THE WEIGHT OF SOUND

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CHAPTER 1

The First Sunday

PART ONE

The Sound

3 March — 0 g

The mountain is the first thing I hear.

Not the wind. The wind comes later, when the sun clears the ridge and the cold air slides down the cliff. The mountain is before the wind. It is a low sound, under the ear, like a hand pressed flat on a drum. I feel it in the wall. I feel it in my teeth.

I sit at the east gate, where the cliff turns its shoulder to the coal road. The wall is cold in the morning. By nine the sun reaches it, and the stone warms, and the tourists come. That is when I play.

I have played here for ten years. I know the wall by its grooves. There are eleven. There used to be twelve. The twelfth was broken the winter they rebuilt the road. The man who broke it did not apologize. You cannot apologize to a wall.

The cliff is above me and to the west. It is a long red-brown face with holes cut in it. Fifty-three big holes. A thousand small ones. Inside the holes are Buddhas. I have never seen them. I know them by the echo. When I tap my cane on the flagstones, the sound goes up the cliff and comes back with a different shape depending on which cave is open. Cave Six has a wooden front and a short echo. Cave Twenty has no front at all, so the sound goes all the way in and comes back deep, like a room behind a room.

The big one sits at the top of the stairs, in the open. The front of his house fell down a long time ago. He is thirteen meters tall. I know because the guidebook says so, and because his voice is the lowest thing in the valley. When

the wind comes from the west, it goes into the cave behind him and comes out through his chest.

I get there at half past six. The gate is locked. The guard, Xiao Liu, opens it at seven. He is twenty-four. He has a soft walk and a loud phone. He listens to videos without headphones. He thinks I cannot hear the videos. I can hear the videos.

"Grandpa Gao," he says. "Cold today."

"Cold," I say.

He takes my arm at the steps. I do not need him to. He knows I do not need him to. He does it anyway. It is a kindness. It is a habit. I let him.

The scenic area put the bench there two years ago, after a local TV piece. It is concrete, painted to look like wood. There is a small plaque on the back. The plaque says **Please respect the artist** in four languages. I asked Xiao Liu to read all four. The English one is the shortest. The Japanese one is the longest. The Korean one has a sound in it like a stone dropping into water.

I sit. I put the case on the ground between my feet. I wait.

The morning has its own order. First the mountain. Then the wind. Then the gate. Then the buses. The first bus comes at eight forty. I hear it before I hear the engine. The road is old and the bus is heavy; the suspension tells me where it is. Then the brake, the hiss of the door, the ticket scanner. The scanner says *please* in a woman's voice. It has been saying please for ten years. No one has ever said please back.

The tourists come off in a cloud of sunscreen and phone light. They are mostly from the south. They wear thin jackets and thick shoes. They stop at the gate and take photographs of the gate. Then they take photographs of the wall. Then they take photographs of each other in front of the wall. The wall is new. The wall is seven hundred years old. Both of these things are true.

A guide with a loudspeaker leads them. The loudspeaker makes her voice into a metal voice. She says the grottoes are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. She says there are more than fifty major caves and fifty-one thousand statues. She says the big Buddha is thirteen meters tall. She says the Northern Wei carved them in the fifth century. She says the coal dust is damaging the stone. She says the government is protecting them. She says all of this in four minutes.

Then she says, “You can take photos, but no flash.”

The tourists take photos with flash.

A woman in heels separates from the group. She stands in front of me. Her shadow falls across my face; I feel the cold change. She is wearing a perfume that smells like a fruit I have never eaten. She says, “Can you play the sad one?”

“Which sad one?”

“The one from the video.”

“I don’t know the video.”

“Everyone knows the video.”

“I don’t have a phone.”

She laughs. It is a polite laugh, the kind that costs nothing. “The one that goes like this,” she says, and she hums four notes. She hums them wrong. She hums them in the major key.

“I know it,” I say.

I set the case on the ground and open it. The erhu is inside, wrapped in a piece of blue cloth. I take it out. The soundbox is six-sided, rosewood, with a python skin on the face. The skin is the color of weak tea. I know its color from the time before. I know its sound from every day since.

