. "The chain was stiff. I oiled it." He clicked the pen and put it behind his ear. The two men on the truck kept working, and one of them glanced at Lin Bo and looked away, and the pallet went up onto the bed with a scrape of wood on metal.

Lin Bo did not go up the pressed line. He stood at the gate with the boardwalk at his back. The afternoon went on around them, the river and the trees and the two fishermen who did not look up.

He had stood on this ground a hundred times that week. He knew the slope of it, and where the water pooled after rain, and which corner of the fence the wind came through first. He knew it better than the two men on the truck ever would, and none of that know-ledge was worth anything at this particular gate on this particular afternoon. Knowledge was a thing he had. The thing he needed was the other thing, which was a way to make his uncle's number wrong without making his uncle's life smaller. He looked for it the way a man looks for a tool in a pocket he has already checked.

He could have named it. He had the chemistry in his phone, and the date, and his own name in the box marked collector, and one word would have put all of it on the ground between them.

He said nothing. Wei counted, and the men loaded.

Then, behind Lin Bo, a scooter slowed on the embankment road.

It was the grid man. He had his phone out of his jacket and tilted at the fence the way he tilted it at everything. The scooter came down to walking pace. He did not call out, and he did not come in. He looked at the truck, and at the shed, and at Lin Bo standing at the gate, and then at Lin Bo's face. He took one photograph. The shutter made no sound that Lin Bo could hear.

Then the scooter picked up and went on up the road, and the grid man put the phone away. He had a whole week before the next cir-cuit, and everywhere in the county a machine was filing what he had just done.

Wei watched the scooter go. He did not look angry. He looked tired, which was worse. He put the clipboard under his arm and climbed into the cab of the truck.

"The number is coming anyway," he said, through the open window. "Dirt is slow. Now I will be fast."

CHAPTER 6

Field Season

The work had a shape by the end of October. The shape was slow.

The crew came at seven, hired the night before off the same WeChat group at the same hundred and eighty a day with lunch. There were six of them now, five men and the woman. They arrived on three motorbikes and a rusted cargo trike, and they stood at the gate with their hands in their pockets until Lin Bo opened it. He had learned to open the gate before they arrived. A crew that waits at a locked gate is a crew that has already begun to leave.

The season was the good one, which in that climate meant the rain had stopped lying. The afternoons were still hot, but the nights had begun to have an edge on them, and the plot held its water instead of sending it away down the road. Along the river the yards were work‑ing the way they always worked in the run-up to the New Year. They were working day and night, and the smell of cooked board came over the fields whenever the wind turned. Lin Bo had learned to smell which yard was running by the taste at the back of his throat. The men on his crew had learned that taste years ago.

The woman brought breakfast in a blue plastic bag. There was *muê* in stacked tins and a dish of the small salted things. There was also a jar of the dark preserved citrus the town kept for the stomach, 老香黄 (*lao xiang huang* - the preserved bergamot of the Chaoshan shelf). She handed him the jar without being asked. He looked at her, and she said it was for his father, and then she went to work.

※

The plan was simple on paper and slow in the ground. The lead would not move, so they would not try to move it. They would raise the pH with the lime and bind the metal where it lay. In the worst

cells they would plant the trays, because the cadmium would walk into a plant, and the plant could be cut and burned and buried.

Lin Bo taught the crew the work the way he had been taught it, which was cell by cell and by hand. He showed them how to spread the lime even and how to read the meter. He showed them how to set a seedling so that the root did not bend back on itself. Then he held up a small fern with fine black stems and told them what it was.

"This is 蜈蚣草 (*wu gong cao* - the brake fern, for the arsenic). It takes the metal into the leaf, and at the end of the season we cut the leaf and burn it, and then the metal is in a bag instead of in the ground."

"And this cell, the one with the lime and nothing in it?"

"That one just sits there," Lin Bo said. "It sits and gets less dangerous, slowly, and one day a child can put a hand in it."

The man looked at the bare cell the way a man looks at a thing he has been asked to believe without seeing it. Then he went back to the line, and the water went on, and the morning went on with it.

By noon the whole crew had the rhythm of the work, which is the rhythm of field work anywhere. Bend, set, water, straighten. Walk one step. Begin again.

He learned the crew in the first week, the way a man learns a tool by holding it.

There was the woman, whose name was A-Chun, who ran the line and the food and, without ever saying so, the pace. There was an older man, thin and quick, who had worked the yards since he was twelve and could read a heap of boards with his eyes shut. There were two brothers who did not speak to each other on the days they had argued with their mother. There was the young man with the phone, and a boy of nineteen who had arrived on the second morning and would not say where he had come from.

They were not a crew that Lin Bo had assembled. They were a crew that had assembled itself out of the town's need for a hundred and eighty a day, and it would come apart again the moment the

money stopped, and he knew that too. He paid them in cash at the gate at six, folded, in front of each man. Wei had told him once that a man wants to see his own money counted and does not want to see anyone else's.

※

Lin Bo worked beside them. He had not planned to, but a lead with a shovel has less authority and better information, and the shovel told him things the clipboard could not. It told him the ground under the second and third cells had gone soft where the old liner ran beneath it. It told him the lime was drinking faster than the model said it would. That meant the pH would settle lower than he had promised. It meant that in a month he would have to promise it again, lower, and in a language the committee would accept.

At half past ten the woman brought out the tins and they ate standing up. The young man who worked the delivery shift at night was there, and he ate with one hand and held his phone in the other, checking the orders he would take at six. His eyes were red at the rims and he blinked a great deal.

Lin Bo asked him how many hours he slept.

"Four hours," the young man said. "Sometimes five, if the rain is good to me."

"You will get sick doing that."

"Everyone down here is sick," the young man said, without any feeling about it, and went back to his rice.

※

The crew talked while they worked. Because Lin Bo was one of them now, in the way that a man with a shovel is one of them, they talked in front of him.

They talked about the park, and the price of boards, and the way the yard took a man's goods and paid him in ten days against a slip and a tax. They talked about a cousin who had got a card and a bay

and was now too good to drink with them on a Friday. They talked about the water.

The trike man did the boardwalk run before dawn, moving other people's goods for other people's owners, and he told them what the river had been like at four in the morning and who had been out on it. He told them which yard had new men and which had new machines, and which road the police had stopped checking. Information was the only thing on the plot that nobody was paying for, so it moved freely. Lin Bo listened to it the way he listened to the pH meter, which was without believing a single number and without discounting any of them.

Then one of them said that the corner of this very plot had been worked before. You could see the old scorch in the earth where the string met the fence, and you could smell it when the wind came off that way.

Lin Bo said nothing. He bent, and set a seedling, and did not straighten for a moment.

"The corner smells of cooked board," the woman said, the way a person reads out a price. "You noticed it, or you did not."

"I noticed it the first week."

"Then you know what it is," she said, "and you can stop asking me."

That was the whole of the conversation. Nobody in the crew ever raised it again.

※

The grid man came on the Thursday, on his weekly circuit.

He walked the fence the way he always walked it, with his phone out and his thumb moving, taking the picture of each corner and letting the machine put the time on it. He stopped at the gate and nodded at Lin Bo and did not come in.

"Morning," he said. "You have been moving dirt."

"I have been spreading lime. That is the work."

"There is a heap on the corner that was not there on my last cir‑cuit." He said it without accusation, the way a man reads out a meter.

"That would be mine. I overdid it on the corner."

"You overdid it on the corner." He looked at the heap for a mo‑ment longer than he needed to. Then he took his photograph of it, and the time went onto the photograph, and he wrote something short in the box, and Lin Bo watched him write it and could not see the words.

"Put the lime on the cells," the grid man said. "The corner is fine either way."

He went on up the road, and Lin Bo stood at the gate and under‑stood that he had just lied to the system for the third time, and that the third lie had been the easiest, and that this was the thing to be afraid of and not the other thing.

※

His phone buzzed at noon. It was Zhao, and it was the same mes‑sage Zhao always sent, which was three lines long. The province had asked for the November sampling date. The committee had asked for a preview of the number before the date. Lin Bo should remember that a preview was a courtesy and not a promise. Under the three lines there was a small yellow face with its hands together.

Lin Bo put the phone away and went back to the lime.

※

He left the field at five and went home to his father. It was his turn, and his mother had gone to a cousin's for the evening, and she had left a list on the fridge in her upright hand. Boil the *muê*. Give the blue pill at six, the white at seven, and the half at eight. The half was the unlabelled one. She wrote it as a half because the pill was scored, and the score was how she had learned the dose from a woman she would not name. Lin Bo had stopped asking and had started count‑ing.

He laid the pills out on the saucer the way his mother laid them out, in a row, in the order of the hours. The blue one was for the heart and the white one was for the water. The half one, the unlabelled one, was for the pain, or for the sleep, or for neither, and the town had a name for it that was not a name. He had looked it up once, from the score and the colour, and had found three possibilities. He told himself it did not matter which one it was, because his father was going to take it either way. The counting was the part he could do. The counting was the whole of what he could do.

His father was worse, and it was not a crisis.

That was the thing about it. It was not a crisis and it never would be a crisis, and it was the whole of the future, which is a thing that does not announce itself. He had gone down at the toilet that after‑noon and caught himself on the frame. He had not told the mother. He told Lin Bo, because Lin Bo was the one who would not make a face about it.

His hands were worse than they had been the month before. He could hold a cup if the cup was heavy. He could not hold a cup if the cup was light, because a light cup asks the hand to decide, and the hand had stopped deciding.

Lin Bo helped him into the chair and put the cup into his hands and watched the water move in it. Then he got the jar the woman had given him and put a piece of the dark citrus into hot water. It was what the town did for a stomach, and for a chest, and for the general condition of being a man in a chair in a house in Guiyu.

His father drank it. It was very sour, and it pulled out of him the face that the sourness asked for, and it was the first face he had made all day that belonged to him.

“It came from the woman on the crew,” Lin Bo said.

“She has a good hand. Tell her the father said thank you.” He set the cup on the arm of the chair. “Your uncle came by this afternoon.”

“Here? He came to this house?”

"To the gate. He gave me a melon and did not come in." A long breath. "He asked me whether the ground was getting better."

"And what did he want?"

"He wanted me to say that it was." His father opened one eye. "So I said the ground was the same, and my son was the same, and the world was the same, and then he laughed and went away. Your uncle laughs when he is being told the truth. It is his way of not hearing it."

Lin Bo said nothing.

"You should go and look at your field in the dark sometime," his father said. "A field is a different thing in the dark. You will see what is on it, or you will see that you cannot sleep, and either way you will know."

※

His mother came back at nine with the cousin's cakes in a tin and the evening's news, which was that the cousin's boy had passed the exam, and that the aunt's roof had a leak, and that the Li family had been asking again.

"Her mother wants a day," she said, in the kitchen, over the sound of the water. "She has been patient. She has been very patient, and patience has an end in it."

"It has been two weeks."

"Two weeks is a life, at her age." She turned the tap off and dried her hands and looked at him. "The girl is all right, is she not? You have not said a word about the girl."

"She is all right."

"All right." His mother said it back to him slowly, testing it, as though it were a fruit she had not seen before. "Then answer this," she said, and she took the bowl out of his hands and dried it and put it in the rack, "and stop making me hold the whole day up on my own."

He went out to the step with his phone and stood in the cold air and looked at the message he had been not-reading since the festival,

which was a short message from Li Hui, sent on the evening of the Double Ninth, that said she had enjoyed the table and that he should not let his mother run the whole family all at once. He had not answered it. He had opened it eleven times. Standing on the step, he wrote four words and deleted them, and wrote three and deleted them, and then put the phone away and went back inside, and his mother looked up, and he said nothing, and she went back to the bowls with her mouth set.

※

The tremor had come back in the fine work, and the fine work had begun.

The lime was the easy part. A man with a shovel can shake, and the lime goes down just the same. But the sampling cups were small, and the pipette asked the hand to be a machine for eight seconds at a time. The girl in the lab had sent a new set of instructions that doubled the samples, because the province had changed the method over the summer, and the old method would not stand up in the year-end review.

He did the first rack alone in the shed after dark, with a lamp clipped to a shelf.

The pipette went into the cup and drew up the clear liquid. He moved it to the tube and pressed the button. The liquid ran down the wall of the tube instead of falling into the middle, which was a small mistake. It would not have mattered in a classroom. It would matter in a court.

He did that tube again and did it cleanly. The second took him four tries and the third took him one. His left hand was fine, and his left hand was a liar, and the difference between those two facts was going to live in his body for the rest of his life.

He put the pipette down and held his hand out in the lamplight. He looked at it the way a man looks at a dog that has bitten a stranger. It was his hand. It had always been his hand. It had shaken

at sixteen and worse at twenty, and less in the year he had stopped drinking coffee, and worse again this month. No doctor had ever given him a name for it that he had believed.

He thought then of the number in the hospital system, the 14.2 with his own name above it, and of the doctor's flat sentence, which was that there was nothing to be done with an old number. He had spent a whole education learning that a number is a thing you can act on. The number on his own file was a thing a man could only carry.

He had a classmate once, in the first year of the doctorate, who had laughed and said that a tremor was a good problem to have, be - cause it meant the hand wanted to be somewhere and the mind could hold it back. The classmate had gone to a company in Shenzhen and posted photographs of a laboratory the colour of new paper. Lin Bo had not answered any of those photographs in two years. He under - stood now that the classmate had been describing a young tremor, a tremor with something to push against, and that his own had stopped being that.

Then he did the fourth rack. It took him five tries, and he did not tell anyone, and he went home.

※

He came back to the plot that night, and while he came he told himself a story.

The story was that the drip lines on the third and fourth cells had a habit of slipping. A slipping line would starve the trays, and he was going out to check the lines because he was a careful man, and because the wind had come up.

He had the meter in his bag and no reason to have it there. He put the bag in the basket of the old bicycle and rode the boardwalk with the lamp off, and the wind came off the water and pushed at his shoulder the whole way.

The plot in the dark was a different thing, exactly as his father had said. The cells did not show. The ground was one black sheet with the

river's noise laid over it. The trees along the boardwalk were only where the town's lights stopped, and across the water the park was a low line of lamps with the chimney pale above it and nothing at all coming out of the chimney.

It was very quiet, and the quiet was a lie, and he knew that it was a lie, and he went into the plot anyway.

He checked the drip lines on the third cell and they were fine. He checked the fourth and they were fine. Then he walked the pressed line that ran from the fence gap to the shed, and he could feel through his shoes that the grass had been flattened again, and that the new flatness lay under the old.

The shed had a new padlock. It was not his. His own was a cheap brass thing, and this one was steel and black and new, and the hasp had been screwed into the wood in fresh holes beside the old ones. If he had brought his key it would have had nothing to hold.

The ground at the corner had been turned.

He could not see the colour of it, but he could smell it, and the smell was the cooked-board smell, stronger than it had been. Under the cooked-board smell there was the wet-lime smell of his own work, and the two smells met in the corner and did not mix.

Somebody had heaped lime over the corner, more than he had put there, white and new and careless. The heap was smooth from the dark, and a bamboo pole stood up out of the middle of it with a plastic bag tied to the top, and the bag turned in the wind.

Lin Bo stood in front of the heap and understood exactly what he was looking at, which was a man hiding one thing by making the ground look like another. It was almost his own method. Raise the pH. Cover the plot. Tie a bag to a pole so that a person on the boardwalk sees a marker and does not see a corner.

He unzipped his bag and took out the meter for a reason he could not have defended. He read the pH in the dark by the light of his phone, and the meter said eight point one, which was higher than the lime could have taken it in a month.

Somebody had put something stronger into this corner and buried it under a heap of lime. The pH of the whole plot would read wrong on the November sheet. That was the point of it, or part of the point of it, and Lin Bo would have to decide, before the sample, what number he was going to tell.

He put the meter away.

Then he did the thing he would think about later, which was the thing he did not do. He did not cut the plastic bag off the pole. He did not photograph the new padlock and send the picture to Zhao, or to the grid man, or to the whole apparatus that existed for exactly this. He thought of all of them for a moment, standing in the dark with his hand not steady, and then he stopped thinking of them, and put his hand in his pocket.

He rode home along the boardwalk with the lamp off. It was past two, and the wind had dropped. Out on the far bank the park's lamps came down to the water in a line and stopped, and beyond them the corner of his own plot was a small black square that he could not see and did not need to.

The road home went past the yards, and at that hour the yards were lit and working, and the men in them wore masks or did not, and the smoke from the burning piles went straight up in the new cold because the wind had died. He passed a shop with a shutter half down and a man asleep on a stool inside it. He passed a woman walking a dog, and a boy on a scooter carrying hot soup to somebody at three in the morning. It was a real job and it paid real money, and it happened every night in that town. None of it looked like a crime. That was the thing he could not make his father understand and could not make himself stop understanding.

He told himself again, in the voice a man uses on himself when he has already decided, that he had gone out to check the lines.

CHAPTER 7

The Boards

The boy fell asleep standing up, with his forehead against the rail of the tray cart, and A-Chun woke him with a word and said nothing else about it.

That was in the last days of October. The crew had gone quiet in the way that teams go quiet, which is not the quiet of a good rhythm but the quiet of a thing being carried between people who have agreed not to name it. They worked. Their eyes went to the gate whenever a motor came up the embankment road.

Lin Bo noticed the boy's hands first. They were stained at the knuckles with a dark that soap did not reach. When Lin Bo stood close to him there was a sharp cold smell under the sweat, which was acid and burnt flux. The boy's shoes were caked with the grey clay of the plot. It was the plot's particular clay, pale when it dried and greasy when it was wet, and there was no other ground like it for a mile.

"Where were you last night?" Lin Bo said. He said it quietly, so that it would not sound like a charge.

"At my cousin's," the boy said, and looked at the trays.

His cousin lived in Chaoyang, and the bus took an hour, and the boy had been standing at the gate at seven the same as every other morning.

Lin Bo did not push it. He went back to the line and pinned a drip line and thought about the other thing, which was that his crew had money he had not paid them. Two of the men were smoking cigar ‑ ettes that cost more than their day. The older veteran had a new phone. One of the brothers had paid the other brother what he owed, in front of everyone, folded, and a man does not settle a debt in front of everyone unless the money has become easy.

At noon he took A-Chun aside, by the water tank, where the others could not hear.

“Tell me what is happening here at night,” he said.

“You do not want me to tell you,” she said. “You want me to say it out loud so that you can go on not knowing it.”

That was exact, and he felt it land, and he did not have an answer for it.

“I will tell you the small part,” she said, “and then we will go back to work. Some of the boys are paid to stand on this ground in the dark and carry things. Some of them need the money. One of them needs it for his mother’s medicine, and I will not say which one. You are the only man on this plot who does not know where his own money goes. That is a thing you have chosen.”

“I pay them a fair day.”

“You pay them a day,” she said. “The night pays better.”

Then she went back to the line, and Lin Bo stood by the tank with the hose in his hand and watched the water run.

※

He did not go home at six. He told the crew he would lock up himself. He stood at the gate and watched them ride away, and then he went into the shed and sat on an upturned crate with the door pulled to but not shut, and waited.

He did not tell himself a story this time. He had told himself enough stories on this ground.

The dark came the way it came at that time of year, quickly and without colour. The river went on making its noise. The town’s lights came up across the water and the park’s lamps came up in their line, and the chimney stood pale above the yard with nothing coming out of it yet. A little before nine a motor turned off the embankment road and came down the track, and it was not a motorbike and not a cargo trike. It was a flatbed with its lights off.

The truck stopped at the fence gap. Two men got down from the cab and one came off the bed, and the one off the bed was the boy.

They did not talk much. One of them took the padlock off the shed, and it came off with a key. Watching through the gap of the door, Lin Bo understood that the lock screwed onto his shed was Wei's lock and that it had a key and that the key was in other hands. The door swung, and the men began to carry out the bales.

The bales were grey and flat and stacked like leaves in a book. They were heavy, because the small man took them two at a time and the boy took them one at a time and leaned back against the weight. They went up onto the bed and lay down in rows. The boards smelled of the cooked-board smell, and under it the wet-lime smell of Lin Bo's own work, and the smell sat in the shed with him and did not leave.

The cab door opened once more and a third man got down, and it was Wei. He stood at the tail of the bed with his phone up and his thumb moving, which was his ledger, and he counted the bales as they came and did not speak.

He did not hurry. That was the thing Lin Bo would remember. Wei stood in the dark on his nephew's land with a truck behind him and moved his thumb on the glass as calmly as a man adding up a bill at a table. Once he raised his head and looked out across the plot, and Lin Bo did not move behind the door, and Wei's eyes went past the shed and off toward the river and came back. He said something quiet to the men, and they worked faster.

The first truck left at half past ten. The second came at a quarter past eleven and took a smaller load. By then the men were tired, and one of them dropped a bale and it opened. The boy went down on his knees in the dark and gathered the boards back up with his hands, and nobody said anything to him.

When the shed was empty the boy carried out four blue drums, one at a time, and set them at the back of the bed. Lin Bo took his phone out and shielded the screen with his hand. He turned it on for

the time it takes to breathe in, and in that light he read one character painted on the drums in white, which was 酸.

He put the phone away.

He told himself that the drums were for the trays, for the washing of the trays, which is a normal thing on a soil plot. He told himself this in a voice that did not believe itself, and he stayed behind the door until the second truck's tail-lights had gone up the embankment road and the plot was dark and his own again.

Then he walked to the corner. The heap of lime was there, and the bamboo pole, and the bag turning on it. The pressed line had been pressed again under the old pressing. He stood on it and looked at where the flatbed had stood and at the marks the tyres had left. He counted the bales and did the arithmetic, and then stopped, because how many there were did not matter. What mattered was that they had gone out through his fence while he stood behind a door and watched them go.

He stood at the gate with his hand on the cold hasp. The dark had a texture to it now that he had spent three hours inside it, and he could hear the plot the way a man hears a room he has been awake in all night. Every drip, every rail, and the small dry ticking of the trays as they settled. He understood that he had watched a crime on his own land and had taken no photograph and made no call, and that if a car had come up the road he would have hidden. That was the fact of the night. The rest was smell and counting.

He locked the shed with his own cheap brass lock, and left Wei's steel one looped through the hasp beside it, so that in the morning anyone who looked would see two locks and think nothing of it.

On the way home the late stalls were still open at the top of the road, the ones that serve the night shift, and the smell came out at him. It was the smell of 打冷 (*da leng* - the late cold-dish spread of the Chaoshan night). There were cold crab and cold fish and brined vegetables laid out on trays in the lamplight, with the rice porridge steaming behind them. He had not eaten since noon. He did not stop.

※

He went to the shop on the Wednesday, because his mother asked him to.

It was a small shop between the bus stop and the lane, half of it mobile-phone cases and half of it medicine, which is how a great many of that town's shops are arranged. Behind the counter there was a woman of about sixty with her glasses on a cord, and she knew the family.

He put the paper on the counter. It carried the name of the tablets, the score and the number, in his mother's upright hand, and it car ‑ ried nothing else, because there is nothing else to write about a tablet with no name on it.

The woman looked at the paper and then at him.

"That one is paid," she said.

"Paid."

"For the month. It is paid. Your uncle pays it, the last Friday of the month, two years now. Sometimes three boxes and sometimes two. Take one box today and come back when it is gone."

Lin Bo stood at the counter with his hand still flat on the paper.

"Which uncle," he said, though he knew.

"The younger one of the house at the corner. The one with the hands." She looked at him over the glasses. "Do you want the box or not?"

He took the box. He put money on the counter and she pushed it back, and he put it on the counter again, and she looked at him and left it there. He took the box and walked home.

His mother was in the kitchen. He put the box down on the table between them and did not sit.

"How long," he said.

She went on turning the bowl in her hands, and then she put it down.

"Since the year your father stopped."

"And the money for it."

"Your uncle." She wiped her hands on the cloth and folded the cloth and put it down. "He pays the medicine. He paid the roof in the spring. Last week he gave your father a melon with two hundred folded inside it, and your father knew, and I knew. And you were in Beijing being a doctor of dirt."

"Mother."

"Do not say it in that voice. Try to make me refuse it. Go on. Stand there and tell me what I should have done with a man in a chair and the pills not on the card."

The father spoke from the other room, because he had heard all of it, in the way he heard everything now, which was by not moving.

"The medicine is real," he said. "Whatever else is not."

Lin Bo stood in the kitchen and did the arithmetic he did not want to do. The bales on the flatbed, the boxes on the counter, the roof in the spring. It was one sum. He had been eating meals in this house that were bought with what went out through his own fence. He had known it for a week. He had said nothing, and the saying of nothing had become a thing he did every day, the way he pinned a drip line.

He did not take the box back to the shop. He put it in the drawer with the others, where his mother kept the counted days.

He went out to the step after that and sat with his back against the door frame. His father's lamp was on in the other room and his mother was washing up, and neither of them came out to him, which was the household's way of letting a thing stand. He thought about the two years and the boxes and the melon with the money in it. Then he thought about the other thing, which was that he had taken the melon's worth in food and quiet and a roof over his father, and that a man who keeps taking loses the difference between what is owed and what is being paid for.

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The yard would sell trays and lime and stonecrop plugs to the project at the cooperative rate, which was half the town price. But it sold them only against a buying slip, and the clerk who signed the slips was in the yard office only until eleven.

The office was a container at the edge of the compound with a desk and a kettle and a window that looked out at the queue. The clerk was a heavy man of about fifty with a shirt the colour of weak tea. He worked a gongfu cha set the way other men work a pen, which is to say he did it while he did everything else. He filled the little pot and poured across the cups and set one in front of Lin Bo without looking up.

"You are the soil one," he said. "From the far bank. Sit."

Lin Bo gave him the slip. The clerk read it and signed it and stamped it and slid it back, and all of it took a minute and a half.

"While I am here," Lin Bo said, "I want to understand the card."

The clerk looked up at that, and for the first time he looked at Lin Bo properly.

"Whose card."

"Nobody's. A man I know wants one. I want to know what a card costs."

"A man wants a card." The clerk poured the second round and thought about it. "There is an application, twelve hundred, one time. There is the renewal, eight hundred, every year. There is the bay rent, which is by the square metre by the month, and the small bays are cheaper and gone. There is a deposit, five thousand, so that they can take the fine out of it without going to court. There is a guarantor, which means a man with a card already, and he has to sign, and if you run he pays. And there is the vote."

"The vote."

"Two men with cards can block an application. Two men with cards and a clean record can push one through. That is the whole government of this compound. We did not design it. It grew." He set the cup down. "So who cannot get a card. A man with a fine on his

record, for six months. A man whose guarantor will not sign, which is most of the poor ones, because the poor have no friends with cards. A man from outside with no local name, because nobody will stand for a name they do not know. And a man who cannot raise the deposit, which is more men than you would think."

Lin Bo looked out of the window at the queue. A line of cargo trikes and hand carts and one flatbed, and the men standing by them with their arms folded. He had walked past that line a hundred times without seeing that it was a line. That is how a man looks at a thing in his own town. Now every man in it was waiting for the same paper. Half of them would not get it. The other thing on offer was the gate.

"The difference," he said.

"With a card, the yard buys your boards at the yard price, which today is eleven a kilo for the good and four for the mixed. Without a card you cannot sell to the yard at all. You sell at the gate to a man with a card, and he gives you three, and he takes it in and gets eleven. Everybody is fed and nobody is cheated, and do not look at me like that." The clerk poured again. "The gate is the rent a man pays for having no name."

"And the one who used to come, the old man with the trike, who was turned back on the demonstration day."

"Fined," the clerk said. "Three thousand, for selling at the gate. He had three hundred in his pocket. So now he owes the deposit he cannot raise plus the fine he cannot pay, and he stands out there every morning and watches other men's trucks come out." He drank. "You asked what a card costs. That is what it costs."

Lin Bo sat with the cup in his hand.

"There is the other road," he said. "A company."

"There is." The clerk's eyes came up again, slower this time. "A registered company with a name from these parts can hold a com‑pany card. More bays, less rent, one guarantor instead of two, and the vote does not apply to a company the same way. It is the road the town has, for men who have a name and no hands." He looked at Lin

Bo for a moment longer than the conversation needed. “Do you have a company.”

“No,” Lin Bo said.

“That is a lie,” said the clerk, without any heat in it, and reached for the kettle. “But it is a small lie and I am not paid to mind it. Drink your tea.”

Lin Bo drank his tea. Then he took his slip and went out through the queue, past the man with the trike, and did not look at him, and went to find the boy.

※

He took the boy to the cold stall at the top of the road. The boy was thin, and Lin Bo wanted to eat with him, and he did not know how to ask a question across a work line.

They sat on the low stools at the front with the dishes on the table between them, the cold crab and the brined greens and the fish. The porridge came hot in two bowls, and the boy ate the way a young man eats, which is all at once. Lin Bo let him finish one bowl and start another before he said anything.

“Your mother’s medicine,” he said. “Is it the kidneys?”