I set the box on my knee. I check the qianjin with my thumb. The qianjin is a loop of cord around the neck and the strings. It is the throat of the instrument. If it slips, the strings go false. It has slipped a little. I move it up, a hair, until the distance from the bridge is the length of my forearm. The strings are steel. The inner is D. The outer is A. I tune them by ear, by the hum of the wall, by the memory of the note.

The bow is horsehair. I rosined it this morning. The rosin is amber. It smells like pine. The hair goes between the two strings, not over them. I draw.

The first note is not a note. It is a breath. Then the string catches and the note comes out of the python skin. It goes into the cliff and comes back changed.

I play the opening of “Erquan Yingyue.” 二泉映月 (Èrquán Yìngyuè, “Moon Reflected in the Second Spring”). Abing’s tune. A blind man’s tune. The tourists do not know that. They know it is sad. They film it. That is enough.

The tune goes up and then it does not come down the way you expect. It comes down in steps, like a man walking down a staircase in the dark. The bow

has to bite. If it does not bite, the note is a whisper. If it bites too hard, the note is a scratch. I find the place between. My left hand opens and closes on the string. The string does not touch the neck. It never touches the neck. That is the whole secret of the instrument. The note lives in the air between the finger and the wood.

When I finish, the woman is quiet. Then she says, "Thank you." She puts a note in the case. I hear the paper. A fifty. She says, "That was beautiful."

"It's the tune," I say.

"It's you."

"It's the tune."

She laughs again. This time it is a real laugh, or close to one. Her heels click away across the flagstones. The clicks get smaller. Then they are gone.

The child has been standing there the whole time. I heard him come. He is small; his breath is high. He has been holding it. Now he lets it out.

"What happened to your eyes?" he says.

"Don't bother the man," his mother says.

"It's all right," I say. "He asked."

"What happened?" the child says.

"A battery."

"Did it hurt?"

"Yes."

The child is quiet. Then I hear his hand go into his pocket. He puts a coin in the case. It is a one-yuan coin. It rings. His mother pulls him away. The coin is warm from his hand. I hold it for a while. Then I put it in the tin with the others.

※

I hear her before I hear her voice.

She wears soft shoes. She walks like someone who is used to being quiet. She stops at the edge of the flagstones. She does not come closer. She sets something down. A tripod. Three legs, three small clicks. Then a phone. Then she waits.

I play. She does not talk. She does not say beautiful. She does not put money in the case. She stands there for the whole tune. When I finish, she says, "Again."

I play it again. She listens. When I finish, she says, "Again."

"You have enough," I say.

"I don't."

"You have three."

"I have three of the same thing. I need the one where you forget I'm here."

I laugh. It is a real laugh. It surprises me. I play something else. A short piece. "Horse Racing." It is fast and bright and stupid, and the tourists love it. I play it badly on purpose. She laughs. It is a short laugh, not polite.

"You're the one with the phone," I say.

"I'm the one with the phone."

"You've been here an hour."

"Two."

"You don't talk."

"I'm working."

"Working at what?"

"At you."

She comes closer. I hear her kneel on the flagstones. The phone is between us. She smells like soap and cold air. She says, "Can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

She laughs. "What's your name?"

"Gao."

"Gao what?"

"Gao Yusheng."

"Like Gao Jianli."

"No. Like the coal."

She is quiet. Then she laughs, one short sound. "That's a good line."

"It's not a line. It's a name."

"Okay," she says. "Gao Yusheng. I'm Xiaoyu. Luo Xiaoyu. I make videos about Datong."

"I know."

"How?"

"Your shoes. They're city shoes. You walk like you're looking for a shot."

"And you're blind."

"I'm not deaf."

She is quiet again. I have gone too far. I do that. I push the stone and wait to see if it falls. Then I say, "What do you want?"

"I want to put you on the internet."

"Post what?"

"You."

"I'm not on the phone."

"You will be."

She says it simply, the way you say a thing you have already decided. She asks if she can come back. I say the gate opens at seven. She says she will be here at eight. I say I will be here at six thirty. She asks why. I say, "The mountain." She does not understand. She says, "Okay." She stands. The tripod folds. The phone goes into her pocket. She walks to the gate. She stops. Then she goes.

※

At noon the tour buses leave. The valley gets quiet. The swifts come out. They are small and fast and they scream. They nest in the niches. The monks used to say the swifts were the souls of the carved Buddhas. The monks are gone. The swifts are still here.

Three old men come up the path. They walk slowly. Their boots are heavy. One of them coughs, a deep cough that comes from the coal. They stop at the wall, ten steps from me. They do not come closer.

"Old Gao," one of them says.

"Old Zhang," I say. I do not know if it is Old Zhang. It is a safe name.

"We came for the anniversary."

The anniversary. The roof fall. Three men. One of them was Luo Cheng, Xiaoyu's father. I did not know that then. I know it now.

Luo Cheng played the suona at the mine parties. He sang. He was the loudest man in the valley.

"Three," I say.

"Three," he says.

They stand there. One of them takes out a cigarette. I hear the match. The smell of sulfur, then tobacco. He does not smoke it. He puts it on the wall. It burns down by itself.

"Ma Jun would have liked that," he says.

"He never liked anything he couldn't talk over," I say.

They laugh. It is a dry laugh, the laugh of men who have been in the ground.

"They're going to light up the big Buddha," another one says. "For the festival. Kang Rui's idea."

The name lands on the flagstones. I do not move.

"Kang Rui," I say.

"You should play," the first one says. "They'd pay you."

"They'd pay me anyway," I say.

They laugh again. Then they are quiet. The cigarette burns. The swifts scream. After a while, they say goodbye. Their boots go down the path. The cigarette is still there. I can smell it. I leave it. It is not mine.

※

At five I pack up. The case is heavier than it was this morning. I noticed it at noon. I noticed it again when I lifted it. It is not a big thing. A case with an erhu in it is heavy anyway. But I know the weight of my own case. A man knows the weight of his own case the way he knows the weight of his own hand.

I walk home. The road is two kilometers. I count the steps. One thousand two hundred and forty. The number changes when they move the bus stop. Last year it was one thousand two hundred and twelve.

The coal trucks go by. A full truck has a low note. An empty truck has a high note. The empty ones are faster. The full ones shake the ground. The dust comes off them in a wave. I turn my face away. The dust gets into my teeth anyway.

Jin Family Noodles is a shed with a blue door and a red sign. Auntie Jin has run it for twenty years. She knew my mother. She knows everyone. She is a small woman with a loud voice and a bad knee. She hears my cane on the step.

"You're late," she says.

"The buses were late."

"The buses are always late. You're always on time."

She puts a bowl in front of me. Knife-cut noodles. The noodles are thick in the middle and thin at the edges. There is mutton in the broth. There is vinegar. There is chili oil. The steam comes up and wets my face.

"Luo Cheng's girl is back," she says.

"Luo Cheng's girl."

"Xiaoyu. The one who makes the videos. She was filming you."

"The one with the phone."

"She's not bad. She's just young."

I eat. The noodles are good. The vinegar is strong. Auntie Jin's radio is on, the way it is always on, tuned to the county station. A man is reading the news. He says the city is preparing for the festival. He says the festival will show the world the new Datong. He says the coal has given the city its past and the stone will give it its future. He says the mayor will attend. He says Kang Rui will attend. He says the tickets are on sale.

Auntie Jin turns it down. "You should play at that," she says. "They'd pay you."

"They'd pay me anyway," I say.

"That's not what I mean."

I know what she means. I do not answer.

Yanyan comes in with her schoolbag. She is twelve. She has a runny nose and a voice that is always a little too loud. She is partially sighted; she can see shapes and light. She wants to learn "Horse Racing." I tell her she is not ready. She says she is ready. She touches the case.

"It's heavy," she says.

"It's wood."

"It's heavier than yesterday."

"You're stronger than yesterday."

"That's not how weight works," she says.

I laugh. She is right. That is not how weight works.

"What's inside?" she says.

"An erhu."

"What else?"

"Nothing."

She is quiet. Then she says, "You're lying."