The boy stopped with the spoon halfway up.

“A-Chun told you.”

“A-Chun told me nothing. She told me one of the boys needs it and would not say which. I am asking you.”

The boy put the spoon down and looked at the table.

“Kidneys,” he said. “The wash, twice a week. The card covers some and not all, and the not-all is eight hundred a month, and my father is gone, and there is my little sister in school.” He said it flatly, the way the young man in the field had said that everyone was sick, and he picked the spoon back up. “The night work is one twenty a truck. Some nights two trucks.”

“You know what it is,” Lin Bo said. “What the boards are, and where they go.”

"I know it is boards," the boy said. "The men say they come off the yards and go out to a man in Puning who puts them in a machine and gets the metal out. I do not ask past that. You do not pay me to know what the boards are. You pay me to dig the trays."

That landed, and Lin Bo sat with it. It was the same sentence A-Chun had given him from the other side, and the boy had given it without knowing he was giving it, and it was true.

"Does it come from my plot," Lin Bo said, "or does it only pass through?"

The boy looked up at him then, and for a moment he was not a boy, and the look was careful and old.

"You should ask your uncle," he said. "He counts."

Then he went back to the porridge and ate. Lin Bo paid for the both of them, and they walked out to the road. The boy said 多谢 (*do sia* - thank you, in the Teochew mouth). In that town a boy says that to a man he does not work for. Then he rode off on his mother's old scooter into the dark between the street lamps.

※

He went back to the plot alone that Friday, close to midnight, with the auger.

He did not pretend, this time, that he had come for anything else. He walked the pressed line to the corner and set the auger where the flatbed's rear tyres had stood. A truck that has carried what that truck carried leaves a little of it in the ground where it waited. He turned the handle with both hands, and the clay came up in the auger's cup the way it always came, grey and heavy and cold. He bagged it. He set a second bag from under the lime heap, where the metered pH had said eight point one.

Then he did the thing he had not planned to do, which was to write on the bags.

He wrote the date and the depth and the place: corner, rear marks, 0 to 20. He did not write the chain-of-custody number. It belonged to

the project, and the project belonged to the sheet, and the sheet belonged to the November sample. The November sample belonged to the committee, and the committee belonged to a room he could already see. He put the two bags in his bag and zipped it.

On the way out he stopped at the fence gap and looked at the corner and at the two locks on the shed. He understood that he was now holding something in his hand that was either evidence or a problem.

He would have to know which. And knowing, he would have to do something with the knowing, and he had not yet decided whether he was a man who did that or a man who went on eating his mother's meals.

He thought about the two bags all the way down the lane. A number on a sheet could be argued with. A handful of clay in a plastic bag with a date on it was different. It was the thing itself, taken out of the ground and kept, and it did not care what anyone said about it. Once he had it, he could never again be a man who did not have it.

He rode home under the lamps with the bag on his back, and the sample knocked against his spine the whole way, softly, like something asking to be put down.

CHAPTER 8

The Tea

The park gate had a queue at ten in the morning. It had a queue the way a river has a current, which is to say that nobody had designed it and it would not stop.

Three cargo trikes stood at the barrier with their engines off. Behind them were two hand carts and a flatbed, and along the fence a row of men who had brought nothing to sell and had come to watch the ones who had. At the edge of the row stood the old man with the trike, the one who had been turned back on the demonstration day. He was not in the queue and he was not leaving. He stood with his arms folded and watched the trucks come out of the compound loaded, one after another, and did the arithmetic with his eyes.

Lin Bo walked past him and the old man did not turn his head. Then he said, to the fence and not to Lin Bo, "You are the soil one."

"I am."

"You were on the stage with the flowers."

"I was."

"Then here is my question, and I will only ask it once." The old man watched the gate. "Whose boards go out on that flatbed at night."

Lin Bo stood with him for a moment. The trikes at the barrier revved, and the barrier lifted, and the first of them rolled in and was gone into the yard.

"I do not know," Lin Bo said.

"No," the old man said. "You do not." And he went back to doing the arithmetic, and Lin Bo went on to the booth and gave his name, and it was on the list.

He walked in past the weighbridge and up the outside stair to the second floor. The yard opened under him the way it always did, the

white woven sacks and the white light off the metal, and the men moving between the piles with their shirts tied around their heads. The extractor on the roof was running, and under it the whole com‑pound made one long sound, like a sea held behind glass.

※

Zhao's office had two windows, one on the yard and one on the river. Zhao sat between them at a tea table with his back to the corner, which is where a man sits when he wants to see the door and the yard at once.

"Sit," he said. "The water is at the right temperature. That is a lie I tell for thirty seconds."

Lin Bo sat. On the tray between them there was a small clay an‑imal, a toad or a lion, no bigger than a fist, and the pot beside it was dark with years. Zhao filled the pot and poured the first water off, and then, without ceremony, tipped a little tea over the head of the clay animal.

茶宠 (*cha chong* - the tea pet). The word came to Lin Bo before he could stop it, because his mother kept a shelf of such things and a rule about which ones could be poured on. The clay drank the tea and went darker.

A girl came in while the pot was steeping. She was from the park's office and she carried a phone on a bracket, and she moved the plate of pastries four centimetres toward the window and stepped back and took a photograph of the tea table, and then another, and then she was gone. Zhao did not look up. That was the park's account, Lin Bo understood, and the tea was the park's account too, and a meeting in that room was a meeting and a picture of a meeting, and there was no way any more to tell the two apart.

"You look like a man who has slept in his clothes," Zhao said.

"I have been getting up at two."

"For the drip lines."

"For the drip lines."

Zhao set a cup in front of him. The tea was *dancong*, the same tea as every other meeting in that office, and Lin Bo understood by now that the tea was the clock. A meeting with Zhao lasted as long as the water stayed hot and no longer. When the kettle went quiet, the talking was finished, whatever the talking had been.

"Eat something," Zhao said, and pushed the plate across. On it were the small round pastries his grandmother's town had always kept for guests. 腐乳饼 (*furu bing* - the fermented bean-curd pastry). Lin Bo took one, because it would have been rude not to and because he had not eaten.

In his pocket his phone buzzed once and then again. His mother, most likely, about the Li family, about a day. He did not take it out. It buzzed a third time and stopped.

"Now," Zhao said. "The fifth."

"The fifth."

"The preview number goes up the line on the fifth of November. The sample is taken on the tenth. The inspection team arrives on the twentieth."

"The inspection," Lin Bo said.

"The 督查 (*ducha* - the inspection)." Zhao said the word the way a man says the name of a relative who is coming to stay. "They will not look at your plot. They will look at the paper your plot produces. That is worse. A plot they cannot read. A paper they can."

He poured the second round. The clay animal sat between them, dark and wet.

"You are wondering why I called you up here to drink tea instead of sending a message," Zhao said. "I called you because two things arrived in the same week, and a message cannot hold two things at once."

"You are going to tell me the two things."

"I am going to tell you the two sentences I am paid to obey," Zhao said. "The first is this one. Do not close a livelihood with one stroke. The second is this one. Do not be found with your eyes closed." He

drank. “Both of them are in the same document, on the same page, in the same paragraph, and they were written by two men who never met. Since the spring I have been obeying them one at a time. It is a trick that works until it does not.”

“And this is the week it does not.”

“This is the week the inspection has a date,” Zhao said.

Lin Bo had seen the trick once, from the outside. In the summer a yard on the west road was found with its acid tanks standing in the open, and the bureau wanted it shut inside a week. Zhao had shut it inside two months. In the first month the men who worked there were given the forms to apply for the park. In the second month the ones who could not get a card were hired outward by a man who had one, and paid half. The yard closed on the last day of the second month, and by then the men and the tanks and the acid and the profit had moved into three yards further up the road, and the report said the west road was clean. Lin Bo had read that report in the project file. He had not understood it until now.

Out on the yard a sack burst at the corner of a pile and a boy went down on his knees to gather the boards, and one of the older men stood over him and did not help, and the sound of it came up through the glass as one thin note in the compound’s long sea-noise.

“Tell me about the park,” Lin Bo said. “Not the paper. The park.”

Zhao looked at him for a moment, as if a question were a thing a man could weigh in his hand.

“The park is the only place in this town where a board can be washed and still be worth what it is worth,” he said. “Outside that fence, a man takes acid to a board in his own yard and burns the plastic off it in the open. The ground takes what it takes. He sells the metal to a middleman for a third of what it is worth. Inside the fence, the same board goes into the machine, and the metal comes out clean, and it is weighed, and it is paid, and it goes back into the world as a thing. That is the whole idea of this place. That is what I am here to protect.”

"And the card."

"The card is how the idea is rationed," Zhao said. "There are not enough bays and not enough buyers and not enough patience for every man in this town to work inside the fence. So the card decides who works inside and who works at the gate. Every yard you can see through that window has a card-holder at the front of it, and behind the card-holder there is usually another man, who is not on any paper, and who takes the real money."

He turned in his chair and pointed two fingers at the window without getting up.

"The second bay from the gate. That bay belongs to a man who has not stood in this yard for two years. He holds nine of them and lives in Shantou and comes down on the day the rent is due and on no other day. He has never touched a board in his life. The men who rent from him do the touching, and they pay him, and he pays the annual fee, and the vote is his. That is what a card is worth when a man has enough of them."

He set the pot down. "We have a word for that man. 白手套 (*bai shoutao* - the white gloves, the man who holds what another man cannot). White gloves. The glove is not the hand."

Lin Bo said nothing. He had heard the word before, in Beijing, used about a company that had published his work.

"You are thinking of your uncle," Zhao said.

"I am thinking that my uncle has hands and no card," Lin Bo said, "and that the man with the card is who he is looking for."

"Then you understand the park better than most of the people on that paper," Zhao said. "Which is why I am going to ask you a ques‑tion, and then neither of us is going to say the answer out loud."

He filled the pot again. The kettle had begun to change its sound, going from the deep voice to the thin one, and Lin Bo heard it, and knew that the clock was moving.

"How is the corner," Zhao said.

※

Lin Bo looked at the tea.

The corner. Not the plot, not the cells, not the number. The corner, from a man who had never walked it, in an office two miles away, over a plate of pastries. Zhao knew. Of course Zhao knew. Zhao had known since the day the boards were reported twice. He had known since the day a grid man photographed a young man standing at a gate with a truck behind him. He had known since the day the town website ran a paragraph about the project that did not contain the word blood.

“The corner is limed,” Lin Bo said. “The pH there is high. There is a heap on it that I did not make, and a pole with a bag on it, and a lock on my shed that is not mine.”

“That is a great deal of answer for a question that was not asked,” Zhao said.

“You asked it.”

“I asked how it is. I did not ask what is on it.” Zhao poured the last of the second steeping into the cups. “This is the difference between you and me. You are a man who answers. I am a man who has learned to ask in a shape that can be left alone.”

“Then leave it alone.”

“I cannot.” Zhao set the kettle down, and it was quiet then, or nearly, and Lin Bo understood that the meeting was in its last third, and that whatever Zhao meant to give him would be given now. “The inspection team will read the November sheet. On that sheet there are ten cells and ten numbers. If the ten numbers are all the same, the team will ask why. They will ask why this plot, which this town has spent its money on, has nothing in it that a man should worry about. And they will ask it in the tone that means they have already decided the paper is a lie. And then they will come out to the plot.”

Lin Bo waited.

"I have read the sheet from the first round," Zhao said. "The one from before the work started. It is in the file. Ten cells. Nine of them are the same as each other and one of them is not. The one that is not has tin in it, in the top layer, above the old lead. Tin is solder, and solder means a man has been working boards on that ground." He drank his tea. "So the corner was on the paper before you ever limed it. You did not put it there. You could not have taken it off."

"I know."

"Then you know that the thing you have been carrying around in your mouth for a month is not a secret," Zhao said. "It is a fact with a date on it. And a fact with a date on it is not a secret. It is a bill."

Lin Bo put the cup down. His hand was not steady, and the cup came down a little hard on the tray, and Zhao's eyes went to it and came away again, and neither of them said anything about it.

He had been shaking since the field, or he had been shaking before the field and the field had only made it visible. He thought about the photograph in the grid man's phone, the one of a young man at the gate with a truck behind him, logged with a time and a corner. He thought about the two bags in his own bag, which were now three days old and which he had not sent anywhere. He thought about the boy and the porridge and the line about being paid to dig. A man could carry all of it at once, and that was the problem. The carrying did not tire him. The carrying had stopped feeling heavy, and that was the thing that should have frightened him, and he could no longer tell whether it did.

"What do you want from me," Lin Bo said.

"I want what I have always wanted," Zhao said. "A number with a source. But I want it on the fifth, and I want it true, and I want to know whether the man who gives it to me is giving it or selling it."

※

The kettle had gone quiet, and Zhao filled it from the thermos without asking, which meant the meeting had been extended, and that had not happened before.

"You asked me once why I care about the numbers," Zhao said. "I did not answer. I will answer now, and then we will finish. My sister's boy lives in the lane behind the school. He is eleven now. When he was eight his blood lead was eleven. Nobody did anything. There was no project and no paper and no cameraman. Last year it was eight point nine. In three years, with nobody lifting a finger, the number went down, because the water was cleaner, and because his mother stopped letting him play in the yard of a certain house, and because time did it."

"Time does some of it."

"Time did all of it," Zhao said. "And when the province asked me what had reduced that child's lead, I said the park did. That was the largest lie I have told in this office. I told it in a chair exactly where you are sitting, and the man wrote it down, and it made the paper. It is the reason there is money in the budget line with your name on it." He poured. "So when I say I want a number with a source, understand what I am. I am not a man who believes the green will clean the blood. I am a man who has already told the province that it will, and who now has to bring them something that looks like it did."

"That is not a small thing to have done."

"It is the smallest thing I could have done," Zhao said. "There is a version of this town where I refused, and the park did not get built, and the boards went on being washed in the open in every lane, and the number in that boy stayed eleven. So you tell me which of us is the liar, and which is the man who did the sum and paid."

Lin Bo looked at the clay animal between them. The tea had run into it for years, and it was shiny as a stone in a river, and it did not know or care what it had been poured for.

"I do not have a number yet," Lin Bo said.

"You have a number. You have had it since the first round. You have simply not said it in a shape you would sign your name to." Zhao pushed the plate across again, and Lin Bo did not take one. "I am not asking you for the corner. I am not asking you to name your uncle, who I have never met and who is on none of my paper. I am asking you for the truth about the ground, in the language of the ground. That is what I am asking."

※

Then Zhao did the thing that made Lin Bo understand he had been inside a trap for the last half hour, and that the trap was not a trap exactly, and that this was worse.

He reached into the drawer of the tea table and took out a single sheet. It was a form, one of the sampling sheets from the project's own chain-of-custody book. He laid it on the tea table between them, printed side up, with the blank chain-of-custody number at the top.

"They have given me the second round," he said. "It runs on the tenth, on the same grid, and it goes into the same file, and the number at the top of this sheet is the number the inspection team will look at first. Now. Count the cells."

"Ten."

"Count the cells on this sheet."

Lin Bo looked. There were ten printed lines, and at the bottom, after the tenth, there was one more, unnumbered and unprinted, a line drawn by hand with a pen by a man who had drawn it slowly.

"Eleven," Lin Bo said.

"Eleven," Zhao said. "The sheet does not know the difference until a man writes on it and signs at the bottom. If ten cells come back and ten cells are on the paper, then the corner was not sampled and the corner was not there. On the twentieth the team comes out and finds a heap on the corner and a number that should have seen it. If eleven cells come back, then the corner was sampled, and the corner was

there all along. Whoever collected it wrote it down the first time, and there is no lie on the sheet, only a hard number and a slow plant."

"And the error is mine."

"The error is mine," Zhao said. "I added the line. A collector samples the grid he is given. The grid was given by me." He looked at Lin Bo. "That is the favour. I have made a thing that was not on the first sheet into a thing that was always on the second sheet. I have put the number blank at the top. I have done it so that a man who wants to tell the truth can tell it without saying that he has been hiding it. That is the most I can do from this chair. The rest is a pen."

The kettle had gone quiet. The meeting was over.

Lin Bo stood. He did not take the sheet at first. He said, because it was the only true thing available to him, "I do not know yet whether I am the man who writes on it."

Zhao did not look up. He turned the small pot over on the tray and set it down to dry, and the clay animal sat in the middle of everything, grown dark with tea.

"Then take the sheet anyway," he said. "A blank sheet on a man's desk is heavier than a full one. Carry it a few days. You will find out what you are by where you put it."

Lin Bo took the sheet. He folded it once and put it in the inside pocket of his jacket, against his chest. It rode there the whole way down the outside stair and out past the queue and the barrier. The old man with the trike was still at the edge of the row, his arms folded, doing the arithmetic with his eyes, and Lin Bo looked at him this time and the old man looked back, and neither of them said the question again, because the question had already been asked.

At the bus stop, in the flat light of the middle of the day, he took out his phone. There were three messages from his mother, all about the Li family and about a day, and one from Zhao's office number, sent a minute ago, which was the photograph. In it, the tea table, the pastries, the pot, the clay animal, and the two cups, and the second cup was his, and the caption under it said that the director had met

with the project team to review the autumn progress. He looked at the picture a long time. His own hand was in it, at the edge, resting on the tray, and the shutter had caught it the way he did not like to be caught. But it was a small picture and the hand was small in it, and a person would have to be looking to see it, and nobody looks at a photograph of two cups of tea.

He folded the phone away and sat on the bench and waited for the bus.

The bus came and he rode it the three stops to the lane and walked the rest. He passed the shop with the medicine and the phone cases, and the woman was in the doorway with her arms folded, and she nodded at him and he nodded back, and neither of them said anything about the box, because the box was paid for. He passed the school gate where the children were coming out for the afternoon, and he stopped a moment and watched them run into the road and their mothers call them back. He thought about Zhao's sister's boy, who had gone from eleven to eight point nine because of cleaner water and a fence and time. Then he went home and put the sheet in the drawer of his room, under the shirts, where his mother did not go. He did not look at it again and he did not decide anything, and he changed his shoes and went to the field.

So there were two of them now on a record, the sheet and the picture, and neither of them said anything about the thing that was actually true.

CHAPTER 9

Blood Lead

The request came, as requests came in that town, folded inside another request.

Guoliang called on the second of November about the inspection. The town wanted the plot presentable, and the office wanted a public explanation of the project. The 老人会 (*laoren hui* - the elders' asso - ciation) had asked a question in its own way. Three grandmothers had stood in the office doorway until somebody wrote the question down.

"They want you to talk to the old aunties," Guoliang said. "Wed - nesday, in the hall, after the morning tea. Twenty minutes."

"I am not a doctor."

"Nobody is asking you to be a doctor. They are asking you to ex - plain the green thing to the people who paid for it with their chil - dren." He said it without weight, the way he said everything. "The inspection is on the twentieth. A hall full of grandmothers saying the project is a lie is a thing I would rather not have on the twentieth."

So Lin Bo said yes, and then spent the next two days preparing, and the preparation was the hardest work he had done since he came home, and none of it was soil.

He made three cards. On the first he wrote what the project was. On the second he wrote what it could not do. On the third he wrote, and crossed out, and wrote and crossed out, the answer to the only question the grandmothers would actually ask, which was whether their grandchildren would be all right. He never finished the third card. On the Wednesday morning he put all three in his pocket and went to the hall with nothing but the first two worth saying.

He showed the cards to his father on the Tuesday evening, because his father could still read, and reading was most of what he had left that was not a chair.

His father went through the first card slowly and put it down. The second card took him longer. He read it twice and put it on the blanket over his knees.

"Nobody will ask you about the pH," he said. "The pH is not the question. The question is whether you are the man who is cleaning the ground or the man who is standing on it while it gets sold out from under him." He closed his eyes. "They will ask you about me. It is not a trap. It is the only question they have."

"What do I say about you."

"The truth," his father said. "The truth is short and it saves everybody the trouble of the long story."

He drank the water Lin Bo had put beside him, and then he did not reach for it again, which meant he was thinking. Then he said, because he had been holding it since Lin Bo came in, "When you were small I took you out to the fires. I carried you so the smoke would not be at your face. I told you the smell was money. You were four. You asked what money smelled like, and I said it smelled like that, and you put your hand over my mouth because you did not like it, and I laughed at you." He closed his eyes. "Tell them that part too. It is a better card than the two you have."

His mother knew about the meeting before he told her, because in that town a thing was known before it happened, and she had already chosen a shirt for him and laid it on the chair. He put it on. She watched him from the kitchen door and said nothing about the meeting and nothing about the Li family. That was her way of being kind and her way of keeping a debt open. At the door she said only, "Do not talk down to them. They are not stupid. They are tired."

※

The *laoren hui* hall was two rooms and a courtyard on the lane behind the school, with a tin roof and a television on a bracket and a long table that had once been three tables. In the courtyard a speaker on a pole played the music for the evening's dancing, softly, the way a village keeps a fire banked all day. Lin Bo arrived early. The grandmothers arrived earlier. By ten the room was full, and most of it was women.

They had come in their good shirts for a meeting about their own lane, and they had brought their own chairs where the hall's chairs ran out. The oldest of them sat nearest the television, because that was where the plug was, and so where the good light came from. There was a village doctor at the second table with a blood-pressure cuff and a notebook. There was a woman from the women's committee with a baby on her back, and the man who kept the hall's key, who had let them in at eight and had stayed. The town had three meetings in that hall every autumn. The grandmothers came to all of them. Nobody had ever come to explain the ground.

Ah-Sheng was there with his phone on a little tripod on the long table, and beside it a second phone, because one of them was for the stream and one of them was the stream.

"You again," Lin Bo said.

"Me again," Ah-Sheng said. "Ask me what I am filming."

"What are you filming."

"The room," Ah-Sheng said. "The room is the story. The speeches are furniture." He adjusted the tripod a centimetre. "Four hundred people watched the park's speech and I made nothing. This is better. This is your own aunties asking you a question with the door shut. That is a clip."

Guoliang took the front of the room and did the thing he was paid to do, which was to make the scheme sound like a favour and the favour sound like a plan. The park. The project. The fifteenth five-year plan. The green cover. The grandmothers listened with their hands in their laps and their eyes on the door, and when he finished

they applauded in the slow way that means the applause is for his leaving.

Then Lin Bo stood up with his two cards and his hands at his sides.

He told them what the project was. Four thousand square metres on the far bank. Lime, and the pH, and the metal bound where it lay. The stonecrop for the cadmium. The fern for the arsenic. No plant for the lead. He said it in the plain order, without the words from the paper, and he watched them decide to listen to him, which they did the way they did everything, all at once and without telling him.

He told them what the target was. Forty per cent less, and less of what a plant or a child can take up, which is not the same as less metal in the ground. He told them the timeline, which was eighteen months, and he saw what eighteen months did in a room where a year was already a long time to be promised anything.

Then a grandmother put up her hand.

"Doctor Lin," she said, and he did not correct the title, because in that room he was not going to correct the title. "You are the son of Lin of the acid hands."

"I am."

"I knew your grandmother. She is on the hill." She folded her hands. "My question is this. If the dirt on that bank is clean by the New Year, does my grandson get clean with it."

And there it was. The whole of the room leaned in, and the second phone kept looking, and Lin Bo understood that everything else he had prepared had been a way of not standing exactly here.

※

The 奴仔 (*nou-gia* - the children, in the Teochew mouth) had been brought to the meeting by their grandmothers. There were seven or eight of them along the wall, and one of them was asleep on a wo‑man's lap. They were not there to listen. They were there because a

town does not leave its children at home when it goes to talk about its children.

“Show him the paper,” the grandmother said.

A younger woman near the front stood up and came forward with a slip of paper folded twice, which she had been holding the whole meeting and which she had not decided to bring and had brought anyway.

It was a screening. A village clinic, a finger-prick, the number printed in a box. The child was six. The number in the box was six point eight, and under the box a line of small print said the value was within the reference range. Beside the mother the grandmother said, “They told her it is normal. Tell her what normal is.”

Lin Bo took the slip and read it twice, and put it down on the table, and looked at the mother and not at the number.

“Sit down, sister,” he said. “I will tell you the truth and it will take a minute.”

She sat.

“The number on this paper is six point eight,” he said. “That is in the units they use, which are close enough to ours. For a long time the line was ten. A child under ten was told he was fine. Two years ago they moved the line down, because two years ago they decided that there is no number at which a child is fine, only numbers that are less bad. Six point eight is a real number. It is not nothing.”

The room was quiet. The second phone kept looking.

“Now the hard part, and I want you to hear all of it,” Lin Bo said. “Your child’s number will not go down because the dirt on that bank goes down. If we clean the ground there, it stops new lead going into new children. It does not pull lead out of a child who already has it. Your child’s body took the lead in when he was smaller, in the years when the smoke was bad, and the body put most of it away in the bones, where it sits. The bones give a little of it back, slowly, for years. That is why the number comes down on its own, a bit each

year, whatever we do. That is why it came down on your boy, and not because of me."

The mother looked at him. "Then what do I do."

"You do the boring things, and they work," Lin Bo said. "You keep the dust off his hands and his floors. You wash his hands before he eats, with soap and running water, every time. You feed him the things with iron and calcium and vitamin C, because a full body takes up less lead than a hungry one. You keep him out of the yards and off the old burning ground and away from any man washing boards in the open. You do that for ten years and he will be all right, and you will never know which of it did the work, and none of it will feel like enough."

The mother folded the paper back on its two folds and put it in her pocket and thanked him, which is a thing that can mean many things, and went back to her seat.

The key-man asked the next one, and it was not about the chil‑dren.

"The river," he said. "They say the river is done. The exhibition hall says so. Is the river done."

"The water is clearer than it was," Lin Bo said. "The mud under the water is not."

The key-man thought about that.

"So it is half done and they are spending the whole money," he said. And the room laughed, the first laugh of the morning, and it was not a mean laugh, and Lin Bo let them have it.

Then the grandmother asked the other question, the one about the medicine.

"The 偏方 (*pian fang* - the folk remedy)," she said. "The one from the woman in the next lane. The honey and the pearl powder and the thing she will not name. Half the mothers on this street give it. Tell us, since you are here. Does it work."

Lin Bo stood very still.

"There is no herb that takes lead out of a child's bone," he said, slowly, so that there would be no mistake about it. "There is a medicine that does it, and it is given in a hospital, and it is strong, and it is dangerous, and it is for children whose numbers are very high. It is not for six point eight. The honey and the powder will not help. They will not hurt, mostly. They will not help, and the money you spend on them is money you could put in the child's bowl." He looked at the grandmother. "If a woman in a lane tells you she can wash the lead out of a child with a jar, she is selling you the thing that has always been sold to this town in a different jar."

Somebody near the back said something he could not hear, and the grandmother who had asked made a small sound that was not agreement and not disagreement, and the meeting went on.

※

It came apart in the questions, as he had known it would, and it came apart not over the medicine but over the blame.

An old man he did not know stood up in the third row. He had the look of a man who had worked the yards and had come to a meeting for the first time in years.

"So the ground on the bank will be clean," he said, "and the children have the lead in the bone, and the bones give it back. Then who pays. The yards have always paid and the yards are still open. The truck comes out of the park at night and goes where it goes, and a man is paid for it. The green paper says the river is done." He looked at Lin Bo. "You are the son of Lin of the acid hands. Did your father pay."

Lin Bo stood with his hand on the table and his hand not still on the table.

"My father worked those yards from ninety-five to two thousand thirteen," he said. "He is in a chair at the end of the lane and he can hold a heavy cup and not a light one. He paid more than any of the

men in this room, and I am standing here because of what he paid, and that is not a clean answer and I am not going to make it one."

"Sit down, old Lin," somebody said, not unkindly, to the old man, and the old man sat, and the room made the small sound a room makes when something true has been said and nobody has won.

Then a younger woman asked the question Lin Bo had been dreading, and she asked it in a voice like a girl's, which was the voice she had decided to use.

"And the trucks at night," she said. "We see them. Everyone sees them. The man with the board on his shoulder, the one with the acid hands, the one everybody knows. He is out on that bank at night and the board goes out of your own fence, and you are up there telling us the ground is getting better. So which is it. Is the bank getting better, or is the bank where the boards go, and you are standing in front of us with the paper."

The room did not lean in that time. It went the other way, quiet and still, as if it had all been here before and had agreed a long time ago to keep its eyes on the door. The second phone did not move.

Lin Bo looked at her. He could have done the small thing and said that the project and the operation were two different things. It was true, and it was the answer that would have let the room keep its eyes on the door. He had the cards in his pocket and both of them worked.

"I know about the trucks," he said. "I have known for a month."

The room stayed still.

"I will not stand in front of you and say the bank is clean, because the bank is not clean. I will not stand in front of you and name the men on the trucks, because naming is not my row to hoe, and because half the men on those trucks are men from this street." He put both hands flat on the table, and the left one, pressed flat, did not shake the way it shook when it was free. "What I can tell you is what I know. The ground was bad before the trucks and will be bad after them. The trucks make it worse in one corner and take nothing out. And I am

the man who is supposed to find that out and write it down, and I have not written it down yet."

He stopped. The grandmother who had asked the first question was looking at him, and her face did not say whether he had passed or failed.

"Then write it down, Doctor Lin," she said.

※

The clip went up that evening, and Lin Bo did not see it go.

It was forty seconds. Ah-Sheng had cut it well, which is to say he had cut it to the truth and not to the sense. The shape of it was this. A dark hall, a phone, a young man standing with his hands on a table saying I have known for a month. Then the grandmother's voice, and then his own hand flat on the wood. And a title that said the son of an acid-hand man tells the town the bank is where the boards go.

It ran four hundred views by the time he sat down to supper, and it ran past his mother's phone before he had finished eating, which is how he found out it existed. She watched it twice at the table with the volume down.

"Is that your hand," she said.

"Yes."

"It shakes."

"It has been shaking since I was sixteen," Lin Bo said. "You have seen it shake a thousand times."

"I have seen it shake in this kitchen," his mother said, and put the phone face down on the table. "I have not seen it shake with four hundred people watching."

His father, from the other room, said, "Let me hear it." Lin Bo took him the phone and held it up and let the clip play, and his father listened to the whole of it without moving, and when it finished he said only, "You said it short." Which in that house was the highest thing a man could say.

Later, just before midnight, Li Hui sent a message. It was one line and it had no greeting in front of it, which was how she sent everything. It said she had watched it three times and that the grandmothers in her class had been talking about it all afternoon and that he should eat something. Lin Bo read it and did not answer it, because he did not know how to answer a thing that was that simple and that kind, and because answering it would have meant something about the Li family that he was not yet ready to say.

By morning it was eleven thousand. By the middle of the afternoon it was on a page in Guangzhou. By evening a woman with a national outlet was on the phone to the town office, asking for the young man from the clip. The town office was on the phone to Guoliang, and Guoliang was on the phone to Lin Bo with a voice Lin Bo had never heard him use.

"Do not say another word to anyone," Guoliang said. "Do you understand me. Not to the aunties, not to the man with the phone, not to the woman from Guangzhou. The inspection is on the twentieth."

"What did I say that was wrong."

"You said the truth in a room with two cameras and a grandmother who asked the right question," Guoliang said. "There is no version of that where nothing happens. That is the problem."

Then Zhao called, and Zhao was quiet, and Zhao said one sentence in the tone of a man closing a door very slowly so that it would not make a sound.

"On the fifth," he said, "I want a number. I no longer have the option of wanting nothing."

On the Saturday a grandmother came out to the plot. It was the old one from the meeting, the one who had asked the first question, and she had walked the whole way from the lane. She had brought a bag of oranges for the crew, because that is what a woman of her generation does when she comes to a place where young men are working. She did not ask about the number and she did not ask about

the trucks. She walked the cells with Lin Bo and put her hand flat on the lime and looked at what came away on her palm.

“It is clay,” she said. “Same clay. My husband turned this clay for forty years.”

At the gate she said the thing she had come to say.

“Do not answer the woman from Guangzhou. She will take your answer and cut it. Give her nothing, and she will have to use the grandmother, and the grandmother will say what she likes, and they will listen to the grandmother more than to you.”

Then she went back along the boardwalk with her empty bag folded under her arm, and the crew ate the oranges at noon, and A-Chun said nothing about any of it, which was her way.

And in the night, when the house was quiet and his father’s lamp was off, Lin Bo lay on his bed and watched the clip one more time, and saw himself the way the eleven thousand had seen him. A young man, a raised hand, a tremor he had carried for twelve years and had told himself for twelve years that nobody could see. They had all seen it. They had seen it in forty seconds, and he had spent his whole life believing that a thing was private if he did not say it.

The shallow thing was not the betrayal of the room or the anger of the town office. His body had been on the national page before he had decided anything with it, and there was nothing now he could do about that. And the deep thing, the thing he did not look at directly, was that the little shake had done more for the grandmothers’ question in forty seconds than he had done with a doctorate in ten years.

The phone kept going until he turned it off. In the dark he did the arithmetic he had been putting off. He had a number in his drawer and a sheet in his drawer. He had two bags going stale in his bag, and a deadline on the fifth, and a grandmother’s sentence in his ear, and a man in a chair at the end of the lane who had said it short. Four things, and all of them true, and none of them willing to sit quietly together.

The 网红 (*wanghong* - the internet-famous) economy had come for his uncle's boards, and for Ah-Sheng's camera, and for the grandmothers' square dance, and now it had come for the inside of his own hand.

CHAPTER 10

The Discovery

The fifth of November came and went, and Lin Bo gave Zhao nothing.

He wrote the message four times before he sent it. What he sent in the end was this. The second round runs on the tenth. I will not hand you a preview of a number I cannot hold.

Zhao did not answer all day. At nine in the evening the answer came, and it was one line, and there was no face under it.

Then you have made a choice.

Lin Bo read the line more than once. It was not angry. Zhao did not spend anger on paper. It was the line of a man who had set a thing down carefully because he would need both his hands later.

He had the eleventh-line sheet in the drawer under his shirts. He had the two off-record cores in the bag under his bed. He had the clip still moving out there in the world. He had a deadline he had just let pass.

He understood that he could not write a number for the tenth until he knew all of what was on his own plot. He had known the corner for a month the way a man knows a room in the dark. He had smelled the drums and counted the bales and read one character by phone-light. He had never once done what a soil man does with ground he does not know.

On the seventh he went out to do it, before the crew and before the light.

※

He came to the plot at half past five with the probe and the auger and a torch and the long thin knife he used to cut turf. He walked it the way he would have walked a site he had never seen.

The rule he had been taught was simple. He said it under his breath as he started, because saying it helped. Work the edge first, then the line, then the hole. The edge tells you what came in. The line tells you where it went. The hole tells you what is underneath. Leave the hole for last, because the hole is what a man remembers, and the edge is what a man needs.

The edge of the plot was the fence, and the fence told him the first thing. Along the river side the wire had been repaired in four places with a different gauge. The repairs were new, and they had been made from the inside. A man does not repair his own fence from the inside unless the holes were made from the inside too.

The line was the pressed grass, and on the seventh it had three branches and not one.

Before he followed them he walked the ten cells, because that was the other half of the rule, which was to know what had not changed. The stonecrop was up in the cadmium trays and the fern was up in the arsenic trays. The lime had settled into the top two centimetres the way the model said it would, and the pH down the profile was where he had put it. His own work was exactly as he had left it. That was the strange thing. He had expected the ground to have kept a secret, and the ground had kept the only secret it was ever asked to keep, which was his.

The branch he knew ran from the fence gap to the shed. The second branch ran from the shed to the corner. The third ran from the shed the other way, down toward the old field drain at the bottom of the plot. It passed through the trays and between the cells. It was faint, and it was there, and he had never once put his foot on it, because he had always walked the first line to the shed and stopped.

He followed the third branch to the drain.

The old drain was a concrete pipe the size of a man's thigh, set into the bank in the years when the field grew vegetables and the town took the water off it. It had been dead for twenty years. There

was a grid of iron bars across its mouth, and the bars were rusted into the concrete, and they had been cut.

The cut ends were bright. Bright meant recent, and recent meant a hacksaw. Beyond the cut the pipe went down and away toward the river. Lin Bo lay on his front in the wet grass and put his face to the mouth of the pipe.

The smell that came back up was not the smell of an old vegetable drain.

He got up and stood there a while with his hands on his knees. Then he went to the shed.

※

The steel padlock was on the hasp beside his own brass one. He had no key for it, and he stood in front of it and understood that he had been treating a locked door as a wall. That is a thing a man does when he does not want to go through.

The shed had a corrugated wall on the river side, put up in three sheets. The bottom sheet on that side was fixed with roofing nails and not with bolts. Whoever built the shed had run out of bolts and had promised himself he would come back, and had not come back.

The nails came out of the wood with the claw of the turf hammer, one after another, quietly. The sheet leaned away from the frame and left a gap the width of his shoulders at the bottom. He went in on his side, on the ground, and turned the torch on, and the shed was not the shed he had left in October.

Along the back wall the grey boards stood in rows, four and five high, on edge like books. There was more than one truck's worth. Along the floor under them there was a fine black dust he had not seen before, and the dust was on everything.

He put a gloved finger into it and rubbed it, and it went into the creases of the glove and stayed. It had the slick feel of something that had been through heat. He did not have to send it to the lab. He had spent four years of a doctorate learning that feel at a bench.

At the far end were the four blue drums he had watched the boy carry, and two more beside them. Six in all, and not full. There was a plastic tub and a jug and a set of rubber gloves on a nail. The gloves were stiff at the fingers from the last time they had been used, and nobody had washed them.

He stood in the middle of the shed with the torch off and touched nothing else. He had seen enough to know he was not standing in a storage shed. A storage shed does not have gloves on a nail and a jug and a tub. A storage shed does not have heat-dust on the floor under the boards. A storage shed is where a thing is kept.

This was where a thing was done.

※

He walked the second branch, from the shed to the corner, and the corner told him the rest.

The heap of lime was over a hole.

That was all of it. It was so simple that he stood over it and felt nothing at first. A man feels nothing when he has waited a long time for a thing and the thing arrives in a shape he could have drawn himself.

The pressed grass ran under the heap. He cut the turf on the clean side with the long knife and lifted it. Under the turf the ground had been opened and closed, and the closure was newer than the opening. The layers had been put back in the wrong order, the lighter clay over the darker. That is a mistake a man makes when he is in a hurry. It is a thing he never forgets once he has dug a hundred holes.

He probed the seam with the auger. It went down two feet and stopped against something flat. He widened the hole with his hands, and the flat thing was a sheet of the old field liner, lifted off its bed and laid again.

Under the liner there was a pit.

The pit was lined with the liner, and it had standing liquid in it that did not smell of water. The liquid was the colour of weak tea. It

ate at the skin of his knuckle for the two seconds before he pulled his hand out and put it in the dew. There was a lip of white salt dried around the inside of the pit at the level the liquid had once reached.

Over the pit, in the lime, there was a stain like a tide-mark. The pit had been fuller and had been reduced. Somebody had poured some‑thing in to settle it. The lime in the heap was not there to raise the pH of the soil at all.

The lime had been put on the corner to make the corner safe to stand next to. It was there to make the corner smell right. It was there so that a man walking the grid with a phone would photograph a white heap and write the word it wrote, which was maintenance.

He sat down on the wet grass beside the hole, with the liner up and the tea-coloured liquid moving under it, and he did the chemistry the way he had done it a thousand times at a bench. It came out in one line.

Acid in the pit. Boards in the pit. The metal off the boards into the acid. The boards out and stored and trucked. The acid neutralised with lime and left to sit. And when the pit was full to the lip, tip it down the old drain and into the river.

He had been told the target was a forty per cent reduction in bioavailable lead. He had spent two months and the town's money raising the pH of ten cells and planting trays. All that while, four metres from his best cell and inside his own fence, a man had been running an acid pit over the old field drain, and the drain ran to the water.

He did the discharge arithmetic on his knees, because a number was a thing he could hold when nothing else would stay in his hands. A pit of that width, a working week, a lip of salt at that height. It came to a few hundred litres a week. It came to that every week. It had been coming to that for a month and more.

The drain emptied somewhere in the tidal reach below the town. The tide went out twice a day. By the time anyone sampled the water,

the water had been to the sea and back and did not remember what it had carried.

Then he understood the last thing, which was not chemistry.

※

Wei had not put the operation on this plot because it was empty, or forgotten, or far from the road. He had put it here because it was the one bad piece of ground in the town with a project on it.

A project meant a fence, and the fence kept strangers out. A project meant a schedule, and a schedule meant that a man with a torch at five in the morning was doing his job. A project meant a monitoring routine, and the routine meant that when a grid man photographed the corner and logged it, the log said project. And a project meant a name. A credentialed name. A leaner of walls. A young man who had come home from Beijing with a doctorate and a green paper and the town's hope.

His own signature on the chain of custody was the best lock on that shed door. It was better than the steel one. Nobody questions the man who is saving the children.

It had not begun before he came home. He was almost sure of that. He made himself sure, and then he sat with it, because it was worse than being used.

He had not been used. He had been waited for.

※

At seven the crew came.

He met them at the gate with the turf folded back and the hole open behind him, and he did the other thing, which was the small daily lie.

"Morning," he said. "Mind the corner. I opened it for a profile. Nobody walks past the pole today."

A-Chun looked at him the way she looked at a heap of boards, which was without believing anything and without discounting it.

Behind her the boy stood with his mother's scooter keys in his hand. He looked at the corner, and then at Lin Bo, and then at the corner again. He said nothing. The boy had understood a month ago the thing Lin Bo had spent the night discovering.

"Cover it before the sun," A-Chun said. "The meter is coming Thursday."

"I know."

"Do you." She pulled her gloves on. "Then cover it with the good lime and not the grey, and put the pole back the way it was. And if you are going to lie to the town, friend, lie to the town properly."

She said it flatly, the way she said everything, and she was already walking to the trays.

Lin Bo stood at the gate with the sun coming up over the yards and the smoke going up straight in the still morning. He understood that he had been keeping the secret from the crew, and that the crew had been keeping it from him. That was the whole of the town, layer under layer. Nobody was clean and nobody was evil, and a woman who needed a hundred and eighty a day would still tell a young man to cover his hole with the good lime.

※

He went home at noon and wrote the lie.

He sat at the kitchen table with the project file open and his mother's bowls away in the rack and his father asleep in the next room, and he took up the pen.

The thing he wrote was for the second round's sheet, in the corner column, in the language of the file. He wrote that the anomaly at C-10 was consistent with historical solder residue from the yard period before 1998. He wrote that it was associated with the old burning ground and the legacy waste line. He wrote that its place in the top twenty centimetres, above the lead horizon, was attributable to the churn of the original landfill and not to any contemporary activity. He wrote that the cell should be limed on the standard schedule and

sampled with the standard grid. He wrote his collector's initials and the date.

Every clause of it was built to be true without being true. The tin was above the lead horizon, which was the exact opposite of the old-landfill explanation. It was above it because a man had been working boards on that ground inside the past two months. Lin Bo knew the real reason and wrote the opposite reason.

The pen did not shake. That was the part he would come back to. He had spent his whole life with a hand that would not hold still, and he had just written the most carefully wrong sentence of his career with a hand as steady as a ruler. He did not know whether the steadiness was the disease or the cure.

He closed the file and put the pen down. He did not put the two off-record cores anywhere near the file.

He had thought, in the dark of the night, that he would burn them or bury them. In the daylight he understood that he would keep them, and he hated that he understood it, because keeping them was not honesty. Keeping them was insurance.

A man keeps the thing he might need later. A man who keeps evidence of his uncle's crime in the bottom of his own bag has not decided anything about the truth. He has only decided to be the only one who has it.

※

His mother came in from the yard while he was closing the folder, and she stood in the doorway with a basket on her hip and looked at the file and at his face.

"You have been at the plot since dark," she said. "I heard the scooter at half past five."

"I had a profile to take."

"On a Sunday. In the dark." She set the basket down. "The Li family asked for a day again. I told them the tenth of the month, after

your sample. I have told them a date now, and a date is a thing I cannot take back."

"Then that is settled," Lin Bo said.

"That is not settled." She wiped her hands and did not sit. "Settled is when you sit at the table with the girl and her mother and I do not have to hold the whole day up on my own. Do you know what your father said to me last night. He said you are carrying something, and that a man who carries something alone is a man who drops it on somebody who is standing near."

"He is right."

"Of course he is right. He has been right for thirty years and could not move his own legs for the last three." She picked the basket back up. "Eat, and then go to sleep in a bed and not in a chair. That is all I am asking of you before the tenth."

His phone had a message from Li Hui. It had come in the night and he had not seen it. It said that her mother had asked her about the tenth, and that she had told her mother it depended on him, and that he should not feel he owed the tenth to anybody.

He read it twice. It was the second message she had sent him that he had not answered. It was also the second one that would have been easier to answer than any of the words he had spent on the file.

※

There was one more call, that afternoon, and it was the woman from Guangzhou.

She had found his number through the town office, which meant Guoliang had given it, which was Guoliang being tidy about a thing he could not stop. She was polite and quick and she had already written the piece in her head.

"Doctor Lin. The clip. Two sentences from you is all I need."

"I have nothing to add to the clip."

"The clip has you saying you knew about the trucks for a month. Is the project compromised. Is the green paper real. Give me one honest sentence and I will not misquote it."

Lin Bo stood at the window with the phone against his ear and looked out at the lane where the grandmothers were doing their afternoon dance under the speaker on the pole. He thought about the grandmother at the gate with her empty bag folded under her arm, and the thing she had said, which was to give the woman nothing.

"I am a soil scientist," he said. "I have one sentence and it is this. There is no plant that takes the lead out of a child."

"That is not the story."

"No," Lin Bo said. "It is the truth. You asked for one honest sentence and I have given it to you. Do with it what you do."

He put the phone down. He did not know whether he had just done the brave thing or the coward's version of the brave thing, and he understood that a man in his position would spend the rest of his life unable to tell the two apart, and that this was probably the point.

※

On the ninth, the day before the sample, he went back out to the plot in the afternoon with two bags of the good lime on the scooter. He covered the corner.

He did it properly, because A-Chun had told him to and because a thing half done is the only thing that ever gets caught.

He pulled the liner back over the pit and pressed the seam down. He heaped the white lime over the whole of it in the shape the heap had before. He stood the bamboo pole up in the middle of the new heap and tied the same plastic bag back on the top of the pole. Then he stood off and looked at his work.

From the boardwalk it looked the same. That was the point of it. It looked like the same white heap with the same bag turning on the same pole, and a marker is a thing a man on the grid photographs and writes down and does not walk to. Underneath, the ground went

on doing what ground does to a thing buried in it, at its own speed, for as long as it took.

His father had said he would know by the dark. He had come to the dark a week ago and had known a little. Now he had come in the daylight and known all of it. What he had done with the knowing was one sentence in a file and one bag of lime.

He straddled the scooter and looked back once at the corner and the pole. Out on the far bank the park's lamps were coming on early in the November afternoon. The smoke went up from the chimney and mixed with the cloud and belonged to nobody.

He rode home along the boardwalk with the good lime dust on his hands and the lie in his pocket and the two bags under his bed. He thought that he had wanted nothing his whole life so much as to be a man who wrote the true number. In the space of one week a clip had put his hand on the national page and a pen had put his name under a sentence he could not defend.

The 偷排 (*toupai* - the illegal discharge) he had found would go down that old pipe into the river every night the pit was full. He was now, by his own two hands and his own good name, a part of the cover.

At the corner of the lane his mother's voice came over the wall, saying that the soup was going cold and where had he been. He called back the only true thing left to call back.

无变 (*bho bien* - "nothing to be done", in the Teochew mouth).

She heard it the way she heard everything in that house, which is to say she heard all of it. She went back to the stove and said nothing and set his bowl down.

CHAPTER 11

The Grid

The tenth of November began with the second round of samples on the far bank. It ended with the Li family at a table in the Changping restaurant. Lin Bo would remember the whole day as one long act of carrying things from one room to another.

He was at the plot by six with the tubes and the labels. The crew came at seven, and by nine he had walked the grid twice.

The second round was the same grid as the first, which meant ten points. There was an eleventh line at the bottom of the sheet that Zhao had ruled by hand. Lin Bo stood over it with the pen and thought about his whole life. Then he wrote eleven beside it and walked out to the corner and took the sample, because leaving it out was now the larger risk.

The corner gave him what the corner had. Under the good lime the liner was still in place, and the seam was still pressed down, and the pit was still under it, quiet, the way a thing is quiet when it is waiting. He set the auger at the rim and not in the middle, because the middle was where the liquid had been. He wanted the soil and not the liquid.

The auger came up with clay the colour of the clay everywhere on that field. But it carried a smell that was not the smell of the clay everywhere on that field. He bagged it and wrote the time and the depth and the point. He did not write the word he had already written in the file.

Then he laid the eleven bags out on the shed bench in the order of the grid and stood looking at them, and that was the sample. Ten cells of a project and one cell of a crime, side by side, in identical bags, with his own initials on every one of them.

The grid man came at ten, which was his day, and he did not come alone.

There was a woman with him, and she was not from the park. Lin Bo knew it before she showed anything, because she had the flat shoes and the light jacket and the phone held low, the way a person holds a phone when the phone is a tool. The grid man introduced her as the office's new colleague, which she was not, and Lin Bo shook her hand, which was dry and quick.

"Close-ups today," the grid man said. "They have asked for close-ups of every anomaly on the parcel."

"Anomaly."

"Your corner is on the sheet from the first round," the grid man said. "The corner is the only anomaly. So we photograph the corner."

He said it the way he said everything, without accusation and without interest, the way a man reads out a weight. But he said it while looking at Lin Bo and not at the corner. Lin Bo understood then that the young man with the phone and the lanyard had understood weeks ago exactly what he walked past every Thursday. He had been making a decision about it every Thursday. This was the Thursday the decision had begun to cost him something.

So Lin Bo took them to the corner himself. He took them to it fast, before they could wander. He stood beside the heap and told them the thing that was written in the file. He told it in the plain voice, without flourishes, because a flourish is a thing a listener remembers.

"Legacy flare," he said. "Historical solder from the pre-ninety-eight yards. It sits in the top layer above the lead because of the old landfill churn. We limed it on the standard schedule and we will sample it on the standard grid. It is in the second round already."

The woman wrote that down. The grid man did not write anything. He crouched at the edge of the heap and looked at the lime. The lime had been put down four days ago. It was newer than the lime on the cells, and it was whiter, because Lin Bo had bought the good lime, the way A-Chun had told him to.

"Fresh," the grid man said. He said it to the heap.

"I topped it up," Lin Bo said. "The heap was slumping."

"Mm," the grid man said. "In that town that can mean yes, and no, and I have heard you. It is not my row."

They photographed the corner from four sides and went on to the trays. The woman asked the actual questions a person asks when they have been sent to satisfy a form. The target. The timeline. The chain of custody. Lin Bo answered all of it. While he answered it he stood so that he was always between the visitors and the shed. He did it without thinking, the way a man shifts his weight when he has been standing a long time.

When they were gone, A-Chun came and stood beside him at the gate.

"That one was not from the office," she said.

"No."

"The office has never sent a woman in flat shoes to count our trays." She watched the road. "She was from the district. They send a woman first, and she writes the note, and the note decides whether the men come."

"Then we will see the note."

"We will not see the note," A-Chun said. "The note goes to the town, and the town reads it, and the town tells the district what the note said. That is how a thing like this is done. You will see the men, or you will not see the men, and either way nobody will show you the note."

※

The Li family dinner was at seven, and Lin Bo had not thought about it all day, and it arrived anyway, the way the river arrives.

The Changping restaurant was two floors of white tablecloth and a fish tank and a woman at the door with a book of reservations. The aunt with the go-between had done the booking, because that is what the go-between is for. There were ten at the table, which is the number a table takes when both families have brought their seconds. Li Hui was on his right. Her mother was across from him. His mother

was across from Li Hui's mother, and the two of them had been smiling at each other since they sat down.

The dishes came and the mothers watched them come. There was *yu fan* and there was the *lu e*. Then came the plates of raw red clams in their shells, with the brine still on them. The go-between said, "血蚶 (*xue han* - the blood clams), from the morning," in the voice of a woman presenting evidence. Li Hui's mother said they were her daughter's favourite. Li Hui said she had never said that. The table laughed, and the laughter was real, and Lin Bo was glad of it.

He was also, from the moment he sat down, doing arithmetic that had nothing to do with the clams.

Six days to the inspection. A sample in the shed with a lie in it and a truth in it. A woman in flat shoes who had written a note he would never see. A boy who had looked at the corner and said nothing. A grandmother's sentence, write it down, Doctor Lin, and his own hand writing the opposite.

Li Hui leaned over under the noise of the room and said, in a voice for one person, "You are not here."

"I am here."

"You are at the plot. You have been at the plot since you came through the door." She turned the small ring on the fourth finger of her right hand, which was her own and had nothing to do with him. "I am not asking you to be here. I am telling you that you are not, so that when you get up to take the phone call you think you are being clever about, I will not be sitting here wondering what I did."

"There is no phone call."

"There is always a phone call," Li Hui said. She put a clam in his bowl. Then she went back to her mother's question about her class, forty-one pupils, the trouble with the two at the back. She said all of it in the ordinary voice of a woman who had decided a long time ago not to be a prize at a table.

He ate the clam. It was better than it should have been, which is what the town would have said about the whole evening.

Then her father, who had not spoken much, asked the question the whole table had been placed around. Where would the young people live. The talk went to the flat in Chaoyang. The price, the down payment, the trap of it. Lin Bo answered when he was spoken to and did not answer when he was not. His mother's face was the face of a woman who could see the goal. He sat in the middle of it with the smell of the lime still in his shirt, and nobody at the table mentioned it, because nobody at the table could smell anything but the food.

At the door, when the mothers were doing the leave-taking, Li Hui stood beside him and put her hands in her pockets and looked at the street.

"The tenth was today," she said. "The sample. That is why you were away."

"Yes."

"I do not need to know what is in the sample," she said. "I have a class at seven, and my mother will want the day written down, and I will tell her something and she will believe it or not. I am telling you so that one of us has said a true thing tonight."

"Thank you," Lin Bo said, and it was not enough. Both of them knew it. She went to her mother's car, and he stood under the restaurant's red lamp and let the evening end.

※

The grid man's Thursday was the twelfth, and it did not go the way the first one had gone.

He came alone. He walked his parcel the way he always walked it, corner to corner, and he took his pictures. When he came to the corner he did not photograph the heap from the boardwalk with the pole in it, the way the routine said. He walked all the way to it and stood on the pressed line. He took a picture straight down at the lime, with the time and the place going onto the picture. Then he took a second one with the pole out of the frame, so that all that was in the picture was the ground.

Lin Bo watched him from the trays with his hands in his pockets.

"You are photographing my lime," he said.

"I am photographing the anomaly," the grid man said. "The sys‑tem asked for close-ups. A close-up is a picture with the pole out of it." He put the phone in his pocket and stood up. "You know what a mark is."

"A mark."

"A mark is a place that does not change." The grid man looked at the heap and then at Lin Bo. "Every other thing on this parcel changes. The trays change. The plants change. The grass changes. Last week this corner was a heap, and three weeks before that it was a heap, and it is a heap in every picture I have of it. The system does not care about a heap. The system cares about a place that does not change, because a place that does not change is a place where somebody is holding it still."

Lin Bo did not say anything.

"I am not paid to find anything," the grid man said. "I am paid to take the picture and put the time on it. That is my job. But the system has begun asking for close-ups, and the close-ups have begun asking for a person, and the person is me." He checked the picture he had just taken. "If the note comes back and says the corner has been held still, the men come. If the note says the corner is a legacy flare, the men do not come. That is the only choice I have, and I have made it every Thursday for two months, and my thumb is tired."

"Then make it one more time."

"I have made it," the grid man said. "That is what I came to tell you. I have made it, and the picture is in the system, and I have written what I wrote, which is the same as last week. Do you want to know what I wrote."

"Legacy."

"I wrote legacy," the grid man said. "I have written legacy four times. But I want you to know that I did not write it because you are the soil man, or because your name is on the paper. I wrote it because

there is a boy on your crew with a mother on the wash. The boxes that pay for her wash come out of that corner. If I write the other thing, the men come and the boxes stop and the mother stops." He put his phone away. "So we are both of us, now, in the same business. And the difference between us is that I have never once told myself I was doing it for the children."

He walked on up the road. Lin Bo stood at the corner and looked at the fresh lime and understood that the young man with the lanyard had just done to him the thing Zhao had done in the tea room. He had handed him a mirror and not called it a mirror. Then he had left without waiting for the answer.

And he understood the other thing too, which was that the grid man had not been asking a question. He had been handing over the weight. It was Lin Bo's now, and the grid man could go home and sleep. That was how it worked. A thing rolled downhill from hand to hand until it came to rest on the person who had the most to lose and the least practice, which was always the one who cared.

※

The 暗访 (*anfang* - the unannounced inspection, the visit in plain clothes) came on the fifteenth, and it came at two in the afternoon. That is the hour a man's guard is down, because it is the middle of the day and nothing has happened all morning.

They came in one car, a grey car with no writing on it, and two men got out. One was about fifty and carried a folder. The other was younger and carried nothing, which is worse than carrying a folder. A man who carries a folder is reading it. A man who carries nothing is looking at everything.

Lin Bo was at the trays with his back to the road. He only knew they were there because A-Chun made a sound and the whole crew went quiet at once. That is a sound no crew makes for a grid man.