"I'm old," I say. "I'm allowed."

She laughs. But she does not forget. Children never forget the things you tell them not to remember.

※

I get home at six. The courtyard is dark. I know it by the date tree, the water jar, the loose brick by the door. The tree is old and crooked. In summer it gives dates. In winter it gives shadows. I do not see the shadows. I feel them on my face when the sun is low.

I light the stove. The coal is in a bucket by the door. I put three briquettes in the stove. They are round with holes. They catch slowly. The smell is coal and paper and the match. I put the kettle on. I sit.

I do not eat. I am not hungry. I sit and listen to the stove. The stove is a small animal. It ticks. It breathes. It settles.

Then I take the erhu out of the case.

I run my thumb along the soundbox. The wood is smooth. The skin is tight. I find the seam of the back plate with my nail. The plate is held by six small nails. I have opened it four times before. The nails are loose now. They come out easy.

I put them in a saucer. I put the plate on the table. The inside of the soundbox is rough and dark. It smells of old wood and rosin and the inside of a hand.

The battery is in a tin box under the kang. It is a miner's cap-lamp battery. It is square and heavy and scarred. It is the one that took my eyes. They gave it back to me in a plastic bag with my glasses. The glasses were broken. The battery was not. There is a company tag on the side. The tag says MEIYUKOU NO. 2 — ELECTRICAL — GAO. I cannot read it with my eyes. I can read it with my thumb.

I take it out. I put it on the table. I open the little door on the side. The plates are inside, gray and soft. Lead. I take one out with the pliers. It is the weight of a small book.

I tie a wet cloth over my mouth. I learned that in the mine. I put the plate in a tin can. I set the can on the stove. The lead melts. It takes a long time. The surface goes bright, then dull. I stir it with a nail. There is a skin on top. I skim it

off. I pour the lead onto a flat stone. I press it with a tile. It cools. I hammer it thin. I cut it with shears. The shears are old. They make a sound like a bird.

I fit the lead sheet against the back and the sides of the soundbox. It leaves a finger's width around the skin. If it touches the skin, the sound dies. I press it flat. It stays. I take a nail. I write.

马军. (Mǎ Jūn.) The horse. The soldier. Two characters. I write them big enough to feel. The lead is soft. The nail goes in easy. When I am done, I read it with my thumb. The horse has four legs and a tail. The soldier has a helmet and a spear. I made the spear too long. It does not matter. It is his name.

I put the back plate on. I tap the nails in with the handle of the screwdriver. I tune the strings. I draw the bow.

The note comes out. It is lower than it was this morning. It is darker. It is not a bad sound. It is a sound with a room behind it. I play it again. The room opens. I hold the note until the bow runs out of hair.

"You would have said it sounded like a cello," I say. "You always wanted me to sound like something else."

The stove ticks. The mountain is still there, under the wind, under the wall, under my teeth.

I put the erhu in the case and put the case by the bed. I lay down. I do not sleep for a long time. I listen to the note go out into the room and come back changed.

That was the first Sunday.

CHAPTER 2

The Soul of Datong

10 March — 180 g

The video was four minutes and eleven seconds long.

Xiaoyu had cut it from two hours and six minutes of footage, which was, she calculated later, a ratio of about one to thirty. Her mother had a word for that ratio. Her mother had a word for everything.

She had filmed his hands for most of it. The hands were the thing. The face was good too — the scars, the closed eyes, the way he turned his head toward the cliff when he played, as if the cliff were the audience and the tourists were just weather. But the hands were the thing. The bow hand, the stopping hand, the way the left fingers hovered over the string without touching the neck. She had shot the hands at 120 frames per second, and when she slowed them down, the bow hair looked like it was breathing.

She had titled it "The Soul of Datong." It was a stupid title. It was also the best title she had ever written. She knew both things at once.

Her apartment was on the fourteenth floor of a new building in the east of the city. The building had a name in English and a name in Chinese, and neither of them meant anything. The apartment had one bedroom, one window, and a view of another building's air-conditioning units. She had a desk by the window, a ring light, a laptop, an external drive, and a mug that said WORLD'S BEST BOSS in English. She had bought the mug at a supermarket because it was funny. It was still funny. She had no boss.