"Which one is the responsible person," the older man said. Not the manager, not the lead. The responsible person. It is a phrase from the

regulations. A man who uses the phrase has read the regulations, and a man who has read the regulations has the power to write the recti‑fication.

"I am the project lead," Lin Bo said.

"You are the person of responsibility on the chain of custody," the man said. He looked at the folder, and then at Lin Bo. Something went across his face that was not recognition and was close to it. "You are the one from the clip."

"I am."

The younger man was already walking. That was the thing. The older man talked and the younger man walked. Between them they covered a plot in ten minutes, the way a comb covers a head. Lin Bo had to choose, then and there, in one breath, which of the two to follow. He chose the walker, because the talker would wait and the walker would not.

He walked beside the younger man. He did not walk in front of him, because that is a thing a guilty man does. He did not walk behind, because that is a thing a frightened man does. He walked beside him at the speed the younger man had chosen, which was too fast.

"Second year of the plan," Lin Bo said, because talk is a fence. "Four thousand metres square. Ten cells on a twenty-metre grid. Lime and stabilisation for the lead. Stonecrop for the cadmium, fern for the arsenic. Sampling monthly, lab in Shantou, chain of custody in the project file."

The younger man did not answer. He was looking at the trays. Then he was looking past the trays at the shed.

Two locks, Lin Bo thought. Two locks on the shed door. One of them is mine, and one of them is a steel one I have no key for and cannot explain. He had thought about the locks every day for a month. He had never once taken the steel one off, because taking it off would have been an admission. Now the younger man was walk‑

ing toward the shed at the speed of a man who had already decided to open it.

"Storage," Lin Bo said. "The shed is storage. Trays and lime and the sample fridge."

"Open it."

Lin Bo took out his key. His hand did not shake. That was the thing. He had stood in a hospital and had a doctor tell him a number with his own name on it. He had stood over a pit in the dark with his knuckles burned. His hand had shaken in both places. Now, at the moment when the tremor would have been worth a thousand yuan, his hand was as steady as the hand of a man unlocking his own door.

He opened his own brass lock and lifted it off and held it. The steel lock hung on the hasp beside it, black and closed. The younger man looked at it for exactly one second and did not ask.

The shed was clean. It had been clean since the seventh. The boards were gone. Wei's men had taken the last of them on the night of the eighth. Lin Bo knew that because he had stood at his mother's door and watched the tail-lights go up the road. He had done nothing, again, and he would do nothing a hundred times. The drums were gone. The gloves were gone. The heat-dust had been swept into the corner and bagged and put in the office bin, mixed with the coffee grounds and the paper, and the bin had gone out with the town's collection on Monday.

There was a sample fridge and there were trays. There was a bench with eleven bags laid out in the order of the grid. The younger man looked at the bags and read the labels upright and said nothing, and then he was done.

The older man asked two questions at the gate, and the second one was the one that mattered.

"Your corner," he said. "The anomaly. What is it."

"Legacy solder from the old yards," Lin Bo said. "It is in the first round and the second. It sits above the lead horizon because of the

landfill churn. We limit the exposure, we lime on schedule, we sample it every round. I can pull the sheet if you want the numbers."

"No," the older man said. He closed his folder. "The sheet is enough."

They got into the grey car and went. Lin Bo stood at the gate and watched them until they turned onto the embankment road. Then he turned around and looked at the plot. The crew had gone back to work. A-Chun was watching him from the trays. The whole thing had taken eleven minutes.

He went into the shed and sat down on the crate, and he put his hands on his knees and looked at them.

They were steady. That was the part he could not get past. He had lied to the inspection for eleven minutes, in the regulation's own phrases, with the calm of a man reading a shopping list, and his body had helped him. He had spent his whole life afraid of a hand that would not hold still, and the hand had chosen, on the day it mattered, to be perfect. He had wanted it to be still for a hundred other things. He had wanted it to be still at the grandmother's meeting. The body did not care what a man wanted. The body did what the body did. His body, it turned out, was a liar of the first rank, and it had learned that from him.

On the eighteenth a notice came up from the town office, forwar‑ded by Guoliang with no message. It was the 整改 (*zhenggai* - the rectification notice), one page, with two items on it. The first was that the project fence had standing water along the river side and should be regraded. The second was that the signs at the gate should be repainted and the contact number made legible. It gave fourteen days.

Lin Bo read it twice, standing in the lane.

It was the best possible outcome, and he knew it, and that was the thing. A rectification with two items about fences and paint was a note that said the visit had found nothing. The woman in the flat shoes had written something, and the state had read it. The state had

written a one-page notice about water and paint and given him fourteen days. That is what the state gives to a project it intends to leave alone.

He folded the notice and put it in his pocket and went in to his father. He did not tell anyone. He hated how easy it had been. He understood that the hate was not going to stop him. The hate lived in the part of him that wrote the true sentence. The rest of him, the part that opened the door and walked beside the younger man, was as steady as a lock. It was going to be steady for a long time, and that was the whole trouble.

He laid the notice on the kitchen table next to the morning's post. His mother read the top line and understood, the way she understood everything in that house. She went back to the stove. She put another bowl on the table. A mother in that town has one language for the two things, which are come and eat, and both of them sound the same.

CHAPTER 12

The Tremor

The second-round numbers came back from Shantou on the seventeenth, and the corner was on the sheet where Zhao's eleventh line had put it.

Lin Bo read the page at the kitchen table twice. Then he read it a third time, because the third reading was the one that was not for anyone.

The ten cells had done what lime does. The lead in the top soil was down by a fifth. The pH was holding in the band, and the stonecrop had taken what it had taken. The plot was a good plot. A man could carry that page into a room and be believed.

C-10 was high. It was high in a way that was now useful, because high and old were, on that one corner, the same word in the report. Tin sat above the lead horizon. Lead sat above the background. Both of them, by the sentence he had already written, were legacy. He had built the lie to fit a number he had not yet seen. The number had arrived. It fit.

He put the page in the folder and the folder in the bag and the bag by the door for morning. Then he sat with his hands on the table and looked at them.

The right one was still. The left one was not.

It had been worse for a week, and it was worse in a new way. It used to shake when he asked it to do something fine, a needle or a pen or a pipette. It had been still enough for shovels, and augers, and the rest of the heavy work. Now it shook in the mornings before he had asked it for anything. It shook while he sat at a table with his breakfast going cold. A hand that shook when a man asked it to work was a nuisance. A hand that shook on its own was a report.

He put the left hand under the table and finished the tea with the right.

※

The inspection came on the twentieth and was over in an hour and a half.

There were three of them. They had a car and a driver, and the driver stayed in the car. They had the sheet, and they had the file, and they had a checklist that ran to two pages and had been photocopied until the boxes came out grey.

The one who led them was a woman of about forty-five with reading glasses on a cord. She did not look at the plot much. She looked at the paper. She asked the questions on the checklist in the order the checklist had them, and beside each answer she made a small mark.

Lin Bo walked her through the ten cells. He did not take her to the corner, and she did not ask to go. The corner was a line on the sheet, and a line on the sheet was a thing the paper had already answered.

She read the C-10 entry with her glasses pushed up.

"A historical condition, then. Pre-ninety-eight," she said.

"Pre-ninety-eight," Lin Bo said. "The old yards fed that corner through the landfill churn. It sits above the lead because of how the fill went in."

"Mm." She turned the page and made a mark. "And you are liming it on the standard schedule."

"Same as the cells."

"Good." She said the word as a woman says a word she has said two hundred times that week. "Then it is not an anomaly. It is a known condition. We like a known condition. A known condition has a number and a line and a man's name." She looked at him over the glasses. "We do not like a surprise."

"No," Lin Bo said. "Nobody likes a surprise."

The three of them went up the embankment at eleven. The woman shook his hand with two fingers and told him the plot was in good order and the result would go up the line as it stood. The car turned onto the river road and was gone, and the crew went back to the trays, and the whole thing had cost him a morning.

He stood at the gate afterward with the folder under his arm and understood what had just happened.

The inspection had passed. The sheet had passed with it. The corner's sentence had passed through the mouth of the state and come back clean. So the lie was no longer a lie he had told. It was a fact the province had read. If he ever stood over the pit again and said the true thing, he would not be contradicting himself. He would be contradicting the province. That was a heavier crime, and it had been handed to him by a woman with reading glasses who only wanted to finish before lunch.

He had wanted the lie to be small. The state had made it load-bearing.

※

The body finished the thought for him over the next two days.

He was sleeping four hours and calling it five. He was eating at the crew table and not tasting it and telling A-Chun it was good. On the Thursday he signed the follow-up letter to the bureau and looked at his own signature, because the letters had begun to lean.

The next morning he set up the crew screening, and he set it up because a plot that turns lead over all day should screen the men who turn it. That was what he told the crew. It was true. It was also not the whole reason he did it, and A-Chun knew that, because A-Chun knew everything that happened on the plot and most of what happened under it.

"The men will ask why," she said.

"Because the dirt has lead in it and they work in the dirt."

"They will ask why now," she said. "It has been in the dirt for a year."

He looked at her.

"Because my hand shakes," he said.

"Mm," A-Chun said, which in that town can carry a whole conversation, and went back to the trays.

※

The health centre in the town had one room for the job and a queue out the door. The day was a Saturday. Half the queue was the crew and half was the town: mothers with children, an old man with a card, a woman from the battery shop who had come because her sis‑ter made her. The technician was a round woman in her fifties who had pricked fingers in that room for twenty years. She did not hurry. She pricked each finger and squeezed a bead into a little tube and wrote a name on a label, and the meter counted the bead down to a number.

"You again," she said to the old veteran. "When will you stop."

"When the yards stop," he said, and put his finger out. "You do not look at mine. I know mine. I knew mine before your machine was born."

The numbers were mostly fine. The old veteran's was high, and he heard it and laughed, because he had worked the yards since he was twelve. A-Chun's was fine, and she said so twice, telling the room she was not afraid.

"Fine," she said. "Fine again. I am the healthiest woman on that plot and I do not even lift."

"You lift more than any man there," Lin Bo said.

"That is what I said," A-Chun said.

The boy's was where it should be, and he looked at Lin Bo when it came out, and Lin Bo looked away.

Lin Bo put himself at the end of the queue, which was good prac‑tice and also a place where nobody looks. The technician pricked his

finger, and the meter counted, and she wrote the number on the form and did not say it.

Then she looked at the form and then at him, and asked him to wait, and went and got the doctor.

The doctor was young and had the tiredness of a man on his fourth shift. He read the meter and put the form on the desk and did not say the number out loud, which told Lin Bo everything the number was.

"Work," the doctor said.

"Soil. Remediation. A lead project on the far bank."

The doctor's pen stopped. He looked up.

"Six months of it?"

"Two. On this plot. Before that I was in a lab in Beijing."

"Do you wear a mask."

"I wear one. Not every day. Not in the heat."

The doctor put the pen down. He looked at the form and then at Lin Bo, and the tiredness on his face was not for Lin Bo. It was for the form.

"This screening is for the factory," he said. "The battery men. The paint men. A man from a soil project does not usually come and stand in his own queue."

"I run the plot. I screen the crew."

"Mm." The doctor made a mark. "A 职业病 (*zhiyebing* - the occu‑pational disease) is a thing a man gets on a job, and the job is supposed to write it down. A soil project is not on the list. That is a good thing and a bad thing. The good thing is there is no paper on you. The bad thing is the same thing."

He turned the form around and pointed at the box, because he was a man who believed a patient should see a number and not only hear it.

"Twelve point six," he said. "That is the finger. The finger runs a little low. We send a tube to Shantou for the vein, and the vein is the real one. But the finger says twelve point six."

"Is twelve point six a diagnosis."

"It is not a diagnosis. For a man on a job, we do not write anything down until forty. You are twelve and a half. If you were a battery man, I would shake your hand and write normal on the dot and send you back to the line." He capped the pen. "Twelve point six is not a sick man's number. It is a worker's number."

"Tell me what it is if I am not a worker."

The doctor looked at him.

"Twelve point six is the number a man carries into a room where somebody wants to know whether the children will be all right," he said. "And I do not have a line for that room. Nobody has a line for that room."

The room was quiet for a moment. Out in the corridor the queue shuffled.

"What takes it out of the blood," Lin Bo said.

"Time, mostly. The blood gives it to the bone, and the bone gives it back slowly, and the number falls on its own and does not fall very far. That is the size of it." The doctor leaned back. "If the number were high enough, I would send you for 驱铅 (*qu qian* - the chelation, the treatment that drives the lead out). A drip, a course, a week. It is strong and it is dangerous, and we do not give it to a man at twelve. At twelve we tell him to wash his hands before he eats, and eat iron, and come back in six months."

"And the hand."

The doctor looked at the hand, which lay on the desk and shook a little, the way a flag shakes when there is no wind.

"The hand is not the lead," he said. "The hand is the hand. It could be the lead, and it could be the job, and it could be the thing under the job. I am not the man for the hand. There is a neurology clinic in Shantou. Wednesdays."

Lin Bo looked at the hand too.

"The hand," he said.

"The hand," the doctor said, and wrote the number on the form again. Whatever the hand was, it would sit in the file beside a num ‑ ber.

※

He gave the vein sample at the town centre on the Monday. The tube went down to Shantou with the day's run. The result came back on the Friday, and it was the finger, and the finger had been right. Twelve point four. He folded the page into the folder with the rest and did not tell his mother, and did not tell Li Hui, and did not tell Zhao, who had a number and did not need a second one.

In the meantime he did the arithmetic, because the arithmetic was the one thing the tremor had not taken.

He knew the science better than the doctor did. That was the joke of it. He had spent ten years learning exactly where lead goes in a body and how it leaves and how long that takes. So he did not have to look anything up when he sat at the kitchen table and worked it out.

A man's lead sat in the blood for weeks and in the bone for years. The bone let it back into the blood slowly. That was why the number did not move much. A man who had been high as a child was still high, in a way that had no line and no paper. His 14.2 had gone into his bones in 1998 and had been coming out ever since, at the rate a bone lets anything out, which is the rate of a thing that has decided to be slow.

Some of it was his uncle's corner, the acid and the boards and the months he had spent turning that ground over and breathing what the auger threw up. Some of it was two months on the plot and a mask left off in the heat. Some of it was 1998 and a four-year-old at the fires with a hand over his mouth. There was no way to separate the three. A body did not itemise.

And then there was the child.

The mother had begun to say the child out loud. She said it the way she said the weather, as a fact about the near future. The Li

family had asked, again, when. At the door of the restaurant, Li Hui had asked him for a true thing and had gotten a thank-you. She had not asked again since. The not-asking was its own kind of press.

Lin Bo knew what the mother did not. He knew that most of what a child got, a child got from the mother. The mother's number was set by where she lived, which was the town and the ground. It was the same soil he was being paid to make less dangerous. He knew that a man's lead reached the child earlier, in the making, and could make the making harder. And he knew the thing that no line covered. A child born here would be born into the same ground. The child would be walked out of a yard and into a lane and put down to play in the dust of a place whose numbers nobody had ever measured.

He had wanted, at some point that he could no longer find, to have the normal life. A wife and a child and a flat in Chaoyang. He had not wanted it loudly. He had wanted it the way a man wants a road he has not decided to take.

The number did not say he could not have it. Nobody had written a line for that room. That was the trouble. A line would have been easier. A line a man can stand on one side of. Twelve point four was not a line. It was a number, and it would be a different number in six months, and there was no man in the province who would tell him which side of anything he was on.

※

He went past the school on the Friday because the school was on the way and because it was not on the way. At half past four Li Hui came out with a stack of exercise books under one arm and a bag on the other.

She stopped when she saw him. She did not look surprised, which meant she had decided not to.

"You are standing outside my school," she said.

"I was walking."

"You were walking past the school at the hour the school lets out." She shifted the books. "That is a road and not a road, and I have taught forty-one children this week and I can hear a story. What do you want."

He did not have an answer he could give her. He had the number. The number belonged to the room with the children in it. She was a teacher who wanted the clear thing that led to them, and he could not put the number between them at a gate.

"Your auntie called my mother," he said.

"She does that. She wants a spring date."

"And what do you want."

Li Hui looked at him for a moment, and the look was not soft and was not hard. It was the look of a woman doing a sum.

"I want to know what is at the bottom of the thing you carry," she said. "I do not want to be the person who is told last. I have been told last before. I did not like it."

"It is not that."

"Mm," Li Hui said, which in that town can mean anything. She hitched the books up and went to her scooter and did not look back, which was its own sentence.

※

His mother found the screening slip in the pocket of his jacket on the Friday, when she went through the pockets before the wash. She put it on the table at dinner and asked him about it sideways, over the food, the way she asked about everything.

"What is this twelve point six."

"Crew screening."

"For what."

"Lead. The men turn the dirt all day."

She put the bowl down and looked at him. It was the long look, the one that had been in the house since he was a boy and had learned to lie about small things to keep the room level.

"And yours," she said.

"Mine too. Twelve."

She sat with that. She did not ask what twelve meant. She had the father and the pills and the folder of designations. Over twenty years she had learned exactly what a number means and exactly what a person is supposed to do with one. A person folds it away and keeps the room level.

"Your father's hands," she said at last. "When he was young. Before the trade went to his hands, it went somewhere else first. He was tired for a year. Before you were born."

Lin Bo looked up.

"He never said that."

"He never says anything," she said. "The Li family asked again. The auntie called. She wants a day in the spring, after the New Year. She asked whether you were well."

"And what did you tell her."

"I said you were well," his mother said, and went to the stove. That was all of it. It was all the house would ever say about the number, and he ate, because the bowl was in front of him and a man eats.

※

He saw Old Ge on the boardwalk on the way to the plot that night, or on the way that became the plot. The old man was squatting at the waterline with his sleeves up, doing nothing Lin Bo could name.

"Doctor Lin," Old Ge said, without turning.

"Old Ge."

"You are thinner."

"It is the season."

"It is not the season." Old Ge washed his hands in the river, which was a thing Lin Bo had never seen anyone do, and dried them on his own trousers. "The soil remembers and the water moves on. A man is mostly water. That is the whole argument between the two of them,

and you have been standing on the soil and drinking the water and wondering which one you are."

"Which one am I."

"Both," Old Ge said. "That is the trouble with a man. A plant is one thing. A man is a plant that walks around and lies about where it has been." He stood up. "Go and look at your field. You always look at the field when you do not want to look at the room."

He walked off along the boardwalk, and Lin Bo watched the river, which was low and clear and had the mud under it that the key-man had said was not.

※

He went to the plot that night and did not tell anyone. He went because he had told himself the corner needed a second off-record core. That was true, and it was not all of it either.

He wanted to test the hand. He wanted to put the auger in the ground and turn it and find out. He wanted the answer the way a man taps a wall to hear whether it is hollow. He wanted to know whether the thing that shook his breakfast was going to take the last of what he knew how to do.

The plot was quiet. The river was low and the lights on the far bank were on, and the corner was where he had left it, white and smooth and unremarkable under the dusk. He stood the auger in the ground at the rim and put his hands on the bar and leaned his weight onto the bit.

The bit needed a bite. That was all anyone had ever asked of the hand, a first bite, one clean turn to start the screw. His left hand had done it a thousand times. It closed on the bar and pushed. The tremor came up through the steel and into the wrist, and the wrist moved. It was not much, the small wrong movement, the flag in the no-wind. The bit walked sideways out of the bite and leaned over and lay on the ground.

He picked it up and set it again.

The second time the bit went in half a turn before it slipped, and he felt the slip in his teeth. The third time he did not get the bite at all. He knelt in the dirt and held the auger with both hands and tried to make the left one be still by will. He had done it a hundred times in a laboratory. He had done it with a pipette for eight seconds at a time like a machine. The hand would not take the order, or would take it and lose it in the middle of the turn, and the auger would not bite.

He stayed on his knees in the dirt with the tool in his hands.

The heavy thing had always been safe. That was the bargain he had made with his body at nineteen, when the hands began to mis - behave. The fine work was where a man got found out; the heavy work was where a man with a hand like his earned the right to a bench. He had built a whole life on that bargain. He had come home on it. He had stood in a room of grandmothers on it and told them, from a position he had earned with both hands, that there was no plant for the lead.

He put the auger on the ground and got up and stood looking at the corner, and then at the hand, and the hand was still.

It had never been the disease and it had never been the cure. He had told his father once that a man could not know which. He knew now. It was neither. It was him. It was there in the mornings before he asked it for anything. It was going to be there when he asked it for the last thing. There was no line in the province that would tell him which side of it he stood on.

He left the core in the ground and walked home, and the light on the far bank stayed on behind him the whole way, steady, the way a hand used to be.

CHAPTER 13

The Ruin Aesthetic

Ah-Sheng's film went up on the twenty-ninth of November. By the third day it had two million views. The town watched itself the way a man watches a shop window, from the side first and then straight on.

The film was six minutes. It was not the forty seconds from the hall. That had been an accident of a phone in a room. This was a thing Ah-Sheng had been building for two years on a second-hand camera. It began with a drone rising off the river at dawn. He did not own the drone. He hired it for two hundred yuan from a wedding man in the county, and the smoke came off three yards at once and turned gold in the low light.

After that it was hands. The hands of the sorting line, and the hands with the scars, and a woman's hands weighing a sack. Then the grandmothers in the square at dusk, dancing in their rows with the yards lit behind them. Then the river, clear and moving, with the boardwalk and the young trees. Then a slow shot of the old burning ground, which was a green field now, with a board on it that nobody had ever stopped to read.

It ended on the square. The grandmothers, the lit yards, a *Chaoju* phrase on the *erxian*, and the title.

The comments ran down the side of the screen the whole way. Lin Bo read them faster than he wanted to, because that was how he read everything. *This is the real Chaoshan. My grandfather did this work. The smoke is so beautiful. Where is this, I want to go. I can smell it from here.* Then one word, repeated down the page by forty people who had never met: 打卡 (*daka* - to check in, to take the photograph at a place).

The platform paid Ah-Sheng the way platforms pay. It is a number and a smaller number and a delay. Two yards asked him to film them

after that, and a tea shop, and a bridegroom who wanted a wedding in the same style. Ah-Sheng did the wedding, and it was beautiful, and no one whose hands were in it had ever carried a board.

※

Ah-Sheng came to the house the next evening with the phone and a face Lin Bo had not seen on him since they were boys. It was the face of a man who has been paid.

"Two point one," he said, and turned the phone around. "Two point one million. The Guangzhou account picked it up, and then a Shanghai account, and then the platform put it on the front page of the province."

"I saw it."

"You saw it." Ah-Sheng sat down without being asked. "My mother saw it. My mother's friends saw it. The old man at the yard saw it and he cried, and I have known that man my whole life. He said it made the work look like work."

"It made the work look beautiful," Lin Bo said.

"That is the same thing to a man who has never been told it is beautiful."

Lin Bo did not answer that, because it was a good answer, and because Ah-Sheng was waiting for something else.

"Say it is good," Ah-Sheng said. "You went and got the degree. If you say it is good, then it is good."

Lin Bo looked at the phone. The grandmothers were dancing in their rows. The smoke was gold against the low sun. It was good. It was also the smoke.

"It is good," he said. "It is also the smoke."

"Everything is also the smoke." Ah-Sheng put the phone down. "You think I do not know what the yards did. My father worked the yards and your father worked the yards and we are the same family. I know it better than you, because you left and I stayed."

"Then why the gold light."

"Because it is the light," Ah-Sheng said. "I did not put the light there. It is the light the men get up in. If I had shot it grey, you would say I made them ugly. You are going to be unhappy with me either way, so I am going to do the version that pays."

Then he was cheerful again, because he was twenty-four years old and had two million views and had not yet learned how much a good evening costs.

"The town is coming," he said. "The wedding man from the county called me. There is a bus from Shantou on Sunday. People want to come and look at the yards. There is a girl who wants to *daka* the burning ground, and she asked me for the address like I was the town."

"Where will she take the photograph."

"At the burning ground. Where else." He was scrolling. "And the 流量 (*liuliang* - the traffic, the flow of views and attention) is not only the film. It is the place. The place has traffic now. The place is an ac‑count."

On the Sunday the bus came, and Lin Bo went and looked at it, because he could not stop himself.

It was a white minibus from Shantou with a paper sign in the window, and it parked on the embankment road at the bend by the boardwalk, and about fifteen people got out. They were mostly young. They had the cameras. They stood at the rail and took the photograph of the yards across the water. The smoke was rising off two of them, and the light was the light. One of the girls said out loud the word Ah-Sheng had used, which was *daka*, and the others laughed and agreed with her.

An old man from the lane had set a table at the rail and was selling water and orange slices in a bag, and he was doing a good trade. A woman asked him which yard was the famous one, and he pointed with his chin at the nearest, and she took the photograph.

Lin Bo stood apart from them and watched. He had spent three years in Beijing learning to hate the kind of person who photographs

other people's work. That was not what he felt. What he felt was smaller and worse. The town had found a way to be paid for the thing that had been done to it. He could not decide whether that was a defeat or the only kind of victory the town was ever going to get. He had no standing to decide either way. His own photograph was in the film too, his hand and its shaking. He had not refused it, and had not even been asked.

The aunt called the house that week to say the film was beautiful and that the people from the cities would come and spend. The mother said, into the phone, that Lin Bo had been in the film, and the aunt said she had seen the hand.

He could have corrected it. He could have said, into the phone, that the hand was a symptom and the symptom was the town. He did not. It was a good evening in that house, and there had not been many, and he let his mother have it.

The grandmother from the hall, the one who had asked him the question and then walked to the plot with oranges, watched the film twice on her granddaughter's phone. Then she came to the plot and stood at the fence until he came over.

"You are in the moving picture," she said.

"My hand is in it."

"Your hand was in the hall too." She looked out at the trays. "The picture makes the water look clean and the smoke look kind. My husband is in that smoke. I did not mind it. I want to tell you that I did not mind it, because you are the one who minds everything." She turned to go, and then she turned back. "But I have not forgotten the number, and the picture has, and you have."

※

The brand came ten days later.

The brand was a clothing label from Hangzhou called Cangshan. Thirty-one shops, mostly in malls, mostly young, and a line twice a year that the magazines called New Chinese. The art director was a

man named Luo. He had seen Ah-Sheng's film on the same front page as everybody else, and he had decided that the spring lookbook would be shot in the yards whose smoke was still in the film.

The producer was a woman named Tao, about thirty, who did the actual work. She came down from Hangzhou with Luo and a location scout and a list, and the list had three things on it. The yards. The river. And the green project on the far bank.

Lin Bo read the list twice.

"The field," he said.

"The field," Tao said. "The film put the grey and the green next to each other, and that is the whole reason we are standing here. The grey is the past. The green is the future. We want the models in between them. It is a simple idea and it is a good one."

She had the town office's chop on the paper and a message from Director Zhao's office on her phone. Lin Bo stood in the doorway of the shed and understood that it had already happened, and that he was being told, quite politely, to get his shovel and smile.

"They do the ruin everywhere now," Tao said, and she said it without cruelty, as a fact about her industry. "Every brand in the country wants the 废墟 (*feixu* - the ruins). Half of them fake it in a studio in Shanghai. We do not have to fake it. We have it. That is a very lucky thing for everybody."

"Everybody."

"The town gets a location fee. The park gets the name. The men get a day rate and a lunch. You get an expert fee for the two days, and you stand by the trays and answer the model's questions, and it is not hard."

The scout came the next morning. Luo walked the plot twice with his hands behind his back. He stopped at the trays and put a hand into the stonecrop. He stopped at the lime and looked at it for a long time. Then he walked to the corner.

He stopped at the corner.

"This," he said. "This white heap. This is the shot. This is the one true thing on this field."

There is nothing on it, Lin Bo thought. There is a pit under it, and a pipe, and a liner I pressed down with my own hands. There is a man in Puning who takes the boards and takes the metal out of them. There is a boy whose mother is on the wash. It is the one true thing on this field only in the way that a wound is the one true thing on a face.

"The lime is for the pH," he said. "It is not decorative."

"Everything on a field is decorative from the right lens," Luo said, and smiled, and did not know he had said anything at all.

Ah-Sheng was filming the scout. He had been hired to film the scout. He was standing at the edge of the trays with his phone. He was good enough at his job to keep the phone on the field and his eyes on Lin Bo.

A-Chun watched the scout from the far end of the trays with her arms folded, and said the thing only she would say.

"They and the boards are the same business," she said. "Those men want what the yard makes and the yard wants what those men make. Nobody in that car has ever carried a sack, and everybody in that car is going to get paid, and so is this field, and so am I. Do not stand there looking like the one man at the market who did not sell anything."

"I did not sell anything."

"You are on the list," A-Chun said. "You get the expert fee."

※

The brand shot at the yards on the Thursday and the Friday, and Lin Bo did not go, and heard about it all week.

They wanted the drums, the blue ones with the character on the side. They were the same drums that had come out of his own shed on the nights he stood behind a door and watched. The brand found them at the yards and asked whether the colour could be matched,

and whether the men would carry them across the frame, slowly, into the good light. The men asked whether they were being paid to carry. They carried, and they were paid. The old yard veteran carried a drum through the light for a camera and set it down and went back to his line. Afterwards he told A-Chun that he had made more in an afternoon of carrying than in a week of washing. He said he did not want to talk about it.

Ah-Sheng was paid for the scout film by the end of the week, and he bought a lens off a man in Chaoyang, and the mother put the photograph of it on the fridge with a magnet, next to the picture of Lin Bo at his graduation.

He went to Zhao the day before the dinner, to object, because objecting was the one thing left that was his to do.

Zhao was at the table with the kettle on and the *cha chong* going dark under the pour, and he heard all of it without interrupting, which made a man spend everything he had.

"So," Zhao said at the end. "You want me to take the chop off the paper."

"I want the field out of it."

"The field is in it because the field is the only green thing in this county that a camera can find," Zhao said. "A brand wants to photograph the future, and the future is you. If it photographs the next man's field, then the next man's field is the future. The money in the budget line with your name on it goes to the fellow on the west road. He is worse than you at this and better than you at being photographed." He poured. "You are not the only man in this town who can stand beside some lime."

"It is not honest."

"No," Zhao said. "It is publicity. That is the thing I have said to you in this room before and you did not hear the first time. A number with a source. A number without a photograph is a number nobody reads." He looked at Lin Bo over the cups. "Your sheet passed the

inspection on the twentieth. That is a good number. Do you know how I know it is a good number. Because a brand from Hangzhou read it and decided the field was the future. That is what a good number is for. It is for the budget. It is not for you to feel clean about."

※

The dinner was the mother's idea, or it was the town's idea and the mother took it up, which came to the same thing. It was at the Changping again, the place with the fish tank and the book of reser‑vations, because a ten-table dinner in that town has one address.

There were ten at the table. Tao and Luo. Guoliang, from the town office, who had the chop and the arithmetic. Ah-Sheng, who had the film. The mother, who had the pride. Li Hui, who had been asked because the mother wanted the Li family represented at a table with a brand, which was a sentence in the mother's long argument. And Lin Bo.

The dishes came and the mothers watched them come, and the fish was good, and Guoliang made the joke about the town's share and everybody laughed, because it was a true thing and a funny way to say it. The mother told the story of the mills and the river and the years, which she told well. She had told it at every table she had ever wanted to be proud at. It had the virtue of being true.

Tao talked about the model they would fly down, a boy from Chengdu who had the face, and about the light, which was only right on the field for one more week. The mother asked whether they would print the town's name. Tao said they would print the name of the fabric, which was a joke, and the mother laughed, and Li Hui did not.

The mother said the field had been nothing but a fence and a smell when Lin Bo came home. She said it was a place now, and that a woman in the market had asked her whether it was the field from the

film. Guoliang said the town had taken calls from two other brands, and the table laughed at that, and the laugh was real.

Luo was a thin man with good glasses and a soft voice. He ended his sentences a little below the sentence before, so that everything he said arrived like a secret he had decided to share.

He had brought the label's last lookbook, and it went around the table in its plastic. The mother held it the way she held the gradu ‑ ation photograph. Li Hui did not touch the book at all.

"We are not selling the ruin," he said. "People will say we are selling the ruin and they will be wrong. We are honoring the men. The hands in that film made this town. We want to photograph the beauty of that work, and pay for it, and put it on a young person's back in a city, so that when they wear it they are wearing these hands."

"That is nicely put," the mother said, and she meant it, and two of the ten at the table meant it with her.

Then Luo said the thing.

"And the smell. You cannot fake the smell. When we came off the bridge this morning it was in the air, that old smell, and I said to Tao, you cannot make that. It is like the past is still in the air here. It is the whole reason the film works."

Lin Bo had been hearing the sentence under every other sentence all evening. He had been eating the fish and hearing it. He put his cup down.

"The smell is lead," he said.

The table did not go quiet at once. It went quiet late, the way a table does when one person has said a word the others are still deciding how to hold.

"It is in the air and in the dust and in the ground," Lin Bo said. "It is in the children. Two weeks ago a girl on this street, six years old, was screened at six point eight. The old line was ten. They told her mother it was normal. The old smell you came off the bridge to find is that."

Luo did not lose his face. He was good at his job.

"I understand," he said. "And I am sorry. I did not mean to make a joke of it."

"You did not make a joke of it," Lin Bo said. "You made a mood of it. That is worse. A joke a man can refuse. A mood a man wears."

He should have stopped there. He could feel the room arrange itself around the sentence. The arrangement was the arrangement he always wanted, which was a table of people looking at him and not at the brand. That was the part he should have heard in his own voice. He did not stop.

He looked down the table at Ah-Sheng.

"And you know the number," he said. "You were in the hall. You had the grandmother and the hand and you did not put the number in the film, because the number does not travel. You know it does not travel. So do not sit there with your two point one and your crying yard man and tell me you are honoring anything."

Ah-Sheng did not get up. He set his chopsticks down and looked at Lin Bo, and when he spoke his voice was level, which was worse than shouting.

"How do you know why the number is not in the film," he said. "You have not asked me one question about the film. I asked the woman in the lane. The girl with the six point eight. I went to her door and I asked her to be in it, because you are right, the number is the truth, and I wanted it in. And she said no. She said her daughter was going to be fine and she would not have the child's face in a thing about the dirt." He picked up his cup and put it down again without drinking. "You did not ask her. You never asked her. You stood in a hall and told four hundred people the truth and the grandmother told you to write it down, and you came home and you did not write it down."

The room held still. Behind Lin Bo, the fish tank bubbled and the woman at the door turned a page of her reservations book.

"You are the one who says the true thing," Ah-Sheng said. "You are the only one of us who gets to say it. I just point the camera at what is in front of me and get told it is not enough. That is fine. But do not tell me I am the one selling the smoke when you are the one who has not written it down."

※

At the door of the restaurant, Li Hui put her bag on her shoulder and waited while the mothers finished the leavetaking, which in that town is a ceremony with no set end.

"That was not about the shoe," she said.

"No."

"I teach forty-one children. One of them, the one at the back, is the son of a yard man, and his mother came to me in the spring, and I have known what the number is since then. I did not need it said at a table with a wine list." She looked at him. "You did not say it for the girl. You said it because they liked your town and you did not want them to. That is a different thing, and it is the thing I do not know how to be at a table with."

She went to her mother's car. Lin Bo stood under the restaurant's red lamp, and the mother came out after a while and did not say anything, which was her heaviest sentence, and they walked home without it.

※

The campaign ran in the second week of December. A-Chun sent the link, because A-Chun sent everything, because she had a phone and the town had a brand now.

Lin Bo watched it twice at the kitchen table.

The models stood on his field in the good light, in the long grey coats, and behind them were the lime and the trays and the crew's tools leaned where the crew had leaned them. Off at the edge of the frame, where a person looks last, was the corner. It was white and

smooth, holding still the way it held still in every photograph now. The caption said, in the brand's voice, that Cangshan was honored to work with the men who were returning this ground to the earth.

They had kept the field and cut the number. He had known they would. What he had not known, until the film of the film was up and the comments ran under it, was that they had kept the corner too. In the campaign's own short film the corner was the last shot, three seconds, held. It was the one place on the field that did not move, and Luo had said so on the scout, and Luo had been right.

Ah-Sheng did not come to the house that month. He put up one more short film before the New Year, about the woman in the lane and the girl, and he did not put a number in it, and Lin Bo watched it three times. He did not send his cousin a message. He had spent the whole dinner wanting to be the only honest man at the table. The table had let him, and had gone on with its evening. The girls in the long grey coats had gone on standing on his field, above the pit, in the good light, in the smoke that was also the smoke.

CHAPTER 14

The Guarantor

The year-end report went up to the province on the eighteenth of December. It was a good report. Lin Bo had made it himself, and the figure and the source were both on the page, and the page did not blink.

The ten cells had taken the lead down a fifth and held the pH in its band. The province's form asked for one number with one source, and the number he gave it was true. The corner sat at the foot of the sheet, in the column where the anomalies go. It had a sentence in it and the sentence had the word historical, and the province read the sheet and did not write back.

Zhao read it in the tea room and set it down and poured, and then he said the thing he said when he was pleased, which was nothing.

"Nothing," Lin Bo said.

"You want me to say it is good."

"I want to know whether it is good."

"It is the number we agreed on," Zhao said. "The province will file it, and the committee will file it, and in January the budget line comes back to us with the same figure on it, and the figure will have your name under it. That is what the word good means in this office." He tipped the tea over the *cha chong*. "The brand sent the photographs. Did you look at them."

"I looked at them."

"Your field on a telephone in Shanghai. A girl in a grey coat standing where you stood the first day I showed you the corner." He set the cup in front of Lin Bo. "Do you know how many men in this town would trade their name for that photograph. All of them. You are the only one who will not."

The plot had its own small end of year. A-Chun counted the trays and the rows and wrote the figures on the whiteboard in her square hand. The boy from the village carried the last of the lime sacks to the shed and stacked them the way he stacked everything, exactly, be - cause A-Chun had made it worth his while to stack exactly.

The board they had put at the gate, the one with the project's name and the small print of the standard, had begun to be photo - graphed by the bus people on their way to the yards across the water. Lin Bo had seen it happen from the plot and had said nothing about it. It was a strange thing, to be a landmark.

"We are on the map," A-Chun said, and she did not sound pleased about it in a way he could measure.

"You are on the map."

"The map is the trouble," she said. "Nobody in this town was on the map before. Now two men have walked their children down here to show them the green field. One of them was a yard man, and he told his boy that this is where the water goes." She wiped her hands on her trousers. "He told his boy that this is where the water goes, Lin Bo. He thinks the water is cleaned here."

Lin Bo looked at the ten cells and the lime and the cover over the corner.

"He is not wrong," he said. "It is where it is cleaned."

"That is not what he meant, and you know it," A-Chun said. "Do not do that with me. You do that with the province."

Then she went back to the trays, and he stood at the fence, and the river went on being the river.

The mother had started to say the spring out loud, in the way she said a thing she had decided, lightly and often. Li Hui had not been to the house since the dinner. She still answered messages, in the short way, with the full stop where the warmth goes. The mother read the full stop the way the mother read everything, sideways, and said nothing about it, and that was the most she would say.

Li Hui had sent one long message before the New Year. He had read it three times and answered it in a line.

My mother has asked me to ask you whether, if the park goes on and you go on with it, you mean to stay two more years, she had written. *I said I would ask you plainly, so I am asking you plainly. Do not answer tonight.*

He had answered that night. He had written, *I do not know,* and deleted it. He had written, *Two more years,* and deleted that. In the end he had sent a sentence about the plot and the spring and the lime. It had been the wrong sentence, and he had known it was the wrong sentence when he sent it, and he had sent it anyway.

The house had started to keep the New Year before the town did. The mother had hung the red at the door two weeks early, because the mother did everything two weeks early and then complained that the town was late. There were *guo* in the steamer and melon seeds in the tin. The seeds were set out for visitors who had not yet come and might not come, and the mother set them out anyway. A tin of seeds on the table is the mother's argument that the house is still a house.

Lin Bo moved through it the way a man moves through a house he is leaving, which is carefully, and with his hands, and without a plan.

※

Lin Bo went to the *guotiao* shop on the twenty-third, because it was the day before the little festival and the town was out, and because Wei had sent him a message that said only, *Come and eat.*

Wei was at the corner table with his back to the wall and the red ledger open on his phone, and he had lost the weight the sums take off a man who lies awake with them. He ordered for both of them without asking. That was Wei's way of paying for a meal without saying that he was paying for it, and Lin Bo had stopped arguing with it years ago.

They ate. For a while neither of them said anything true.

Then Wei said a true thing. He said it carefully, because they were two tables from the door and the door was full of the town.

“The yard is holding the money longer than it used to,” Wei said. “The Puning man cut his price again. And the city put the check-points back on the river road for the New Year, so the flatbed has to go the long way, and the long way costs diesel.” He turned the phone face down. “It is a tight month. Tight is all. Every December is tight.”

“And Zhou.”

Wei looked up. It was the first time Lin Bo had used the name at a table.

“Who told you about Zhou.”

“Nobody told me about Zhou.”

That was true, and it was not all of it. He had seen the name written under a doorbell in the lane behind the bus road, on a small plate the size of a business card. He did not say that either, because to say it would be to say that he had gone looking.

“Wei,” Lin Bo said. “Is my name on anything.”

Wei put his chopsticks down. For once he did not do the thing he did with every hard question, which was to laugh it into the oilcloth. He looked at his nephew for a long moment, and then he said the sentence Lin Bo would carry out of the shop and into the year.

“You are family,” Wei said. “In this town, on a paper, that is the same as signed.”

※

He found it the way a man finds a lump, which is by looking for something else.

He had gone to the service hall to ask about a form for the year-end payment. The girl at the desk was from Guoliang’s office and knew his face. Because he was tired, and because she was kind, he said a joke. He said, is there a company somewhere with my name on it.

She laughed and typed his name into the window that searches names, as a person types a name into the window that searches people, for the small pleasure of seeing nothing.

There was something.

The screen said, in the small careful type of the system, the name of a company that had not existed in October. Shunfa Recycling Materials. Registered on the eighth of October, registered capital five hundred thousand yuan, paid-in zero. That is the way a company is written when it exists on paper and nowhere else. The registered address was a shop number in the lane behind the bus road, a number he had walked past a thousand times and never once looked at. Under the field the system keeps for the person who carries the company, the field the system calls the legal representative, the screen said his name.

He did not say anything at first. The girl had turned to the next window and was helping a woman with a household register. The queue moved. He stood with his hands on the counter and read the page the way he read a worksheet, which is from the top, and it was in that reading that he came to the part under the facts.

The system keeps a section for risk. In the section for risk there were two lines. The first said the company was a defendant in a matter of 民间借贷 (*minjian jiedai* - private lending, the loan between people). The second said an enforcement order had been filed, for a sum that he read twice and then a third time, and the sum was one hundred and twenty-eight thousand yuan.

Shunfa had borrowed two hundred thousand from a man who liked to be paid on the day. Shunfa had paid some of it back. Shunfa had stopped paying. The man had gone to a court, and the court had made the paper that says the paper must be paid. The paper said the company. The company was a name, and under the name was a person, and the person was him.

He thanked the girl. He walked out into the cold of the service hall's forecourt and stood by the flagpole. He did the arithmetic he had been making for three months without the number attached to it. The number attached to it was one hundred and twenty-eight thou ‑ sand yuan. He did not have a hundred and twenty-eight thousand yuan. The only thing in his family that was worth that much was the house with the tiles, and the three tiles on the roof that were the wrong colour.

He went to Guoliang's office the same afternoon, because Guoli ‑ ang had the town's chop and had been in the room, or near the room, when the company was made.

Guoliang heard him out with his hands folded on the desk, and when Lin Bo was done he did the thing men in that office do, which is to explain the world to a man instead of answering him.

"A company with a name from these parts is a good thing for a town," he said. "It lets the yard sell to a licensed buyer. It keeps the money in the town instead of in Puning. Every office in the province wants that and cannot get it. Your uncle got it. That is not nothing."

"My name is on it."

"Your name is on a great many things," Guoliang said. "You are on the roll of the project. You are on the roll of the school's donor board, at your mother's asking. You are on a paper that this town signs and did not print, and there is no man in the lane who is not." He leaned back. "The company is small and the company is quiet. If a company is quiet, it does not exist. If you shout, it exists."

"So you know."

"I know the way a man knows the weather," Guoliang said. "I do not go out and stand in it."

Lin Bo stood up.

"Tell me one thing straight. Is the company going to be all right."

"No," Guoliang said, and it was the first straight thing he had said. "It is going to be settled. Those are different words, and you are the only man in this town who insists they be different."

※

He asked the mother as a man asks the hard question when he already knows the answer, which is with the door open.

He found her in the kitchen with the knife and the pork, and he stood in the doorway, and he asked her about October and the papers at the kitchen table.

She did not put the knife down. That was the thing he would remember. She kept cutting. She answered him the way she answered the *xiangqin* question. That is the truth, sideways, without the word for it.

"Your uncle needed a name," she said. "You were in the house. The paper was in the house. You said you would think about it, and you thought about it, and then you signed. I did not wake you to read it, because you had read enough that year."

"I signed."

"You signed. I put it in front of you with the pen. It was the night your father could not hold the cup, and the box was not on the card, and your uncle had paid for the box, and the paper was the way he paid it back." She set the knife down then, and wiped her hands, and looked at him. "If you are going to be angry, be angry at the arithmetic. The arithmetic has been in this house for twenty years. I did not invite it in."

He wanted to say that he was not angry at her. He found that this was not true. He found that it was not true in a way he could not yet put down, so he said nothing, and she went back to the pork.

"There is a carbon," he said at last. "You keep everything. Where is the carbon."

She dried her hands and went to the drawer under the sewing machine. She took out a folded envelope and put it in his hand. She did not let go of his fingers for a moment longer than the hand needed.

"You want to see the paper," she said. "Then look at the paper. But a paper you have already signed does not get better by looking at it."

He went in and sat with his father, because the father was in the chair by the window and the father was always in the chair by the window now.

The father was watching the news with the sound low. He looked at Lin Bo with the look he had, which was the look of a man who half knows who is in the room and half does not mind. On the table beside the chair there was a cup, and the cup had a handle. It had been chosen for the handle. A cup with a handle is a cup that a hand that shakes can hold, if the hand is having a good day.

"Papa," Lin Bo said. "In October. The night Uncle came. Do you remember the paper."

The father looked at the television. Then he looked at Lin Bo. For a moment the look was the old look, all of it. It was the look he had used when Lin Bo was a boy and had done something wrong and had come to the table to say it.

"Did we make trouble," the father said.

"No," Lin Bo said. "No trouble."

The father nodded and went back to the news, and Lin Bo sat with him, and it was the first lie he had told at that table in a week that had not been expensive.

※

He read it on the step, in the cold, with the door at his back.

It was two pages, folded into three, the way a form is folded when a company prints it. He read it from the top this time, which was the thing he had not done in October. There was the company and the number. There was the amount, two hundred thousand. There was a clause for the interest, which was not a bank's interest. Halfway down there was a paragraph he would have passed over in October the way a man passes over a paragraph of type. The paragraph had the word 担保 (*danbao* - the guarantee, to answer for another man's debt) in it,

and the word was repeated. Under the word, on the line, the form had been completed in his uncle's hand and signed in his own.

He had signed it at the kitchen table with the television on. He remembered the television now, the sound of it, the way he remembered the sound of a room and not the room. He had signed the way he signed a delivery slip. And that was all of it, which was the part he could not put anywhere. He had not been tricked by a stranger. He had been tired in his own kitchen and had signed a paper to make the evening stop.

He looked for a long time at the signature. It was neat. That was the thing he could not get past. The signature on the guarantee was neat and small and even, and he had made it in October, before his hand had started to go, and the neatness dated it the way the rings date a tree. It was his hand, and it was a steadier hand than the one he had now. The paper had taken the steadiness of it and turned the steadiness into a promise. He would answer for a man's debt.

A fa ̌rén is a name on a paper. He had known that. He had not known that the paper would be a door, and that a man could sign his way into a room before he had ever stood in front of it.

He folded the carbon and put it in the inside pocket of the coat, the good coat, the coat he wore to the province. Then he sat on the step for a while longer. The step was cold and the house behind him was making dinner and his father was inside, and for a moment he did not want to go into a house his name was in.

※

Wei came on the twenty-ninth, in the evening, without the message and without the oilcloth smile.

He stood in the yard and did not come up the steps, which was his way of saying that he knew he was not invited and would not make the mother choose. He said it plainly, which was the only thing Lin Bo had ever been able to count on him for.

"It is mine," Wei said. "The borrowing is mine, the shortfall is mine. Your name is on it because a man with my hands cannot be the name on the paper, and you have the degree, and the park opens a file for a degree. I used you. I am telling you I used you, because you are going to hear it from the town and I want to be the one who says it in the yard."

"Zhou."

"Zhou is not the enemy," Wei said. "Zhou lent to a family he has known for thirty years and is owed a hundred and twenty-eight thousand, and he is not a monster for wanting what he lent. In this town a man who lends is called a loan shark, and a man who does not lend is called no brother. There is no chair on either side of that. I sat down in one of them and so did you."

"What do you want me to do."

"I want the year to turn," Wei said. "The New Year always turns. The checkpoints come off the river road in the second month. The price comes back. I pay Zhou. Zhou takes his name off the doorbell, and the company goes quiet. It has gone quiet before. It will go quiet again." He put his hands in his pockets. "Do not do anything with the paper. If you move the paper, you wake the whole thing. That is what I came to say."

He left before the mother could come out and look at him, which was the kindest thing he did all year. Lin Bo stood in the yard and listened to the town. The town sounded the same as it had the day he came home.

※

He did not do anything with the paper. He went back to the plot, because the plot was the one thing in his life that paid attention to him.

He did not go to the lane behind the bus road until the sixth of January. He went then because the year had turned and nothing had

happened. He could not make himself believe a door he had never stood in front of could close.

The lane was narrow and had the washing on the second-floor rails. The shops were three in a row under the one building. He found the number at the second unit the way a man finds a house he has inherited in his sleep.

The shutter was down and locked. On the shutter, at the height of a man's chest, there was a sheet of paper, and it had been pasted at the corners with the kind of paste that does not come off.

It was a 腾退 (*tengtui* - the notice to vacate, the order to clear the premises) from the landlord of the building. It gave fifteen days. It had the company's name on it and the company's number. Under the name it had the field the system keeps for the person who carries the company. Under the field it had his name, and above his name, in the smaller type, the words for the man who carries the company.

He stood in the lane and read it twice. A woman at the end of the lane was watching him the way the lane watched everything. A dog was lying under the third shutter. Above him the washing moved the way washing moves when there is no wind left and only the shape of the sound of the river.

The woman had come out onto her step, because a strange man standing in a lane is a thing to come out for, and she was not un-friendly.

"You are the paper man," she said.

"I am the name on the paper."

"Same thing," she said. "You want the landlord. He comes on the eighth, if you want him to open it." She looked at the shutter as though it had a fault she had long ago stopped mentioning. "There is nothing inside it. There never was. It was a room to put a number on. Every lane has one."

Fifteen days. He thought about how a signature is the one thing a man gives away once and then lives inside, the way the town lives inside a river it has stopped looking at. He had signed the paper at

the kitchen table with the television on. He had gone out the next morning and put lime on a corner. He had walked to the plot every day for three months and had never once walked the length of this lane.

He did not photograph the notice. A man does not photograph the door of a house he owns and has never lived in. He put his hand on the shutter, which was cold, and under his hand the metal was steady, and it was his hand that was moving.

CHAPTER 15

The Trap

The year-end review came on the ninth of January, and it came with a projector and eleven men in good coats, and the park's number held.

Lin Bo sat at the back with the crew and the file, and the province's man asked one question about the anomalies column, and Zhao answered it before Lin Bo could open his mouth. The answer was the sentence Lin Bo had written in November, the sentence with the word historical in it, and the province's man wrote the answer down and did not ask it a second time.

After it was over, Zhao did not go to the banquet. That was the first strange thing, because Zhao went to every banquet the way other men went to sleep. He was in the tea room with the kettle on, and he waved Lin Bo in, and he said nothing at first. That was the second strange thing. A quiet Zhao was a Zhao who was deciding whether to say a thing.

"The province put the river on the list this year," he said at last. "Not the yards. The river. There is a section in the plan called the water environment, and this year the river's section has our county's name in it, and the name has a date beside it."

"A date."

"Everything in that office has a date," Zhao said. "It is the only honest thing in the building." He poured, and the steam came up between them. "It is a long list and we are a small line on it. But the line is there, and the woman in the flat shoes wrote her note, and the note is in the list now, and the list has a date."

Lin Bo did not say anything. He had learned in that room that the way to hear Zhao was to let him finish.

"On the list, the problem is not the yards," Zhao said. "The yards are old and the yards are this town's whole history and no one in the province has the appetite to pull a town's history out by the roots in a year. On the list, the problem is what is new. New pits. New cuttings. New things done last autumn by men who knew better." He looked at Lin Bo. "There is a form of words the office uses. It is called a joint enforcement action. It means the environment bureau and the police and the market office and two men from the procuratorate, all in the same four cars, all on the same morning. When they write that form, the list has stopped being a list and has become a date."

※

The date came to him on the twelfth, in a meeting room with a whiteboard and a water dispenser and no tea, which was how Lin Bo knew it was not Zhao's.

There were five of them. The man at the head of the table was from the environment bureau's enforcement team and his name was Wu, and he had the hands of a man who had once used them. The others were a young woman who took the minutes and two men who said nothing and had the particular stillness of men who carry guns and do not need to say so.

"Lin Bo," Wu said, and did not ask whether it was him. "Doctor. Project lead. You can confirm for me the pit at the corner of your parcel."

The room did not move, and neither did Lin Bo. He had come in with a folder of monitoring data, because he had been told the meeting was the year-end compliance question. The folder was on the table in front of him, and he did not open it.

"There is a corner," he said.

"There is a pit," Wu said. "The corner is what is over it. I am asking about the pit."

"I can confirm the soil profile at the corner includes a filled fea‑ture."

"You can confirm it in a report," Wu said. "You are going to con‑firm it in a report. I am asking you now, in this room, because I have read your report. Your report says the filled feature is a legacy of the soldering trade. The report has your name on it, and the report is wrong."

The young woman's pen moved. One of the silent men looked at the wall.

"I am not here to talk about your report today," Wu said. "I am here to tell you where you sit. On the day, the action will cover the row of yards on the north bank and the parcel on the south bank. The parcel is where the material is held. It is where the water leaves. It is where a man has put a pipe he has no licence for. On the day, my officers will find the pit under your corner. They will photograph it, and they will sample it, and the sample will go into a case."

"A case," Lin Bo said.

Wu opened the folder in front of him, which was a different folder from Lin Bo's, and turned it so Lin Bo could read the first page.

The first page said the matter had been 立案 (*li'an* - the case opened, the file entered) on the fourth of January. It said the matter was opened on the note of the district officer and on a moving picture that had travelled the length of the country. The picture had shown the burning of boards and the drawing of drums. It said the matter was against persons unknown. It said the matter was open.

"There is a case," Wu said. "It is called a case because a man in the lane picked up the telephone and made a 举报 (*jubao* - a report, a denunciation to the state) against the yard beside his. The district officer wrote her note. The picture put the note on the front of the province. Three small things, and the state picked them up the way a river picks up three small things and calls them a flood. What we have is a case, and what a case does is it wants names."

"There is already a name," Lin Bo said. "On the picture."

"There are four names," Wu said, "and I will read them to you, and then you will understand why the office asked for you and not for a man with a mop."

He read them.

"The first is your uncle, Wei, whose hands are the hands in the picture and whose name is on no paper. The second is the company that buys the boards, which is called Shunfa, registered in October, capital five hundred thousand, paid in zero. The third is the man on the fourth floor in Puning who takes the boards and does not ask where they came from. And the fourth is the man who is the legal person of the company and whose name is on the sheet that says the corner is a legacy." Wu closed the folder. "The fourth name is you."

The water cooler burbled. The young woman stopped writing and looked at her pen.

"So you are three things at once," Wu said. "You are a witness, because you are the only man in this county who can tell me what is in the soil. You are a party, because your name is on the company and your signature is on the borrowing. And you are the man who wrote the report that will either be the truth or the lie, and that will be decided by what the shovel finds, and the shovel belongs to me."

"Then why am I here. If you have the pit and the company, you do not need me."

"Because a case is not a pit," Wu said. "A case is a story that a room believes. And the office would like the story told by a doctor, and not by a man with a mop, because in this county a doctor is be - lieved and a mop is not." He stood. "Do not touch the parcel. Do not move a drum, do not fill a hole, do not pull a pipe. If you touch it, you are not a witness, and I will not be able to help you, and I am telling you plainly that I would like to be able to help you. We go before the New Year. It is the thirtieth."

※

Lin Bo went to Zhao the same evening, because there was nowhere else to go, and because Zhao was the only man in the county who owed him a plain sentence.

Zhao heard him out and did not pretend not to know.

"You have two roads," Zhao said, "and you have come to me to ask for a third. There is no third."

"The thirtieth. Before the New Year. If they come on the thirtieth they will find the pit, and they will find the pit under a corner that my report calls a historical flare, and the report has my name on it."

"Yes."

"Then you know what happens."

"I know what happens to you," Zhao said. "I am the director of a park, and the park is not your name and the park is not my name, and the province does not close a park for one man's corner. The park will still be here on the first of the second month, and the number will still be the number. There will be a new lead on the parcel. He will be a young man from a good school who has never once had a father with lead hands. That is not cruelty. That is the arithmetic of the place I run."

"Then tell me the third road."

Zhao poured, and did not drink, and looked at the steam.