She edited at night. The city was quiet at night, or quieter. The coal trucks still ran, but the road was far enough that they were just a low rumble, like a stomach. She liked the rumble. It reminded her that the city was still working, even when it was asleep.

She watched the third take again. The one where he forgot she was there. His head turned toward the cliff. His bow arm moved from the shoulder, not the

elbow. The note came out and hung in the air, and then the wind took it, and then the echo brought it back, and for a second the echo was the only thing in the world.

She added a title card. White text on black:

> *Gao Yusheng, 58, has played erhu at the Yungang Grottoes for ten years.*

She added a second card:

> *He is blind.*

She deleted it. She added it again. She deleted it. The video showed it. The video did not need to say it. But the internet did not always watch. The internet watched with one eye and read with the other. She left it out. She told herself it was a question of craft. It was also a question of what she wanted people to feel when they pressed play. She wanted them to feel the note before they felt sorry for the man. She wanted them to hear him before they saw him. That was the whole argument of the video, and she had made it without saying a word.

She posted it at 11:47 p.m. on a Sunday.

By Monday morning it had two hundred thousand views. By lunch it had two million. By Tuesday it had eleven million. The numbers were not real to her. They were a weather report from a country she had never visited. Her phone made a sound she had never heard before, a sound like a small animal being stepped on, and then it made the sound again, and then it did not stop.

※

The comments came in faster than she could read them. She read them anyway. She read them at two in the morning, with the ring light off and the laptop brightness turned down, and she felt the way you feel when you have told a secret to a room and the room has told it back to you in a different voice.

> *@datong_girl: i'm from datong and i've never seen him. i'm crying in my car*
> *@li_wei_88: this is what the city should be famous for. not coal.*
> *@mountain_goat: my dad worked at meiyukou. he says the old man used to play at the mine parties. he says his friend disappeared.*
> *@sophie_in_shanghai: the sound is so sad. why is it so sad?*
> *@erhu_student: his intonation is strange. the bridge might be warped. also his qianjin is too low.*
> *@north_west_wind: share this if you love datong*
> *@truth_hunter_88: is this fake? the tears look real but the sound is weird*
> *@little_sun: my grandmother says he plays like Abing. she saw Abing once, in wuxi, before the war.*
> *@coaldust: my grandfather died in meiyukou no. 2. thank you for this.*
> *@wang_laoshi: 四分钟 (sì fēnzhōng, "four minutes") and i forgot my train stop*

She read the last one three times. Four minutes and the man had made a stranger miss his train. That was a thing she had done. She had done it with a phone and a tripod and a Sunday morning. She closed the laptop and lay on the floor of her apartment and looked at the ceiling, which was white and had a crack in it shaped like a river.

※

The call came on Wednesday. The screen said **SUN KEZHANG** — Section Chief Sun, Yungang Scenic Area Management Committee. She had met him once, at a press event, where he had given a speech about "cultural soft power" and then eaten four skewers of lamb without wiping his mouth.

"Xiaoyu," he said. "The city loves you."

"The city loves him," she said.

"Same thing."

She could hear him smiling. She could hear the whole room behind him, the way you can hear a room through a phone: chairs, papers, another phone ringing, a man laughing at something that was not funny.

"We want to work with you," he said. "A series. The grottoes, the old city, the noodles, the coal heritage park. You know the style. You made the style."

"How much?"

He told her. More than her rent for a year. Less than she had made in Beijing in a good quarter. The number made her sit down on the edge of her bed.

"There are conditions," he said.

"There are always conditions."

"The festival. September. We want the old man in the opening film. You produce it. You know him now."

"I don't know him."

"You made him."

"I filmed him."

"Same thing."

She said she would think about it. She said yes before she hung up. She told herself she had said yes to the money, which was honest. She told herself she had said yes to the story, which was also honest. She did not tell herself she had said yes because she wanted to be in the room when the city lit up the big Buddha. That was the least honest thing, and it was the truest.

※

She went back to the grottoes on Friday with a second camera, a drone, and a lavalier microphone in a small fur case.