"Clean your field," he said, very quietly. "The corner is your corner. A man is allowed to finish his own work. Fill the feature. Cap the pipe the way the standard says to cap a pipe. Put the good lime over the top and the trays on the lime and let the photograph be of trays. Do it this week. Then on the thirtieth there is no pit, and there is no corner, and there is a project, and a project does not go to a case. It goes to a report, and the report is mine to file and has your name on it for the right reason."

"That is destroying evidence."

"That is finishing a remediation," Zhao said. "The words are for the court to choose. The dirt is for you to move."

"If I move the dirt, the officer has me for the moving. He told me plainly not to touch it."

"Then do not touch it," Zhao said. "Let him find it. Let him photograph it, and let the photograph go into a case with your name on the sheet that calls it a legacy." He set the cup down. "You wanted a third road. There are two roads. One of them keeps the park's number and the other keeps the officer's story, and they both have your name, and between them there is no grass growing. That is all I can say in this room."

Lin Bo sat with it. And it was in the sitting that he saw the shape of it, all the way around, the way he saw a soil profile when he finally cut the right face.

If he cleaned the corner, he dug his own obstruction. If he left the corner, the officer dug his lie. If he told the officer about the pit, he put his uncle's hands in a photograph with a date and put his own name at the top of the same page. If he told his uncle about the thirtieth, he put the whole action at risk and himself in a worse room than this one. There was no road on the ground. There was a corner of soil with four things on the same point, and the point was where he stood.

※

He went to the parcel next morning, because there was a project to run, and because a man who is going to be arrested still owes a crew a morning.

A-Chun had the whiteboard out and the boy had the hose, and both of them stopped when he came through the gate. So the town had been to them too. The town went everywhere before the men did.

"You are going to be the one who tells," A-Chun said, and it was not a question.

"I am going to be the one who is asked."

"Same thing," she said. "They ask the one who knows, and the one who knows is the one who goes down. I have watched it in this town

since I was a girl. The yard man who talks gets the smaller fine and never works the river again. That is the justice here, and it is a justice. You should take it."

"Take it."

"Take it," A-Chun said, "and then come back here in two years and tell the boy it was worth it. Because the boy is thirteen and the boy thinks you are the reason the water is clean, and I would rather you broke that now, gently, than let the river break it for him."

She went back to the whiteboard. The boy watched Lin Bo from the trays the way the boy watched the corner, which was directly and without asking.

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The town knew before he did, of course. The town always knew first.

Wei came on the fourteenth, in the evening, and this time he came up the steps and sat in the good chair, and the mother brought tea, and the mother stayed, which meant the mother had been told too.

"Before the New Year," Wei said. "There is a date, and the date is in the paper, and the paper is in a drawer in the county. The drawer has a man who is a cousin of the man who runs the *da leng* stall." He drank. "So it is a date, and everyone with a cousin has it."

"Then you know."

"I know," Wei said. "I have four days to move two hundred tonnes of material. Or I have four days to invent a story about two hundred tonnes that a court believes, and I have not once in my life invented a story a court believed." He looked at Lin Bo. "You have. You wrote one on the corner. That is the one thing about you that has ever frightened me."

The mother put her hand on the table, which was her way of putting her hand on the whole family at once. The father was in the chair by the window with the television on and the sound low. Lin Bo understood that the father had heard all of it and had kept his eyes on

the news, which was the father's way of leaving the room to the ones who could still hold the cup.

"Tell him the truth, Bo," she said. "Whatever it is, tell your uncle the truth before the men come, because after the men come there is nothing left to tell."

And Lin Bo found that he could not say the plain true thing at that table either. The plain true thing was that he did not know whether he would warn his uncle or would not. The not-knowing was the truth, and it was not a truth a mother puts her hand on.

"There is a date," he said. "It is before the New Year. I do not have it exactly. If I get it exactly, I will tell you."

Wei nodded slowly.

"That is a sentence with a door in it," he said, "and I will not open the door in my brother's house, so I will put it plainly instead. If you get the date, you tell me, and I move the material, and I take the weight of the material, and no paper of yours ever goes near the pit. That is what I want. You do not have to say yes to-night. You can say nothing at all, which is the answer you have been giving the paper since October, and it has served the paper very well."

He said it without unkindness, which was the worst of it.

"In the old years," Wei said, at the door, "the men who came were the county. The county was one man. The one man was the one man whose brother washed his roof. It was a small river then. Now the river is on a list in a building in the province. I am a man with two hands and a red ledger, and the ledger is short. There is no man north of the river I can call a cousin to." He put his cap on. "Do not decide to-night. A man who decides to-night decides with the men coming. Decide when the date is in your hand, and be the man who had the date in his hand."

※

Li Hui called on the twentieth, for the first time since the New Year, and she called about a practical thing, because that was the door she used now.

"One of my children," she said. "The yard man's boy, the one at the back. His father has been told there is a case, and he has stopped sending the boy to school. The boy is on the bank in the morning instead, and I cannot get him back without the father, and I cannot reach the father." A pause. "I am not asking you to fix it. I am telling you because you are the only person I know who is inside this, and I want you to hear a fact about it that is not about you."

"I hear it."

"Good," she said, and the word had no warmth left in it, and no cruelty either, which was worse. "Then I will go and stand at the bank in the morning, because somebody should, and it will not be you, and I have stopped hoping that it would be."

She hung up before he could make the sentence he was building, which was the right thing to do, and which left him holding it, and it was the third door that week with his name on it and no handle on his side.

※

Old Ge was at the waterline three nights later, at the hour he was always at the waterline.

Lin Bo sat on the bank a while before he said anything, because Old Ge had taught him the use of a silence, and because the river made its own. Then he told Old Ge the shape of it, all of it, the way he had told nobody. The old man was not family and was not the park and was not the state. He had no chair in any of the three rooms.

Old Ge listened the way he listened, which was to look at the water and let the words come down.

"When I was a boy," he said at last, "the men who sold the old medicine had a saying. They said the furnace does not care who feeds it. It takes the wood from the honest man and the wood from the thief

and it makes the same heat, and the same ash, and the same smell at the gate." He picked a flat stone and did not throw it. "You have been feeding the furnace since the autumn and telling yourself you were standing outside it. You are not outside it. You have been the bellows. The bellows does not decide what burns. The bellows only decides how hot."

"Then what does the bellows do."

"The bellows stops," Old Ge said, "and the furnace runs down to the coals, and the coals are still hot enough to burn the man who reaches in. That is why the bellows is afraid to stop. And that is the medicine. I sold it for thirty years and I still do not know whether the stopping was mine to do. That is not an answer. I am an old man at a river. Go and do the arithmetic, and do not do it at my bank, because my bank is the safest bank in the county and nothing true was ever decided on it."

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The date came into his hand on the twenty-fifth, in a message from Wu's young woman, in the flat language of documents. It said the joint action was set for the thirtieth of January. It said the person should be available at the parcel from the hour of six in the morning. It said the person should bring the project's log sheets and the monitoring record and should not bring any other person.

The 联合执法 (*lianhe zhifa* - joint enforcement, the multi-office action in the same cars on the same morning) was six days off. He read the message twice and put the phone face down, the way Wei put the phone face down when he was done with the sums.

And the vice closed on him the way the old men said the tin closed on a boy who got too close to the fire, which is slowly, and from behind, and with a good smell.

He had the date, and the date was a thing a man can hold, and to hold it was to decide what to do with it, and every door out of the deciding had his name on it. If he gave the date to Wei, he gave it to a

man who would move two hundred tonnes in five nights. Wei would put himself and his nephew in front of a court that had a photograph and a note and a film. If he kept the date, he kept it from his mother's brother. The family he came home to protect would watch the men come up the lane before the New Year. They would know that the one man who could have warned them had the day in his phone the whole time. If he cleaned the corner, he was the obstruction. If he left the corner, he was the lie.

He walked the parcel in the last light, the whole length, and stopped where he always stopped, at the place the men would photograph first.

The cover was still on the corner. The trays were still in their rows. The pipe ran under the good lime the way it had run since October. He knew which tray to lift to show it to Wu. He knew which sheet to hand over and which to keep. He had known both things for three months, and the knowing was the trap. A man who does not know can be surprised. He had spent all autumn building the thing that made him the only man in the county who could not be surprised. Now he stood on it in the cold, holding the date. The date was the door, and both sides of the door were a room he lived in.

Far off across the water the yards had their fires going for the evening shift. Three of them, and the light came up off the river the way it had come up the first night he stood there. The smoke went into the same sky it had gone into before there was a list in the province, or a note in a drawer, or a company with a paid-in of zero. It went into the sky above a young man with a degree, standing at a corner in the last of the light, deciding whether the right thing was to tell a true story badly or a false story well.

He took the phone out and looked at the two names in it, the of ficer's and his uncle's. The screen went dark while he was looking at it. He did not touch it. The river went on with the smoke that was also the smoke.

CHAPTER 16

The Confrontation

Wei sent for him on the twenty-seventh of January, and the message had two lines, and Lin Bo read it standing up on the bus.

Come to the shop. Eat something.

He had known the summons would come. In that family an invitation was never only an invitation. It was a summons with rice around it, and the rice was the part you were meant to notice.

His mother caught him at the door with his coat half on. She did not ask where he was going, because she knew, and because a woman who has run a house for thirty years does not ask a question she has already answered. She put a warm paper bag in his hand. It held two of the *ang tao kueh* she had steamed for the New Year, and she closed his fingers over it.

"He will not have eaten," she said. "Make him eat."

Lin Bo understood that his mother had been carrying the two of them on one plate for a year, and that the plate was the only thing in that house still the right shape.

The shop was in the lane behind the bus road. It was the address on the company paper, and Lin Bo had seen it once from the far end of the lane on the morning the notice went up. He had not gone in that day. He went in this day.

The shutter was up to his chest. The lane smelled of diesel and wet cardboard. Inside there was one bulb on a cord, a folding table, a butane stove with a blue ring, and a bedroll against the back wall he had not expected. On the door frame the white paper was still up. It was the *tengtui*, and the fifteen days had run out on the twenty-first. Someone had drawn a tick under the date in pencil, which was the town's way of saying the count was finished and nobody had come.

Wei was at the folding table with the phone in his hand, doing his sums. He did not look up at once.

"You came."

"You asked."

"I asked," Wei said, "which a man does when he wants to know whether asking still works." He set the phone down and turned the stove down under a small pot. "Sit. It is only noodles. It has been noodles for four days."

Lin Bo sat on the stool across the table. The room was cold enough that the steam stood up straight.

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The pot was bean-thread noodles with a little of the preserved vegetable and nothing else, and a plate of cold *yu fan* laid on the table between them like an argument neither of them wanted to make. Wei ate. Lin Bo ate. For a while the only sounds were two men and one bulb and the trucks going by on the bus road.

Then Wei pushed his bowl away and said the thing straight, be‑cause that was the only way he had ever opened a table.

"For how long have you had it."

"Five days."

"And you came to-night."

"I came when I could."

"You came when you had worked out the words," Wei said. "That is not the same as when you could. I have known you since you were the size of a ladle. You do not come to a table with nothing in your hand. You come with the sentence rehearsed."

Lin Bo let that stand. It was true.

"Say it, then," Wei said. "Whatever you built in the dark for five days. Say it and let us eat the second bowl without it standing between us."

And Lin Bo found that the sentence he had carried up the lane was not the sentence he could say. It had sounded plain on the bus. It

sounded like a notice on a door in this room. So he said the shorter thing instead.

"The action is on the thirtieth. Six in the morning. They will come at six."

Wei did not move his hands. He had the kind of stillness that a man learns at a fire. He looked at the pot. Then he looked at Lin Bo. Then he looked at his own hands on the table.

"The thirtieth," he said.

"Six days—" Lin Bo stopped. "Five days. Now."

"And you are giving me the five days."

"I am giving you the date."

"You are giving me five nights to move two hundred tonnes down a road with a checkpoint on it at the second bridge," Wei said. "Or five nights to put a story on the material. Or five nights to be gone across the river to the Puning man's floor. A county man does not go there. I would be a stranger with a truck and a name on a company that never paid in a yuan."

"Then be gone."

"For five days," Wei said. "The material is not the thing, Bo. The material is the thing the paper wants so it can have a shape. A man can move two hundred tonnes. A man cannot move the yard, the shed, the pipe, the corner. He cannot move the ground under the corner. He cannot move the last four months of his own life."

"So you will not go."

"I did not say that." Wei picked up the phone and turned it over twice. "I said that you gave me the date, and I am telling you what the date is worth, and the two are not the same, and you knew they were not the same before you came up my lane."

※

The red ledger was not a book. It was the phone. He had run the whole trade out of it since the first year, and the mother had said once that the phone was the only thing Wei ever counted like a son.

He opened it now and turned it toward Lin Bo, and the numbers came up green and small in the dark room.

"Look," he said. "You are the one who reads numbers. Read them."

There were the platform runs, the diesel, the tonnes, the hold-backs. There were the boxes of unlabelled tablets, one entry a month for two years. There was the roof, one spring. There was the melon with the two hundred folded into it. There was the box he had paid for at the funeral shop, which was not the funeral. It was the box of medicine that came on a Friday and went into the drawer with the counted days. Wei had paid for that too. Lin Bo had known it since the night he learned it.

"The medicine is thirty-one thousand, four hundred over two years," Wei said. "The roof is four thousand two. The box is two hundred and eighty a month. The rest is the acid I put on your ground, which is not on this ledger, because I do not write down what I do on family ground."

"Then write it now."

"No," Wei said, and put the phone face down. "That is the whole difference between us and it is a small difference and it is the only one. A man does not put a number on the ground he stands on. A man does not put a number on his sister's son. I have kept this ledger for eleven years and I have never once written your name in it. That is the book. That is the whole book."

"Then there is nothing to pay."

"There was never anything to pay," Wei said. "That is what I have been trying to make you hear since October. There is no 亏欠 (*kuiqian* - a debt owed between people, the kind with no paper on it) between a man and his sister's son. You keep trying to buy the ground back. You cannot buy ground, Bo. You can only stand on it or leave it."

"Then tell me the number of the other thing."

"What other thing."

"The company. The borrowing. The hundred and twenty-eight thousand. The order from the court." Lin Bo's hand was on the table and it was not steady, and he let Wei see it, because there was no longer a reason not to. "I am the name on the paper. I have been the name on the paper since October. That is the debt with a paper on it, and it is mine, and it is the only one this table can settle. Tell me the number."

Wei looked at the hand for a while.

"The number is one hundred and twenty-eight thousand," he said. "And the borrowing behind it is two hundred thousand, and the man behind the borrowing is Zhou, and Zhou is not a man, Zhou is a rate. And the rate is at me, not at you. I signed for the borrowing. You only signed the guarantee. There is a difference, and the difference is all I have left to give you."

※

Then he did the thing Lin Bo had been afraid of since he walked in. He turned his hands over on the table under the bulb, palms up, and laid them flat, the way a farmer lays the fruit of the season down for a buyer.

They were the acid hands. The backs were scarred in ridged silver lines where the splash had gone, and the palms were smooth and almost yellow, and the nails were wide and flat and did not have the right shape any more.

"Look at them," Wei said. "These are the hands that paid for your Tsinghua."

Lin Bo did not look away.

At nine he had stood at the edge of the old burning ground and watched his uncle feed the fire. Wei sang while he worked, and the men around him laughed, and the smoke went up into the blue evening, and Lin Bo had thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Nobody told him it was poison. The whole town stood in that smoke the way a family stands in a photograph, and smiled,

and said it was good. He had spent twenty years deciding what to do with that memory. He had not done anything with it. It was still there, in the room, under the ledger and the noodles and the two scarred hands, patient as ground.

"I was twenty-nine when I did the cable," Wei said. "Your father was thirty-one. We did the acid part together for eleven years, and I did the most of it. He had the mother's mouth to listen to and I had nobody's. It is easier to stand in the acid when there is nobody at home counting the hours." He turned the hands back over. "I could not feel my fingertips by the time you were born. That is the trade. The trade is not the money. The trade is that a man gives the acid ten years of his skin and the acid gives him back the town's money, and the town's money buys a boy a ticket out."

"So I am the ticket."

"You are the ticket," Wei said. "Your father wanted a man in this family who did not smell of the fire when he came through the door. And he got one. The man came back, and the man brought a shovel and a plastic tray and stood in the yard looking at the smoke. The whole town watched him look at the smoke. The whole town understood something about our family in that one look."

"What did the town understand."

"That we had made a man who could leave," Wei said, "and the leaving did not take. That is not your fault. I am not saying it is your fault. I am saying it is the weather, and the weather is the thing that comes down on a house whether the house was good."

Lin Bo's hand was still on the table. He put it flat beside Wei's, palm up, and the two hands lay there under the bulb, and neither of them had the right shape. Wei's had the acid. Lin Bo's had the shake, which was not the acid, or was not only the acid, and which had begun in the autumn and had not stopped.

"That is the number," Wei said, and pulled his hands back. "That is the number in the room and it is a bigger number than a hundred

and twenty-eight thousand, and neither of us has it, so we can stop passing the paper across this table and eat."

※

The second bowl did not come. The pot went cold on the ring. Somewhere out in the lane a shutter went down, and then another, and the trucks on the bus road thinned to one every minute.

"You came here to-night with the date in your pocket," Wei said at last, "and you have not asked me the one question, so I will ask it for you." He looked up. "You want to know what I think you owe me. Whether I think you are the man who gave me up."

"I have not given you up."

"You have not decided," Wei said. "I know. I have watched you not deciding since October. It is the same as deciding, Bo, and you are the only man at this table who does not know it."

"Then tell me what I owe you."

"You owe me nothing, and that is what has gone wrong between us," Wei said. "A man who owes me something can sit at my table. A man who owes me nothing is a man who has moved out of the house and kept the key. You have been keeping the key. You keep the key and you come back to open the door and check the meter, and you tell yourself that is being a son and a nephew, and it is not. It is being a landlord."

Lin Bo sat with that. Outside, the lane was quiet now, and the bulb hummed.

"I never asked for the name on the paper," he said. "You put my name on the company and you put the boards on my ground. Both of the things that are destroying me, you put on me, and you did it quietly, and you did it while I was sleeping. Do not stand in front of me with your hands and tell me I am the landlord."

"I will tell you the truth about it," Wei said, "because you came up my lane and you earned the truth. I put the boards on your ground because your ground was the one place in this county that nobody

looks at twice. Nobody looks because it has your name on it, and your name is Tsinghua, and the county does not go and dig under a doc ‑ tor's field." He said it flatly, without apology, the way he read the diesel. "That is the reason. It was not love and it was not spite. It was a hole in front of me and your ground was the paving stone I stepped on. I told you the same thing at the yard in December. I used you. I am telling you again, because you have come here pretending you did not hear it the first time."

"I heard it."

"Then stop asking me to say it in a softer voice."

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Lin Bo looked at the phone lying face down on the table. He looked at the white paper on the door frame and the bedroll against the wall. He understood, all at once and too late, that Wei had known.

Not the date. The date had come to-night. The rest of it. He had known the action was coming since before the year-end. He had moved his own life into a shop with a paper on its door and a bedroll against its wall. He had not run. He had not moved the material out of the county.

"You knew," Lin Bo said. "Before the year-end. You knew they were coming."

"I am not a fool, Bo. The note was in the lane, and the woman in the flat shoes walked my yard twice, and the picture was on every telephone in the province, and I know a river on a list when I hear one." Wei stood and opened the little cupboard and took out a bag and put it on the table. "That is why the shop is empty and the bed is here. That is why the ledger is short and the truck is sold. I have been closing this trade since the autumn, and you have been standing in the middle of it writing a report."

"Then why the corner. If you were closing it—"

"Because a man closes a trade the way a boat comes to a bank," Wei said. "The engine is still running when the hull touches. You do

not cut the engine first or you drift and lose the bank. The last cuts pay for the closing. That is the shape of the last four months. You watched me do it from a shed door and wrote down the number."

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The silence that came after that one was the real one, and Lin Bo felt it settle the way the cold had settled, from the floor up.

"Why did you ask me to come," he said.

"To see your face when you carried the date up my lane," Wei said. "Because I wanted to know which of the two things you would bring me: the date, or the money, or nothing. I have spent four months watching you choose, and I did not know, and now I know, and I am done watching."

"You did not want the date."

"I did not want the date," Wei said. "Do you hear it. If you had come up this lane in December and told me to stop, I would have stopped. Not because of the county. Because you asked. But you did not ask in December. You asked me nothing in December. You wrote a report in December, and a report is a thing that a man makes when he has decided not to ask, and you have been making it since Octo‑ber." He put both the scarred hands flat on the table. "So no. I do not want five nights. I do not want the date. A date from you is a pay‑ment, and I have told you there is nothing to pay. If I take it I become a debtor. I have stood in front of a fire for thirty years, and I will not stand in front of my sister's son as a debtor. Keep your date. Take it home and put it in the drawer with the counted days."

"Then what do you want."

"I want nothing from you," Wei said. "That is the gift. I am the only man in your life to-night who wants nothing from you. You cannot stand it. That is why you are on that stool with your hand shaking, trying to find a way to make me take something."

Lin Bo's voice went out of him for a moment. When it came back it was smaller than he wanted.

"So I am to do nothing."

"You are to be what you are," Wei said, "and I am to be what I am, and the county is to be what it is. When the men come on the thirti‑eth, you will be either at the gate with a folder or at the corner with a shovel. I will be where I always am. The family will see who stood where. I am not asking you to lie for me and I am not asking you to tell the truth about me. Do neither. Do the thing you have always done. Stand a little distance off and write it down."

"That is not fair."

"It is not fair," Wei said. "I did not say it was fair. I said it was true. You came home to do the town a good turn and you have spent four months deciding which of your own people to spend to pay for it. That is your 良心 (*liangxin* - the conscience, the thing inside a man that keeps accounts), and I am telling you it comes with a bill. Everything in this town comes with a bill. 血缘 (*xueyuan* - the blood tie, the thing a man is born into and cannot sign away) is the one bill nobody ever made you read before you owed it."

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He stood and went to the wall and did something Lin Bo did not expect. He reached up and took the white paper down off the door frame, and folded it, and put it in the pocket of the coat, and then he took the coat off its hook.

"Where are you going."

"To the yard," Wei said. "I sleep there now. The shop is closed, and the county knows where it is, and I am not going to give a man the pleasure of finding me on a bedroll in my own empty shop." He put the cap on. "You should go home. Your mother made me promise to send you home and I told her I would, and I do not break the ones that cost me nothing."

"And the thirtieth."

"The thirtieth is the thirtieth," Wei said. "It was always going to be there. It is not the thing between us and it never was. The thing

between us is this. You came up this lane to-night with a date in your hand and you are going back down it with a ledger in the other. You will spend the whole walk home deciding what to do with both. By morning you will decide to do what you have always decided. You will do nothing beautifully, with both hands, and call it thinking."

Lin Bo stood too. The stool scraped.

"Uncle."

"Do not," Wei said, and it was not loud and it was not kind and it was the first time in Lin Bo's life that the word uncle had ever been refused. "You call me that when you want something. You have called me that all night and you have wanted something every time. Go home."

He lifted the shutter from the inside, and the cold of the lane came in, and Lin Bo stepped out under it, because his body had to go somewhere. He turned on the threshold, the way a man turns to say the last thing. He saw his uncle on the other side with his hand on the strap of the shutter, the folded paper in his coat, and the scarred hands.

For a moment neither of them said anything. Lin Bo understood that this was the last thing and that he had better make it count. He could not. The thing he had rehearsed in the dark for five days was already gone.

"I will see you," Lin Bo said.

"You will see me," Wei said. "Everybody in this town will see me on the thirtieth. That is the one thing the county has ever promised me."

And he pulled the shutter down.

It came down all the way, and the little wheels ran in their little rails, and the metal met the concrete with the sound a shutter makes and no other door in the world makes. The light under it went out from left to right. Then the lane was just a lane, and the trucks on the bus road were just trucks. Lin Bo stood in front of a closed door in the dark with the date in one hand and the ledger in the other. Neither

hand was steady. He did not know which of them had done the clos‑
ing.

CHAPTER 17

The Bust

The thirtieth came in at six and it came in dark. Lin Bo was at the parcel an hour before it. Wu's young woman had written the hour of six, and he had heard the hour of five underneath it.

He had not slept. He sat at the kitchen table from two o'clock with the folder in front of him. His mother got up once and looked at him, and then went back to bed without a word, which said the one thing she meant.

Behind the wall the father was awake. Lin Bo could hear him, the small mechanical sounds a man makes in the dark when his body will not settle. The pills were on the saucer. The seventh one, the unla - belled one, was still in its foil. Nobody had ever asked about it, and nobody was going to. The house had four rooms, and three of them were awake, and none of them said the thing.

At the parcel the gate was as he had left it. The chain he owned hung looped on the post, stiff with cold. He opened it and walked the grid the way he had walked it a hundred times. He went from the road end to the far corner. His boots left a line in the frost. It was the first frost of the year, and the plot looked as clean as a plan.

He walked it and counted, because counting was what he did with fear. Ten cells, twenty metres each way. Four hundred auger points in a season he had not been allowed to finish. The lime on eight of the cells was still working in the cold, patient, going on with the chem - istry the way it would go on whether or not anybody ever came back to look at it. The ninth cell was old-high with the signature of the nineties. The tenth was the corner, the one furthest from the road, the one where the string met the fence and the ground turned over.

The folder was under his arm. It held the log sheets and the monitoring record, which was what Wu had asked for. It also held the

two sheets he had not been asked for. Those were the sheets where the corner had a story, and the story had a name.

He came to the corner and stopped, the way he always stopped.

The cover was on. The lime was good lime. The trays stood in their rows, and the plants in them were the plants of a slow science. Under the trays, under the lime, under the dark, there was a hole. The hole had a pipe in it. The pipe had never held a licence.

Zhao had said, fill it. Wu had said, do not touch it. Those two sentences had lain on his chest for five days. In the dark, one hour before the men, he understood that they were not two sentences. They were one sentence. Two men had spoken it, and each of them wanted the number to come out his way.

He crouched and lifted the near corner of the first tray. The smell came up, cooked board under wet lime. It was the smell of the whole autumn. It went into him the way the smoke had gone into him at nine, the year he thought the fire was the most beautiful thing in the town. He set the tray down.

He did not fill the hole. He did not lift the tray again. He stood at the corner with his hands at his sides and waited for the men. It was the most honest thing he had done since October. It was very small, and it was all he had, and it was the only true thing he had done since October that he could have said out loud in a room with his uncle in it.

Then the headlights came up the embankment road.

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They came the way a thing comes when it has been planned in a room with a whiteboard. There were four cars. Behind them came a van with a box on the roof. Behind the van came a flatbed with a small tracked machine and a bar of lights. The lights were on. The whole line came down the embankment in the dark with the river on the left.

The tape went up first. A young policeman in a padded vest walked the fence line and unrolled it. Another planted a stake at the far corner. The plot that had taken Lin Bo four months to walk was closed into a rectangle in ninety seconds.

Wu came through the gate in a parka with his name on the pocket. He had the walk of a man who had done this in the dark before. He did not need the light.

"You are early," he said.

"You said six."

"I said six," Wu said. "You are early. That is either a good sign or a very bad one. I have never been able to tell the two apart in the first hour."

The young woman came behind him with the box of forms. The two silent men walked the fence the other way and looked at the road. Two men in good coats stood at the tape with a folder between them and did not move. Lin Bo understood that those were the procurat‑orate. They were there for the part that came after.

There was one more face. The grid man was at the tape on the road side. He wore his town-logo windbreaker and his phone on the lanyard, and he was not filing to-night. He looked at Lin Bo across the plot, and Lin Bo looked back. Neither of them said the thing that had stood between them since the first week. The grid man had been right about the corner in October. It had taken the county four months to catch up to a boy on a scooter.

"Sit in the car," Wu said. "You are the expert. I will want you when we open it."

"I can stand."

"You can stand," Wu said. "Stand there, then, and watch your own method."

The grid man came through the tape with his phone held out. He held it the way a man holds out a thing he has been carrying for a long time. He gave it to the young woman, and the young woman gave it to one of the silent men. The silent man looked at it and gave

it back. Nobody wrote down that it had happened. Lin Bo understood that the county had been carrying the corner in a boy's phone for months. It had only now decided to open the file.

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They did it the way Lin Bo would have done it. That was the part he had not prepared for.

A man in a rubber apron and a hard hat took the trays off first, tray by tray. He set them in a row on the clean ground. The plants went into bags, and the bags were labelled. Then the lime came off in square shovel-cuts, and the cuts were neat. The lime went into a heap that had its own label. Then there was soil, and the soil went into a sieve, and the sieve told them what the soil was.

He knew the bags. He had used them himself in October. Same clear plastic, same white label, same line for the chain of custody. The man in the apron wrote a number on a label. It was a number Lin Bo had written on his own sheets a hundred times. The system had always been a set of numbers that agreed with one another. Now somebody had written a number that did not agree. He had written it himself. It would agree with nothing for the rest of its life.

Under the soil there was the hole.

It was there at twenty past seven, in the white light of the bar. It was a cut and fill. The edges were still sharp under the frost. The fill was dark and greasy with oil. At the bottom a length of grey pipe went down into the wet clay toward the river. At the throat of the pipe there was a colour that was not the colour of any soil in the county.

Two men followed the pipe away from the pit with a tape. It went toward the water. They measured it in sections and wrote each section down in a notebook. One of them stood at the end of it in the wet grass and looked at the river, and did not write anything at all.

Wu stood at the lip and looked at it. Then he turned and looked at Lin Bo.

"Doctor," he said. "Come and see your corner."

Lin Bo came. The tape was at his back and the lights were at his shoulders, and the two men in coats watched from the edge. He stood at the lip and looked at what he had made, and not written down, and covered with good lime.

"Tell me what it is," Wu said.

"It is a cut and fill from this autumn."

"How do you know the autumn."

"The edges are sharp under the frost. The fill is oil-dark. There is fresh tin above the old lead on the lip. At the bottom there is a length of discharge pipe with a licence that does not exist." Lin Bo's voice came out flat, the way it came out when he read a profile to a room. "The pit is not a legacy of anything. It was cut this autumn and filled this autumn."

"And your report."

"My report records the filled feature as a legacy of the old soldering work."

"Say the rest of it."

"My report is wrong."

Wu did not look pleased, or satisfied, or any of the things Lin Bo had spent four months imagining on the other man's face. He looked the way a man looks when a job he has to do turns out to be the job he thought it was.

"The young woman will take your words in a moment," he said. "When she does, say exactly what you just said. Do not add to it. Do not say it was for your uncle, and do not say it was for the number. The county does not care what it was for. The county cares what it is."

Two men in aprons were lifting a blue drum out of the dark at the back of the pit. Then another. Lin Bo had known there would be drums.

Beyond the tape, past the fence line, the crew had begun to gather in the dark. A-Chun was there with the boy. Nobody had called them and nobody was going to send them home, because the town has a

rule that a man may watch his own ruin from the correct side of a line.

"We have the drums," Wu said. "We have the pipe and the sample. What we do not have is a man. A pit does not walk into a yard. Somebody filled it."

"Then you will want the man."

"I want the man," Wu said. "But I do not need to find him."

Lin Bo looked at him.

"At ten to six this morning a man came into the north yard office and sat down with his hands on the table," Wu said. "The night man did not know what to do with him, so he gave him tea. He was still sitting there when my people reached the yard at six. He asked them to tell the young one—" Wu stopped, and looked at Lin Bo, and left it there.

"He came in on his own."

"He came in on his own," Wu said. "No one asked him to and no one brought him. He was 传唤 (*chuanhuan* - to call a person in, the official summons) before the cars were down the embankment. He answered the summons by walking to the chair first." Wu looked at the pit. "That is the difference between your uncle and the rest of this trade. It is the difference I will write down. It is the only thing on this plot to-day that a court will understand."

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The north bank was a mile of water away. In the grey of the morning Lin Bo could see the lights of it, three lines of them. The yards were running to the year's end the way they always ran.

He stood at the tape with the folder in his arms and watched across the river. Then a figure came out of the yard office between two men and stood on the loading apron. The figure did not hurry. It did not look at its hands. Then it got into the white car, and the car went up the road with no lights flashing, because it was a summons and not a chase.

Lin Bo did not move. There was nothing in his body that wanted to move. He had spent five days deciding whether to give his uncle a date. His uncle had given the county himself before the sun was up. That was the answer to the question, and the answer had not needed him.

The young woman came with the form. She stood beside him at the tape in the cold and read him the words.

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"Your statement, in your own words. If I write a word wrong you stop me."

She wrote. He said it flat, once, all of it. It came out short and clean. It was the first time he had said the whole true thing out loud since he came home. It took four minutes. It cost the autumn.

She wrote it in the flat hand they teach, and she did not look up while she wrote. She did not breathe in the wrong places the way people do when a story troubles them. That was the part Lin Bo had not expected and could not get used to. The state took a man's worst morning and made it into a page with a line for the date. The page was neat. The page was true. The neatness was the whole of the dif - ference between what he had done and what he had written down.

When she read it back, there was a line at the bottom for his name. Under the name there was a line for the date. Under the date there was a line that said the record was true.

He signed. His hand was steady. He looked at it after, at the two neat characters of his own name on the county paper. It was the steadiest his hand had been since November. He understood that the steadiness was not calm, and not relief, and not absolution. It was a body that had put down a thing it had been carrying.

The report was in the case now. All of it, the log sheets and the monitoring record, and the two sheets no one had asked for. A man in a coat took the whole folder and put it in a box with a number on it. The box went into a white car. The number was the case, and the

case had been opened in January, and it now had a *li'an* on the cover with 笔录 (*bilu* - the formal statement, the written record of what a man says to the state) under it, and his name on the line.

※

Zhao came at nine, when it was light.

He came alone and walked the tape the way a man walks a boundary he already knows. He stopped where the pit was open. The two men in coats had set their folder on a trestle, and Zhao looked down into the pit for a long time. He did not ask what it was. He had known since November, and Lin Bo had known that he had known since the tea room. The two of them stood there in the cold with the whole thing open between them and nothing left to be pretended.

"The number," Zhao said at last.

"The number is finished," Lin Bo said.

"The number is finished," Zhao agreed.

And then he did the thing that was his choice. Lin Bo watched him do it, and it was the clearest thing he saw all winter.

Zhao did not protect the corner. He did not protect Lin Bo. He did not fold the pit back into a footnote. He turned to the procuratorate men and spoke in the flat voice of a man reading a form. The park would submit a corrected record to the province. The park would not contest the sampling. The park would place the project in its own file as a project under a case.

He said it the way a man reads out a road number, and the two men in coats took it down without asking him to repeat it. Nobody on the plot asked him to choose differently, because the choice had already been taken by a pit and a pipe and a drum, and a morning does not get to argue with a hole in the ground.

Then he said the second thing, which was the arithmetic.

"The lead submitted a report," he said. "The report is the park's report, and the park will say that the report is the lead's. That is not a judgement on the lead. It is the form. A report is a thing with one

name on the line. The name on the line is the person who signed it. That person is standing at your table."

The two men in coats wrote it down.

"And the park," Zhao said, "the park will take the correction on the number. The number will go into the province as a bad number. The province will not close the park, because a park that corrects itself is a park that is working. That is what a director can do in a morning. It is neither cruel nor kind. It is park arithmetic, and you have heard me say the arithmetic before, and I am sorry that you are now the num‑ber."

"You are not sorry," Lin Bo said.

"No," Zhao said. "I am not. That is the other thing I have been trying to say to you since October. You have not been able to hear it, and I do not blame you. I like the work you do. I would keep you at this park if the county let me. The county will not. That is not a cruelty. It is a fact, and in this office a fact comes with a date on it. I have said the rest of it to you before, with the kettle on between us. The date is the only honest thing in this room."

He looked at the pit one more time.

"Go home," he said. "Talk to nobody to-day. Somebody will talk to you after the New Year. When they do, tell them what you told the young woman, and nothing more, and nothing less. It will be a smaller thing than the thing you are afraid of. It usually is. The men who spend the most on the trial are the men who decide the story in a room before the case is warm. I would not have you be that man." He put his hands in his pockets. "You came back to this town to do a good thing. The good thing is in the record now. The record has your name on the line, and that is the end of it. The river does not get a correction. Only the paper does."

Then he did one more thing, which was small, and which Lin Bo would think about for a long time. He took out his phone and stood in the cold and made a call, and he said the crew's names into it, and he said the word for the day's wages. He said the park would pay the

day, because the day had been the park's. When he put the phone away he did not look at Lin Bo. It was not a kindness. It was the same arithmetic. But it was also the crew's rice, and Lin Bo watched him do it. He understood that a man can be the thing that ruins you and the thing that pays the crew in the same hour. This town is full of such men. His uncle was one of them.

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They sealed the plot in the afternoon.

It was an ordinary seal, the kind the county keeps in a drawer. It was a narrow strip of paper, a metre long, with a red character printed on it and a serial number at the foot. One of the two silent men pasted it across the gate and smoothed it down with the side of his hand. Another photographed it. Then everybody got into the cars and went away. The plot was a rectangle of frosted ground with the two stakes still in it, and a paper seal shivering on the gate.

The *tengtui* on the shop behind the bus road had been a white paper. It meant a man had run out of time. This was a small red mark on a green gate. It meant the state had taken the ground into its hands, and the ground would not be walked again until the state was done with it. The 查封 (*chafeng* - to seal off by authority, the state's seal on premises or ground) was one strip of paper. It was heavier than the fence that had stood there since the autumn. It was heavier than the twelve months of lime.

Lin Bo did not go in. He had come to the gate with the crew and stood outside it. A-Chun stood beside him and the boy stood beside her. Nobody said anything, because in that town there was nothing to say in front of a seal, and every one of them had stood in front of one before, at a door, at a yard, at a boat.

They walked back up the embankment road together, the four of them. Nobody was paid for the day, because there was no day to be paid for. A-Chun said she could find the crew a week's work at a fish yard in Dongli, if Lin Bo would write the letter. Lin Bo said he would

write the letter. The boy walked at the back with his hands in his pockets and looked back at the sealed gate the way he had looked at the corner.

At the bus stop Lin Bo turned and looked at the far bank. The yards had their fires up for the afternoon, three of them, and the smoke went up into the grey the way it had gone up every afternoon of his life. Somewhere over there his uncle was sitting in a room with a table and a light. He would be answering the summons in the flat voice of a man reading his own ledger out loud.

The bus came out of the grey and he got on it, and it was almost empty at that hour, and it smelled of wet coats and diesel and the cold that had come in with the frost. It carried him along the em‑bankment road with the sealed gate on his left and the paper seal shivering on the wire. His hand was steady on the strap. He took the folder out from under his coat. It was not the folder with the sheets in it, because they had taken that one. He opened it, and inside there was nothing at all. He closed it. It was the steadiest his hand had been in four months. He did not want it. There was no one he could tell.

Under the seal was the corner, and under the corner was the hole, and in the hole was the pipe, going down to the river the way it had gone down since the autumn. Nobody had pulled it. Nobody was go‑ing to pull it. It was still there, and it was still his.

CHAPTER 18

The Fallout

The New Year came to the town on a wet grey morning, and the house on the lane did not keep it.

In other years his mother began a week out. She bought the three meats and the cakes for the shelf. She cleaned the ancestral tablets and put the red on the doors. This year she did none of it. The shelf kept the last year's dust. The red paper stayed rolled in its drawer with the string around it. On the morning itself she cooked rice and a fish and set out three bowls for a house of three, and Lin Bo counted them twice, because there had been a fourth place at that table for as long as he had been alive and this year it was a room the county keeps.

The shelf had the grandfather's tablet and the grandmother's, and the small enamel cup. In other years she lit the three sticks before the rice and moved the cup an inch to the left and an inch back, which was her whole ceremony and had been her mother's. This year the sticks stayed in their paper band. Lin Bo did not ask about them. He had learned, in a month, that the things which were not done in that house were louder than the things which were.

Lin Bo had never seen the house refuse the New Year. All his life the town had drummed and burned and eaten through it. The lanes filled with the returnees' cars and the smell of the offerings and the frying oil. This year the town kept the festival. This house did not. The difference was one quiet door in a lane where every other door had the red on it.

The town ran on 闲话 (*xianhua* - the town's talk, the small words that weigh a family). It ran on the talk the way the river ran on rain. In the week after the raid the talk had a single subject, and the subject had the family's name in it.

He went to the market before the holiday. The fish woman who had sold to his mother for twenty years looked at him and looked down at the ice. An old neighbour who once wanted to marry him to her niece asked after the weather in a warm voice and moved on with her basket. Nobody said a rude word. That was how the talk worked. You were greeted and served, and the stalls were pleasant as ever, and behind you the sentences closed over you like water over a dropped stone.

His mother had spent thirty years building one thing, and the thing was the family's 名声 (*mingsheng* - the reputation, the name a family keeps in a town). It was not money. It was the thing you could borrow against at the fish stall on a morning when your purse was at home. She had built it one good year at a time, the way a woman builds a wall, and the county had taken it down in four days. Lin Bo understood this. He could not make it weigh on himself the way it weighed on her, and that was the first of the winter's separations, and nobody argued about it.

The aunt phoned on the first day. She did not come. She said her knees were bad, which was true, and she said the family should keep the New Year small this year, which was also true. Under both truths she said the thing she had rung to say. The keys would stay on the board. The diaspora houses would stay shut. This year nobody would walk the lane and photograph the locked doors, because this year the family had a locked door of its own. A locked door is a different thing when it is your own.

His mother had stopped talking.

Not the small talk of the house, which had always been mostly the dishes and the sighing. She had stopped the other talk. She no longer asked who had rung. She no longer said what the Li family had sent back, or what the go-between had hinted, or which spring day the aunt wanted. For the first time in his life the house ran without her voice in it, and he understood that her voice had been the house's

calendar. She had carried the family's whole diary for thirty years, and in four days she had set it down.

He tried to pick it up. He made the rice one evening and she let him and ate it without comment. He asked whether she wanted to go and sort his uncle's things. She gave him the flat look she saved for a wrong number on a bill. That was the new manner. In the old manner she would have talked for an hour, and the hour would have been about something else.

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He walked to the hall on the third day to return the folding chairs the aunt had lent at the autumn rite. The old men were at their cards and the grandmothers were at the long table with their tea, and when he came in they went quiet for the length of a breath and then talked about the weather. One of them, the one who had stood at the plot in the autumn and said the picture made the smoke look kind, asked him how his father was doing and did not ask anything else. He answered her and carried the chairs to the store and came back out.

He understood that the hall would say nothing to his face. He also understood that the hall was where the town did its deciding, and that the deciding had already been done, and that it had been done about his mother, who had done nothing, and about his uncle, who had done everything, and that neither of them had been in the room.

His mother's friend, the grandmother from the far lane, walked out with him as far as the gate. She was the one who had told him about the smoke and the shed children, and she had never once been unkind to him, and she was not unkind now.

"Your mother is a proud woman," she said. "Tell her the hall keeps her place. Tell her to come and sit on the fourth."

"She will not come."

"Then tell her anyway," the grandmother said, "and she will know that I said it." She put her hand on the gatepost. "The town has

decided about your uncle. The town has not decided about your mother. Those are two different rooms, and she thinks they are one."

※

His father was the only one in the house who was talking.

The father had been heading toward silence for two years, the way a river heads to the sea. This winter he turned and went the other way. He wanted the news. He wanted it twice. He wanted the raid told to him, and the tape, and the seal, and the date in Lin Bo's palm.

"Say the part with the drums again," the father said.

"There were two drums. They were blue."

"And the pipe."

"The pipe goes down to the river. It has gone down since the au‑tumn."

The father looked at his own hands for a while. "Your uncle used to say a yard is a man's whole life in a small place," he said. "He meant it as a good thing."

Lin Bo gave him the pills and the water. The father took them, and the unlabelled white one went down with the rest, and neither of them said anything about that one, because in that house the medicines were real and the rest was not discussed.

"Your mother will talk when the food runs low," the father said. "She has not gone far. A woman keeps a house the way a man keeps a boat, and she has pulled the boat up on the bank for a while. Leave her on the bank."

"Will she come back to it."

"She has come back to worse," the father said.

Then he asked the question Lin Bo had been waiting for since the raid.

"Did you write it down."

"Yes."

"All of it."

"All of it."

The father nodded, slow, twice, the way he nodded at the river. “Then it is written,” he said. “That is all a man can do with a thing like this. He writes it down and lets the paper carry it, and then he goes outside and the yard is still there, and the river is still there.” He looked at Lin Bo across the room. “You will not be forgiven for it, and you should not go looking for the forgiving. But nobody has put you out of this house, and nobody will. That is not a kindness. It is how the house is built.”

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The go-between rang on the eighth day. She did not ask for his mother. She asked for Lin Bo, which was already the answer. Her voice was quick and warm the way it always was. She said the Li family had decided that the time was not right. She used the trade’s word, which was 退亲 (*tuiqin* - to call off a marriage arrangement). She said both young people were good and that nobody was at fault. Then she said the other thing, which was the arithmetic under the courtesy, and the arithmetic was easy to hear. A man whose name stood on a company with a case against it was not a floor a family could build a daughter on. A girl who taught forty children did not need a gate with a paper across it. The spring date everybody had been ready to fix was, this year, not a date any family could fix.

Lin Bo thanked her for telling him plainly. She sounded relieved at that. She said she had told his mother first, four days ago, and that his mother had said nothing at all. The silence, she said, had been harder than any answer she could have been given. Then she rang off.

He sat with it in the front room, and then he understood the thing he had been circling. The go-between had not minded telling him. The go-between had minded telling his mother, because his mother was the one who had kept the whole account for thirty years, and the account had just been closed by a man on the other end of a phone who was not even angry.

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The aunt phoned again the next morning, and this time she talked, because this time it was not about the family's face but about the case. A lawyer had been found in Chaoyang, a cousin of a cousin, and the lawyer wanted money up front, and the money would come out of the four houses the way the New Year money always came, folded and counted and never named. Your uncle is being held, the aunt said, and the holding is not the sentence, and the sentence is a thing the spring will decide. Lin Bo listened and wrote the lawyer's number on the back of an envelope. He did not tell her that he had stood at the tape and given the county the words that would help make a holding into a sentence. That was the kind of true thing a man kept in the same drawer with the rest of the things the house did not say.

That afternoon he walked to the shop behind the bus road to fetch his uncle's things, because his mother had asked him to, and the asking was the first real work she had given him in two weeks.

The shutter was down. The *tengtui* was still folded into the frame, and somebody had pulled it out and read it and pushed it back. He had a key, because there was a key, and he lifted the shutter a metre and went in under it.

The bedroll was against the wall. The folding table was clean. There was the bulb, the sink, the electric ring, the bowl, the chopsticks, and one tin of bean-thread noodles with a rubber band around it. That was the whole of a man's shop. He rolled the bedroll and put the bowl in a bag and left the noodles, because the noodles were the one thing that could wait for the man himself. On the door frame, above the pencil tick that had closed the *tengtui*, somebody had written four small characters he could not read from the lane, and he did not stoop to read them, and he pulled the shutter down over them and locked it and put the key back in his pocket, where the key had always been.

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Li Hui came the next afternoon.

She stood at the gate with her helmet under her arm and did not come in, and he went out and stood with her in the lane. The lane was quiet. The red on the other doors was already curling at the corners.

“You have heard,” he said.

“I heard it from my mother, who had it from the aunt, who had it from the go-between, who had it from your mother, who said noth ing.” She set the helmet on the wall. “I did not send her. I want that on the table. My mother did this on her own.”

“I know.”

“Do you.” She looked at him, and it was her look from the res taurant, the look that had stopped being a kindness in October. “You do not know anything, Lin Bo. I keep finding that out.”

She asked after his father. She asked after the plot, and whether the men had been paid, and he told her about the fish yard in Dongli and the letter he had written to the foreman there. She listened the way she did everything, flatly, without giving ground. Then she told him the thing she had come to tell, and it was not about the match at all.

The yard man’s boy had come back to school. He had missed el even days. He sat at the back and would not read aloud. His father was one of the men the case had taken, and the boy had learned the word for that from the other children, and the word was not a kind one. So she had done a thing she was not sure she was allowed to do. She had told the class that her own family had been touched by the county that winter too. Then she had called on the boy, and he had read one sentence, and the class had let him read it.

“Why are you telling me this,” he said.

“Because you would have found it out in a month,” she said, “and it would have hurt you worse. There are children in it. I wanted you to hear a fact about the case that is not about you.”

He stood with that a moment. The lane smelled of wet brick. Somewhere behind the wall a television was doing the New Year, loud, the same program the whole town was watching.

"Is it over," he said.

"It is over the way four o'clock is over," she said. "It happens, and then it is the next thing." She picked up the helmet. "You will be all right. That is not a kindness. It is a thing I have looked at from every side, and it is the only thing I have to give you." She put the helmet on. "Eat something."

She rode off down the lane. He watched the scooter take the corner, and the lane closed over the place where she had been, and that was the end of it. He did not know whether to call it the end, and it did not matter what he called it.

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A-Chun came on the fourth day, on foot, with a plastic bag of the fish-yard money folded the way Wei had always folded the men's pay.

"The fish man took all six of us," she said. "A week, maybe two. The boy is on the ice line, which is cold but clean. I came to tell you the crew is fed, because I know that is the thing you are lying awake about, and I want you to stop."

"Thank you."

"Go on, then. Say the other thing." She looked at him. "You have the face of a man with an other thing."

"The plot is sealed," he said. "You know that. The project is sus - pended. I do not know what I am doing here any more."

A-Chun put the bag on the step and sat down on it, which was her way of saying she had time. "You know what I think," she said. "I think you did the right thing and it has cost you everything and it will go on costing you, and that is not a reward, that is just what the right thing costs. I have watched this town thirty years. Nobody is ever paid for the true thing. They are paid for the useful thing. The men on the ground are always paid in the useful coin." She stood up and

dusted the bag. “But the true thing is written down now. My boy can read. He will find it in a book some year and he will know what his mother stood next to.”

“And what did she stand next to.”

“A hole and a paper on a gate,” A-Chun said. “Which is more than most men in this town ever get told. Eat something. Your mother is not cooking, I hear.”

She went off up the lane. Lin Bo took the bag inside. He did not need the money and he did not return it, because returning it would have been a statement and A-Chun had already made hers.

※

The letter from the park came on the first working day after the holiday. It had the park’s seal on the corner and it said that the project was suspended pending the case and that he should come in for a talk.

The office was cold. Zhao had the corrected record on the desk, one page, and Lin Bo read it standing up. His own false sentence was quoted in it and struck through, and the correction was written underneath in the same font, and the province’s line was at the foot of the page in a smaller font, and the line said received.

“They will read it in the spring,” Zhao said. “They read everything in the spring. It is the only season the province has.”

“Sit down,” he said. “This part is short. The park has suspended the project. The park has not dismissed you. A dismissal is a judgement and a suspension is a fact, and this office no longer makes judgements. You are on the books and off the ground. Somebody will come from the province in the spring. When they come, tell them what you told the young woman at the tape, and nothing more, and nothing less.”

“And my name.”

“Your name stays where it is,” Zhao said. “On the company, on the guarantee, on the report. I moved none of it. You moved none of it. That is the fallout, and you can hold it in one hand.”

Lin Bo asked the one thing he had come to ask. “The crew. The letter to the fish yard.”

“I know nothing about any letter,” Zhao said. “I know the park paid the day. The day is paid.”

Lin Bo stood up to go, and Zhao spoke again, to the window rather than to him.

“One more thing, and then you can go and not come back for a while. The record has a correction and no finding. A park with a case on it and no finding has to explain itself twice. You know the ground better than any man in this county. Write the number.”

※

He did it at the kitchen table at night, with the house asleep.

The log sheets were in his head and the lab’s returns were on the phone. Five months. The eight opened cells had come down on bioavailable lead by between sixteen and twenty-eight per cent, and the middle of them was twenty-one. The ninth cell, the old-high one with the signature of the nineties, had not moved at all, because its metal was already bound and the lime was not for it. And the corner, C-10, had gone up. The corner had never been a legacy. The fresh material the trade had put into it was doing what fresh material does.

So the honest interim finding, five months into an eighteen-month pilot, was a fifth. The park had asked for forty. The lime was working. The plot was poisoned. Both of those were true, and neither of them cancelled the other.

He wrote it plainly, because there was no other way to write a thing that would stay true. While he wrote he understood how little it would please anybody.

The park wanted a number it could paint on a board at the gate. It was getting a number with a caveat, and the caveat was a criminal case.

The province wanted a green field to stand in front of. It was getting a green field with a pipe under it.

His mother wanted the family's name back. The record was now saying, in the state's own hand, that the family's own trade had put the poison into the family's own ground. That was true. The name did not come back with it.

The grandmothers in the hall wanted the children's blood cleaned. Their blood would not be cleaned. That was not the project's failure or the park's or the province's. That was the metal, and the metal stayed.

What he wanted, he could no longer say. He had come home to fix a thing. He had come home and written a true page. Those were not the same, and he was beginning to think the page was the whole of what he was going to get.

He looked at the number one more time before he closed the folder. A fifth. He had come home with a model that promised forty in eighteen months, and he was leaving with a fifth in five and a hole that would go to a court. If the province read the fifth and read the case and decided the whole thing was a fraud, then the fifth would go in the bin with the rest of it. That was the risk he had taken when he signed the true page. He had made the number smaller and truer and easier to throw away, and he did not know whether that was courage or only a man tidying up behind himself.

※

He showed the page to nobody. But in the morning his mother had found it on the table, and she had read it, which she could.

She put it down and looked at him across the bowls.

"When he comes home," she said, "he will eat at this table."

It was the first real sentence she had said in two weeks. It was not about the page and it was not about him. It was a decision she had made without asking him, and Lin Bo understood that his mother had chosen her brother over her son's fine honest number, and that she would go on choosing him, and that this also was true and would have to be lived in the same house.

He did not argue with her. There was nothing to argue. He stacked the bowls and went out into the yard and stood there in the cold, and the yard was still there, the way his father had said it would be.

He put his copy of the finding in the empty folder. For four months the folder had held a lie that had done the whole county's work. Now it held a true page that nobody had any use for. He closed it and set it on the shelf beside his father's folder of cards and bills, and he knew which of the two the house would need in the spring.

The province read the number and did not write back. The river went on running under the seal. The lime went on working in the cold ground, slow, patient, doing its chemistry whether or not anybody came back to look. And the number was a fifth, and it satisfied nobody, and it was true.

CHAPTER 19

The Compromise

The province sent its someone in the second week of March. The someone was a woman of about forty, with a soft folder and a hard question, and the hard question was the one Lin Bo had carried since the seal.

She walked the plot with him. The tape was down and the stakes were gone. The paper seal had gone the way paper goes in weather, and a county lock hung on the hasp now, and the woman had the key. She walked the grid the way he had walked it a hundred times, from the road end to the far corner. She stopped at the corner the way everybody stopped at the corner.

"What is to be done with the ground," she said.

"The corner comes out to the base of the pipe. The drums and the fill go out through a licensed unit. Then the pit gets its lime and closes, and the cells go back in."

"Who is to do it."

That was the question with a door in it, and he had spent a month circling the door. He did not answer at once. He had learned in four months that the county takes a pause for a lie, and a lie for a thing to be written down.

"The park has no crew for this class of work," the woman said. "The park has a list of three units in the region that hold the permit, two in the county and one in Chaoyang. The park sub-contracts. The park writes a ticket, the unit holds the paper, the crew does the work, and the waste goes out with a number on it. You know a crew, Doctor Lin. Everyone in the file knows a crew."

"I know a crew," he said.

"Then bring me a licensed one," she said. "Bring me a unit that will hold the ticket for that crew, and the park will write the contract,

and the ground will be worked. I do not care what the crew did last year. I care who signs for what it does this year. That is my job, and it is yours."

She had read the file and she had read his report, and she asked him two questions about the ground and none about himself, which he took for the kindness it may or may not have been.

"Two problems," he said. "On the worked cells there is the old lead, bound into the soil since the nineties, and the lime is slowly locking it down. In the corner there is fresh material from a trade that ran on this ground last autumn. They are not the same problem, and no single number describes both. The park's last record made them one thing, and that was my doing."

"I read the corrected record," she said. "It says the two things as two things. That is why I am standing on the ground this morning instead of sitting behind a desk." She looked out across the cells. "A record that carries two hard things is worth more to me than a record that carries one easy one. I am not required to say that. I am saying it."

She gave him the list, three units, on a half-sheet of paper. She walked him back to the gate. At the gate she stopped once more, and the softness came back into her folder and not into her voice.

"Your own part," she said. "The report with your name on it. The county has read the corrected record. The county will decide your part in the summer. Until it decides, stay off the ground, keep the park informed, and do not talk to the papers."

She crossed the lane to a grey car and was gone before he had thought of an answer. He stood at the gate with the list in his hand, and the lock on the hasp, and the afternoon in front of him and nothing in it but the list.

※

He went to Zhao the same day.

Zhao listened with both hands around the cup and did not close the door, which was the first surprise of the month.

"You are asking me to let your uncle's crew back onto the county's ground," he said.

"I am asking you to let the crew back. Six people who can read a profile and move two hundred tonnes and not drop a drum. The park needs that crew. The province has just told you to have the ground worked by a licensed unit. The crew is the hands and the unit is the paper, and that is a thing the park can do."

"It is a thing the park can do," Zhao said. "And it is a thing that a certain office in Chaoyang will read in the summer, and decide whether it was a thing the park should have done."

"That is the arithmetic either way," Lin Bo said.

"It is the arithmetic either way," Zhao said.

"You know how licensed work is done in this county," Lin Bo said. "The unit holds the ticket and a crew goes under it. Every yard here that has been made legal in ten years was made legal that way. It has a word."

"It has a word," Zhao said. "It is 挂靠 (*guakao* - to attach one's crew and operation under another unit's permit, trading under a licensed name). The province dislikes the word and uses it every day. The licensed units will not send a crew from Chaoyang to a yard in this town, and the yards in this town will never hold the permit themselves. So everybody says the word quietly, and the waste goes out with a paper, and nobody writes the word down. You want a thing the province does not write down."

"I want the men fed and the drums gone," Lin Bo said, "and I want it written down somewhere, even if it is the wrong somewhere."

Zhao put the cup down. "Bring me the unit," he said. "Bring me a unit with a real permit and a real plant and a name I can put in a contract, and I will write the contract, and I will not enjoy it."

Lin Bo stood to go. Zhao said the last thing to the window rather than to him.

"You know what you are doing," he said. "You are taking the thing that was done in the dark and doing it in the light. Most of the light in this county is a fee. That is not a sin. It is the only way anything gets done here." He turned from the window. "Your uncle will wear a badge. You tell him, not the unit. He should hear it from family."

※

The unit's office was a room above a tyre shop on the Chaoyang road. The man was young and quick, with a good jacket and a desk that held nothing but a phone and a packet of cigarettes he never opened. His name was Huang, and he said the word before Lin Bo did.

"Under our ticket," he said. "The crew, the truck, the drums, the furnace, all under our ticket. We hold the 资质 (*zizhi* - the permit, the qualification a unit must hold to move and process this class of waste). You bring the hands. We take fifteen off the top and you take the wage, the county gets its paper, and everybody sleeps at night."

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen of the ticket, and the ticket carries the disposal fee, and the disposal goes to the plant in Shantou, and the plant is the only one that will take your drums," Huang said. "It is not a bargain, Doctor Lin. It is a fact with a price. Go and get your own permit and I will wait. I will wait two years. That is how long it takes."

Lin Bo looked at the desk. There was nothing on it, and the empty desk was the man's qualification. The unit did not do work. It held a permit and a plant contract and a bank account, and it let crews walk through the gate under its name.

"And if the drums are not clean," he said.

"Then it is my permit and my problem and my fine," Huang said. "That is what the fifteen buys. You are not paying me to be honest. You are paying me to be the one holding it when it goes wrong."

Lin Bo asked the question he had come to ask.

“And the man whose hands it is. The one who held the ticket himself.”

“He wears a 工牌 (*gongpai* - the work badge, the card a worker wears on a licensed site) like everybody else,” Huang said. “On my ticket a man is a badge. The badge says the unit. It does not say the man. Tell him that before the first morning, because the first morn‑ing is when they learn it, and I do not want a scene on my ticket.”

※

Before he went to Wei he went up the north bank to the yards, because a licensed crew is no use if the other yards keep the dark, and he had learned that the dark is a habit and not a choice.

He walked the lanes the way he had walked them in October. The boards were still stacked in the open, grey and warped. Two men he knew from the autumn stop-work were stripping cable at a table, and they did not stop for him.

“The county is putting the work out under a unit,” he said. “Huang, above the tyre shop in Chaoyang. Fifteen off the top. The drums out the front gate. A wage at the end of the week.”

The older man cut a length of cable and did not look up.

“And who wears the badge,” he said.

“You do.”

“Then the badge tells me whose yard I am standing in,” the man said. “I already know whose yard I am standing in. I do not need a card to tell me.” He held the wire up to the light and turned it. “Come back at the New Year and count how many of us are under the tyre shop. It will not be all of us. Some men will keep the dark, because in the dark a man keeps his own fifteen.”

Lin Bo did not argue with him. There was nothing to argue. The man was right about the town the way the county was right about the paper, and both of them were right in a way that left the drums in the ground.

※

Wei had been out on a guarantee for three weeks. He had come home and eaten at the table the mother had kept for him, and then he had gone back to the shop behind the bus road, because a man who has been held sleeps where his work is.

Lin Bo lifted the shutter and went in under it. Wei was at the folding table with the tin of noodles open and a bowl beside it, and the four small characters were still on the door frame, and this time Lin Bo read them. They were the words for the day's rate, pencilled, the way a man writes a thing he means to watch and not to keep.

"I have a unit," Lin Bo said. "Huang, above the tyre shop in Chaoyang. Fifteen per cent off the top. The crew works under his ticket, the drums go out to Shantou, the furnace runs with a number on it. The park writes the contract. The province told them to."

Wei ate a mouthful of noodles and looked at him.

"And me," he said.

"You wear a badge."

Wei put the chopsticks down. He looked at his own hands for a while, the pale smooth ones that had stopped showing pain.

"On the badge," he said, "what is the name."

"Huang's unit."

"Not mine."

"Not yours."

Wei laughed. It was the thing he did when he was told the truth and did not want to hear it, and the laugh was short and it reached nothing.

"Eleven years I kept the ledger," he said. "I was the name and the hands both. Now I am the hands, and the name is a man above a tyre shop who has never smelled a board. That is what the county calls making it right. It is not right. It is a fee." He picked the chopsticks up again. "But the men will eat, and the drums will go out the front gate with a paper on them instead of out the back at night, and the river

will get a little less than it was going to get. That is a small thing. It is not nothing."

"And the shop," Lin Bo said. "Shunfa. The firm has to come off the door. My name is on it. I take it off."

"You take your name off the door," Wei said, "and you leave it on the paper."

"It is the most I can do."

"It is all any man in this county can do," Wei said. "The door is for the lane to look at. The paper is for the court to look at. A man keeps his name off the door and on the paper and calls that a life."

"The wage," Lin Bo said. "Zhou and the order."

"The wage goes to Zhou until the order is met," Wei said. "I have given Huang the number. It comes off before it reaches my hand. That is the other fee, and it is the one I chose."

"You chose it."

"I chose it the day I signed for the two hundred thousand," Wei said. "A man does not choose again at the end. He just pays."

※

He told the father that night, because the father was the only one in the house who wanted the news told twice.

"Under the Chaoyang unit," the father said. "Fifteen off the top. And Wei?"

"He wears a badge. Same work. He is a hand now, not a name."

The father looked at the ceiling for a while, the way he looked at anything he was turning over.

"It is how it is done," he said at last. "In the old days a man went in under the licensed yard and paid the yard its cut and worked under its sign, and the sign went up over his own door, and the town called him a partner. Nobody was ever a partner. Everybody was a hand under somebody's sign. Wei has been a hand under his own sign for eleven years, which is the worst kind. You are the name and the hands and you keep the ledger, and there is nobody to blame but the

two of you.” He closed his eyes. “A badge is not a shame. A badge is a thing a man puts on and takes off. If the county takes it off him, he has lost a job and not a life. Tell him I said that.”

※

He told the mother last, because telling the mother was the only telling that mattered.

She was at the sink with the bowls. He said it plainly, the way he had learned to say things in that house. The unit. The ticket. The fifteen. The badge. The wage that would go to Zhou before it reached a hand. The door that would come off the shop and the paper that would stay.

She did not turn around. She washed the bowl she was holding and set it down and picked up the next one.

“He will wear the badge,” she said.

“He will wear the badge.”

“And at the New Year he will eat at this table.”

“He will.”

She set the second bowl down.

“Then it is done,” she said, and that was all of her, and it was more than the aunt had managed all winter.

※

The lawyer in Chaoyang did the paper. Shunfa would be struck from the register on the ground that it had no paid-in capital and no trade and a case. Lin Bo signed the pages that took his name off the company the way a man signs for a bad tooth.

“Does this take my name off the debt,” he asked.

“It does not,” the lawyer said. “The guarantee is you. The company was a hat. You are the head, and it was your head we put in the hat.” He stacked the pages and squared them. “You may keep the hat. It is worth nothing, and it is yours.”

※

He told A-Chun before he told anyone else, because A-Chun would hear it wrong from anyone but him.

“So the crew goes under the Chaoyang unit,” she said. “Fifteen off the top. A badge on every chest.”

“A badge on every chest.”

A-Chun looked at the sealed gate.

“I have worked this ground under a man’s word and under a paper and under a fence,” she said. “I will work it under a badge if the wage is the same. Is the wage the same?”

“The wage is what the yard paid.”

“Then it will do,” she said. “Do not dress it up. It is a job, and a job is the only thing the men were ever asking for, and you have spent four months finding a harder way to hand them the thing they already had.”

※

The case came up on the last Wednesday of March. Wei went in with the lawyer and came out with a fine and three years held over his head, and the lawyer called it a good result, and so did the aunt, and so did the mother. The crew’s new contracts went into the file, because a court likes a harm that has already begun to be paid for, and the badge was part of what paid.

The procuratorate read the harm into the record in the flat voice of a man reading a bill of lading. The drums, the pipe, the tin, the trace, the two hundred tonnes. Wei stood and said the short formula the lawyer had prepared for him, and the formula was that he ad - mitted the thing. The admitting was not an apology. Nobody had asked it to be, and nobody in that room was owed one, and Lin Bo, listening from the lane, understood that his uncle had done the one thing he had refused to do for four months, which was to stand in the light and let the county write him down.

Lin Bo was not in the room for the sentence. He heard it on the phone, from the lawyer, standing in the lane outside his own door.

When he put the phone away his hand was steady, and he noticed that it was steady, and he did not know any more whether that was the tremor resting or the tremor gone.

※

He went to Old Ge the next day, because Old Ge had once told him to come and drink tea when he had measured him, and Lin Bo had not measured him yet, but he had something to bring.

Old Ge was at the nursery with the seedlings. He listened to all of it with his hands in the trough and did not look up.

"Now the furnace will run," he said.

"In April. Under a number."

"That is all the furnace ever needed," Old Ge said. "It was not the burning. It never was. The town believes it is the burning. The town is wrong, and the town will sleep better, and both of those are true." He lifted a seedling out of the trough and looked at its roots. "The number does not go into the blood. The number goes into the paper. The paper is a good thing to have." He set the seedling back, and the water closed over the roots. "Water moves on. Soil remembers."

He did not say the rest of it, and Lin Bo did not ask.

※

The corner came out on the first fine day of April.

The unit's truck came down the embankment road with the unit's name on the door. The crew walked behind it with the badges on their chests. A-Chun had hers on the strap of her bag, because a badge on a chest is a thing that catches on the trays. The boy had a badge, and he looked at it the way he had looked at the sealed gate.

Wei came last, on foot, the way he had always come. He had the badge pinned to his jacket and the flat cap on his head. He stood at the lip of the corner and looked down into his own ground for a while, the way a man looks at his own house when he comes back to it. Then he took the shovel and put the pale smooth hands into the

dark soil, and the badge stayed flat on his chest, because it was not a thing that came off at the end of the day.

At the fence the boy had taken his badge off and was turning it in his fingers, and Lin Bo went and stood beside him.

"It has the unit's name on it," the boy said. "Not yours."

"Not mine. It has the unit's name."

"What is it for."

"It is for the gate," Lin Bo said. "It is what lets you through the gate in the morning without a man stopping you to ask who you are."

The boy turned the card over. On the back there was a number and a strip of the county's colour. On the front there was the unit's name and no face.

"Then it is like the bus card," the boy said.

"It is like the bus card."

The boy put it back on his chest. It was the first thing Lin Bo had watched him do that looked like deciding something.

The furnace ran that afternoon.

It was the same furnace, the small one at the back of the yard that the older men had called the *liandan lu* since before Lin Bo was born, and Huang's unit had stencilled a permit number on its side in yellow paint. That number was the difference between the thing it had been and the thing it was. The boards went in the way they had always gone in. The smoke went up the way it had always gone up, grey and slow, into the grey. The crew stood at the rails with the badges on, and the town smelled the smell it had smelled for thirty years, and this time the smell had a number, and the number made it legal, and it was the same smell.

Lin Bo stood at the fence and watched it.

He had brokered the thing. He had put a permit on the smoke and a badge on the hands. The men would eat, and the drums would go out the front gate with a paper on them, and the river would get a little less, and the wage would not reach Wei's hand until Zhou's

order was met. None of it was what he had come home to do. All of it was the most he had managed.

His uncle would say it was a fee and not a right. Old Ge would say the furnace was never the sin. And the boy, who had a badge now, watched the smoke go up the way it had always gone up and did not look away. He had been handed the one thing his own father never had, which was a paper that said the smoke was allowed, and the paper would not keep his children's blood any cleaner, and no man at the rail would say any part of it out loud.

CHAPTER 20

The River

The county decided his part in the last week of June. The decision came the way county decisions come, in a white envelope with a window in it and two lines of a form.

The form said three things. The entry in the park's record was false. The record had been corrected by the man who had made it. The county would stop there.

The rest of the envelope was a fine. The fine was two months of his pay. The county collected it the way it collected everything, in a slip and a stamp, with no voice raised and no door closed.

He read it twice on the step of the lane house. Then he went in and gave his mother the short version, which was that he would not be charged. She said "Good" and turned back to the sink. He did not tell her the fine. In that house a number was a thing you folded away. It had taken him a year to learn that, and he had learned it at last.

The fine found him again in September, in the way of that house. He went to the tin on the shelf for the house money and found it short by exactly two months of his pay, and a slip folded into the paper, and the slip named the county's account and the sum. His mother had paid it in July, the week the envelope came, and had read it herself, the way she read everything that came to that house, and had said nothing. He stood at the shelf with the slip in his hand. She could read the size of a county fine the way she read a window number. He folded the slip back into the paper and said nothing, and neither did she, because in that house the paying of a thing was the end of the talk about it.

The park's letter came the same week. The project would go on under the park's own crew, under the unit's ticket, and Lin Bo could take a contract as the technician on that crew.

It was the same work he had done all year. It was a fifth of the money, and it was a badge. He signed it before he reached the bottom of the page. It was the only decision he made that year without weighing it first.

The badge had the unit's name printed large and his own name printed small underneath. That was the order the county had settled on, the unit first and the man second, and he wore it the way his uncle wore his, not as a thing he had chosen but as a thing he had stopped arguing with.

Zhao signed the contract and did not make a speech. He said the park had kept what it could keep of him. He said a technician's contract was issued at the discretion of the unit and renewed at the discretion of the unit, which he said twice, in the same words, the way a man says the only warning he is permitted to give. He said a man in this county should hold every paper lightly. Then he poured the tea, and they drank it, and that was the last meeting of the year that mattered.

※

They finished the corner in July.

The unit's men took it down to the base of the pipe. They lifted the pipe out in three sections and capped the line. The drums went out through the front gate on a flatbed with a number on the manifest, and the plant in Shantou signed for every one of them. Then the crew filled the pit with clean soil and good lime in layers and closed it.

Lin Bo stood at the lip and watched the last layer go in. It was the same pit his uncle had cut in the autumn. It was the same pit he had covered in the spring. The lime going in now was the good lime, and every scoop of it had a line in a box in Chaoyang. That was the difference, and it was all a paper could do.

He took the resample himself in August, because the technician takes the samples and he was the technician. The corner came back clean of the fresh tin. The old lead under it was down a little more

than the last time. The corner read like the rest of the plot, which was all it had been asked to be.

The number for the year came up in September. The eight worked cells were down twenty-nine per cent on bioavailable lead. The ninth was down four. The corner was like the rest. Twenty-nine, in twelve months, against a target of forty in eighteen.

The province's woman had told him once that a record with two hard things was worth more than a record with one easy one. He had written her a record with two hard things. A method that worked slowly. A hole that had been a crime.

On the first morning under the contract the crew stood at the gate. The unit's man handed out the badges one by one, reading each name off a list, and the men put them on the way men put on a thing that has been decided for them. A-Chun took hers and hung it on the strap of her bag. She said, to nobody in particular, that it was lighter than she had expected, and Lin Bo did not ask lighter than what.

The park put up a board at the gate of the plot in September, the way the park put up boards. It was white metal on two legs. It said the plot was a demonstration of the park's cooperation with the li‑censed unit for the remediation of the site, and it gave the square metres and the four heavy metals and the responsible unit's name in red paint. It did not give the method. It did not give a man's name. Lin Bo stood in front of it and read it as a man reads his own handwriting on a document he has signed over.

"It does not have you on it," the boy said, because the boy had learned to read the board.

"It has the cells on it," Lin Bo said. "The cells are the part that lasts."

He did not believe that entirely. He believed it more than he believed the rest.

Two of the crew had come off the old yards and had the hands for it. They did not talk about the yards. They talked about the trays and the plants and whose back had gone out that week. Then in August,

when the ridge pump failed at noon and the whole line had to be walked, one of them sat down on the bund and looked at his own hands for a long time. He said, to nobody, that he had not been able to feel the small stones for ten years. Then he got up and went back to the pump. Lin Bo asked him nothing. There is no test for what that man had and no plant will ever be grown for it, and every man on the crew knew it, and it was the reason none of them said anything.

※

He saw his uncle most days. They worked the same ground and wore the same badge, or wore it until the wage was cut, and the cut fell on Wei and not on him.

They ate apart for the first month. Then Wei sat down on the same low wall with his bowl. Neither of them said anything about it. After that they ate on the same wall.

"You have been quiet," Wei said one day.

"I have been working."

"That is not the same as quiet." Wei ate a mouthful. "You want to say a thing to me. I can hear you wanting it."

"And if I said it."

"Then I would hear it." Wei looked at the corner, filled and furred green again. "I will not call you nephew. That is a thing I put down and a thing I do not pick back up. But a man can eat on the same wall with a man he does not call nephew. The wall does not care what we call each other."

"Does the badge bother you," Lin Bo said.

"It bothers me every morning," Wei said. "Then I put my hands in the ground and it stops, because the ground does not read badges either." He wiped the bowl with his thumb. "You think the badge is the punishment. The punishment was two months in a room with a light and a table and a young woman writing down every word I said. The badge is the part I got to keep."

※

The father stopped walking in June.

He went down twice at the toilet. The second time the mother found him on the tiles and could not lift him and called the neigh ‑ bour. After that there was a chair with wheels in the front room.

The father lived in the chair or in the bed. He did not complain about either. He had spent a year not apologising for his body, and this was more of the same, and it was the last of the same.

The pills changed. There were more of them. The unlabelled white one was joined by a second unlabelled white one. The mother paid for all of them now, because Wei's wage went to Zhou and Wei could not pay for them any more.

The mother went back to the medicine shop by the bus stop and put the money on the counter. The counter woman took it and said nothing. That was the town's ceremony for a change of that size.

Lin Bo learned to lift his father. He learned it in a week, the way a man learns a knot. He learned the pills and the times and the sheets and the chair. He learned the little hill of the doorstep, which is nothing to a walking man and a wall to a chair.

He learned to hold the light cup for the father. The father could not hold a light cup and would not be given a heavy one. The father had asked once to be given the cup he liked and to be helped with it. It was the last dignity he had left. He used it every day.

Nobody in the lane said the word for it. But his mother's friend said it once, at the gate. The word was 养老 (*yanglao* - to provide for one's aged parents, and to keep them to the end). Lin Bo heard it and did not answer. It was true, and a man in that town does not answer a true thing in the lane.

Zhou came to the lane on the first Sunday of August, because the garnishment on Wei's wage did not cover the month. He was a thin man in a good shirt and he stood at the gate and did not come in. He did the arithmetic aloud for the mother the way he did it every

month, and the arithmetic had not changed. Lin Bo paid him the difference out of the technician's wage, which was most of the technician's wage, and Zhou wrote the line in the book and tore the slip and handed it over and went back up the lane to his van. The mother watched him go and said, once, that the man had good manners. Lin Bo did not tell her what the good manners cost.

He went to the clinic in July for his own draw. He had gone in October and November and had never stopped. The technician was the round woman of fifty-odd. She remembered him and did not make the small talk.

His finger was 12.0. His vein came back 11.8. It was lower than the fourteen point two he had carried in October. It was higher than the number that would let a man stop thinking about it. It would never be a clean number. He knew that now with the flat knowing of a man who has read the whole file. He folded the slip and put it in the drawer with the other slips and told nobody. That was the way the house had always done its medicine.

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The mother asked him about the Li girl once, in the summer. She asked about children. He did not say yes and he did not say no. She did not ask again, and the not asking was its own answer.

He did not know what he would do. He only knew that he was not leaving. Not leaving was a thing a man could choose, and go on choosing, every morning of the year.

He saw Li Hui once, in the market in August. She was at the vegetable stall with a plastic bag, in her teacher's shoes, and she looked up and saw him and did not turn away.

"You look better," she said.

"I sleep more," he said.

"Then it was worth it." She paid the stall for the greens. "The boy read aloud again in June. Two paragraphs. The class let him." She took the bag.

"Thank you for telling me."

"I am not telling you to be kind," she said. "I am telling you because you should know the case had an end for somebody." She shifted the bag to her other hand. "Eat something." And she went off down the aisle, and that was the last time he saw her that year.

He took the mother to the reservoir on a Sunday in July, on the bus that used to go up to the yards and now went up to the water, because the whole town had gone to the reservoir and she had not. The fish breakfast stand was in the car park with a blue awning and a queue. They ate *yu fan* with white porridge, and the fish was the sea's fish and not the river's, which the mother pointed out as a fault and then ate all the same. On the far bank a man flew a kite with a long tail. The mother watched the kite and said that the water was higher than it had been in the dry years, and she said it the way a woman says a fact she has decided to be glad about. Then the kite came down and they went for the bus.

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The campaign went the way campaigns go.

The Hangzhou brand shot its lookbook in the yards in the spring. It used two of the photographs and took the ruin out of the captions, because a brand sells a look and not a wound. The Sunday buses still came, but fewer.

Ah-Sheng had stopped posting the yards. He had started posting the river, and the river did well for a month, and then it did not.

He came out to the plot once in August and stood at the fence with his phone down at his side, which was a thing Lin Bo had not seen him do.

"It is over," Ah-Sheng said. "The town has moved on to the reser‑voir. There is a woman selling fish breakfast at the reservoir and she is the whole town now."

"You could film the corner," Lin Bo said.

"The corner is green and legal and has a number on it," Ah-Sheng said. "Nobody watches a number." He looked at the plot for a while. "I did want to say one thing to you. I said a hard thing to you at the dinner. It was true and it was hard, and I have been carrying it. I am not sorry I said it. I am sorry about the rest of the night."

"Then we are square," Lin Bo said.

"We are not square," Ah-Sheng said. "But it will do." He put the phone in his pocket, which was the closest thing to putting it down that Lin Bo had ever seen him do, and went back up the road.

The smoke had not gone. It had 沉淀 (*chendian* - to settle, to let the heavy thing sink and the water go on over it). The furnace ran every day with its number on the side, and the town had stopped talking about the yards the way a town stops talking about weather that has been the same for a week. The outrage had settled out of the water and lay on the bottom with everything else the river had been given.

The province's own report for the autumn said the trade had not gone but moved. Two towns up the river, past the county line, the numbers were worse than Guiyu's had been at its worst, and the report carried a photograph of a stack with no number painted on the side, and the caption gave the place a name Lin Bo had never heard. He read the whole report twice at the kitchen table. He had spent a year making one hole in one plot green, and the province had spent the same year teaching him how heavy a thing the smoke was, because a thing that weighs that much does not go up and away. It goes sideways and comes down somewhere else, and the hole he had closed was a hole in the one town the cameras had found.

The boy was on the crew now in his own right, with his own badge and his own wage. He had bought his sister a school bag with the first of it, and he told Lin Bo that at the gate one morning, in the flat voice a man uses for a fact. Lin Bo said that was good. The boy said his mother's wash was down to once a week. Then he went to the trays,

and neither of them said anything else about it, which was the closest the town came to joy.

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He went to find Old Ge in September. Old Ge had told him in October to come and drink tea when he had measured him, and Lin Bo had never measured him and had never come.

Old Ge was at the river, in the place he was always at the river, in the grey nursery overalls, with the sulfur and the mugwort on him. He had a flask and two cups, and he poured for both of them without being asked.

"So," Old Ge said. "You have measured me."

"I have not," Lin Bo said. "I have measured everything else."

Old Ge laughed, which was a thing Lin Bo had not heard him do before.

"That is the closest thing to it," he said. "The men who measure everything else are the only ones who ever get near me. The men who try to measure me never do."

They drank. It was the cheap tea and it was good.

"You want to know about the furnace," Old Ge said.

"I know about the furnace."

"You know the number on the furnace. That is not the furnace." Old Ge turned the cup. "The old men had two fires. The outer fire was the one you built under the pot. The inner fire was the one you kept in yourself. The whole art was to keep the two of them at the same heat, because a man who runs the outer fire hot and the inner fire cold burns the thing he came to make." He drank. "Your uncle ran the outer fire thirty years and never lit the inner one. You lit the inner one and let the outer one go out. Neither of you got it. The art is the two together, and the art is hard, and most men die with one fire."

"What do I do with that."

"You keep both," Old Ge said. "You do not hurry. And you remember that the thing you are tending is not the ground. The ground

is the pot. The thing you are tending is the man standing next to the pot.” He set the cup down. “Smoke goes up light and comes down heavy. What comes down is the weight of it. You have carried that weight since you were nine years old and did not know the word for it. Now you know. That is the difference, and it is not a small differ‑ence.”

Lin Bo asked him, once, the question he had carried all year, which was what he was.

Old Ge drank and did not answer. The not answering was not a refusal and was not a riddle. It was how a man declines to be a thing he has not finished being. Then he stood up with the flask and the cups and walked back toward the nursery along the water. His steps left the dead grass unspringing. He did not look back.

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He took the father to the river in the last week of September, on the day the town kept the Mid-Autumn. It was a year to the week since the bus had set him down on the embankment road with two bags.

He pushed the chair up the road to the place where the boat steps go down to the water. He stopped there, because the chair would not go further. The two of them looked at the river the way the men of that town had looked at the river for two hundred years.

“What is the number now,” the father said.

“Which number.”

“The one they will ask you about.”

“Twenty-nine per cent,” Lin Bo said. “On the eight worked cells. The corner reads like the rest. The river is not in the number.”

The father nodded the slow way he nodded at the river. “Twenty-nine,” he said. “A year ago it was nothing. Now it is twenty-nine, and in this town that is a life’s work twice over.”

Then he said the name, which he had not used in a year.

"Bo. You came home to fix a thing. You have fixed a part of a thing, and the rest of it you are going to live next to. Do you hear me. Live next to it. Do not try to carry it. You are a man who carries. Your grandfather carried and I carried. It is the family disease, and it is worse than the hands." He closed his eyes against the water. "Put it down at night. Nothing in this town was ever fixed. Things were tended. That is all of it, and it is enough, and it will have to be."

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Lin Bo had brought the bottle and the tape, because he brought them everywhere. While the father watched the water he did the last 取样 (*quyang* - to take a sample, to draw a bottle of water for the record) of the year.

He went down the steps. He put the bottle in the river and let it fill and capped it and dried the cap on his sleeve.

The water went past his hand the way it had gone past every hand in the town for two hundred years. It carried the smoke and the lime and the lead and the new paper and the old. It let the heavy things settle on the bottom, where the river keeps them, and it moved on.

He wrote the date on the tape in the neat small hand he had been given. The hand did not shake any more, or shook only when it was not asked to. He put the bottle in his coat over his heart, the way a man carries a thing he means to hand up and never get an answer to.

Behind him the yards smoked in the grey evening, three stacks with numbers painted on the side of them, legal now. In front of him the river went on doing the only thing a river does. It carried what it was given. It let the heavy thing sink. It kept going toward the sea.

His father slept in the chair. The smoke went up. The water went by. And Lin Bo stayed.

Colophon

黄金入火，百炼不消；埋之，毕天不朽。

Huángjīn rù huǒ, bǎi liàn bù xiāo; mái zhī, bì tiān bù xiǔ.

Gold enters the fire, and a hundred smeltings do not consume it; bury it, and it does not decay till the end of heaven. — Ge Hong, Baopuzi 抱朴子 · on gold, and why the furnace

Ge Hong 葛洪, the Jin dynasty alchemist, wrote the book on the furnace — what burns, what stays, and why the breath of the fire could be refined into the body. He is never named in this novel. He is only there, in the sealed line the park calls the 炼丹炉, the alchemy furnace, and in the old man who keeps the plants that live and says the poison is the same, only the road to the body has changed. Lin Bo, a soil scientist, comes home to Chaoyang to grid ten plots of it: forty per cent bioavailable lead on paper, a father's blood work in a folder, two cores that never reached the lab, and a green transition that needs one number with a source behind it. Book One of two companion volumes after Ge Hong — independent books, no sequel between them.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, “true love.” Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, “real,” plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

The Weight of Smoke · 20 sections · 80,191 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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