The old man was on his bench. He had a thermos beside him and a canvas bag at his feet. He heard her before she spoke. He always heard her before she spoke.

"You brought a machine," he said.

"A drone."

"It sounds like a wasp."

"It's for the wide shot."

"The cliff doesn't need a wide shot."

She laughed. He did not. She set up the second camera on a tripod and clipped the lav to his jacket. He let her. He was patient with her in a way that made her feel young and stupid and also strangely safe.

She asked him the questions she had written down. He answered them in the order she asked, which was not the order he wanted. She could feel him rearranging them in his head.

"How long have you played?"

"Ten years here. Longer before."

"Where before?"

"The mine. Meiyukou."

"What did you do there?"

"I was an electrician."

"Did you play music there too?"

"There was a troupe. We played for the workers. We played for the safety meetings. We played for the dead."

She kept the camera on his hands. The hands were still. The hands were always still when he talked. It was only when he played that they moved.

"How did you lose your sight?"

"A battery."

"What kind of battery?"

"The kind that explodes."

"Was it an accident?"

"It was written down as one."

She waited. He did not fill the silence. She had learned that about him in the last two weeks: he did not fill silences. He let them sit there like a stone on a table.

"What does that mean?" she said.

"It means it was written down."

She asked about the mine. He said it was closed. She asked about the men he used to play with. He said some were dead, some were gone, some were in the city. She asked about Kang Rui. She asked it lightly, the way you ask about the weather, because she had seen the name in the festival press release and she wanted to see what his face would do.

His hands stopped.

"Who told you that name?" he said.

"The news. He's the festival chairman."

"The news is a loudspeaker."

He picked up the erhu. She thought he was going to play. He did not play. He held it across his knees, the way a man holds a child who is not his.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be sorry. Be careful."

※

She moved the case to get it out of the shot.

It was heavier than it should have been. She had carried erhu cases before. Her father had played the suona, not the erhu, but the cases were the same kind of thing: a long wooden box, a handle, a hinge. This one was wrong. It had the weight of a box with something else in it.

She almost dropped it. She caught it against her hip and set it down and looked at the old man. He had not moved.

"What's in here?" she said.

"An erhu."

"It weighs a ton."

"It's old wood."

She lifted it again. The weight was not in the wood. The wood was light. The weight was in the middle of the box, low down, where the soundbox was. She had held the box in March and it had not felt like this. Or maybe she had not been paying attention. She had been paying attention to his hands.

She put the case down. She did not say anything. She did not know what to say. She was a person who made videos, and a video was a thing you could see, and the weight was a thing you could not see.

※

That night she listened to the audio.

She had recorded the interview on the lav and the music on the second camera's microphone. She imported both tracks and looked at the waveform. The interview was a city of small spikes: his voice, her voice, the wind, a bus, a

bird. The music was different. The music was a long low hill with a thin bright line on top.

She soloed the low band. A hum under the note. Not the wind. Not the microphone. In the instrument. She had heard it in the grottoes and thought it was the echo, but here it was in the raw file, in her apartment, in the headphones, with the city outside and the refrigerator humming in the kitchen. A low steady hum, about the pitch of a man humming with his mouth closed.

She looked at the frequency display. There was a peak at the bottom that had not been in the March recording. She did not know what it meant. She was not an engineer. She was a person who had taken a course in audio post-production and had passed it with a B.

She typed into the search bar: **erhu heavy sound low frequency**.

She got videos of people playing the erhu. She got a forum for instrument makers. She got a thread from 2010, on a site that looked like it had been built by a man in a basement and then abandoned by the man.

> *Subject: Meiyukou No. 2 — battery accident?*
> *Posted by: laokuang*
> *Date: 14 August 2010*
> *A man named Gao, an electrician, was blinded at Meiyukou No. 2 last year. Official story: battery charging accident. But the battery was not on charge. He was asking about Ma Jun. The company paid the family. The case is closed.*
> *Reply: who is Ma Jun*
> *Reply: the one who talked*
> *Reply: no, the one who didn't*

She read it four times. The page had no comments after 2011. The site had a banner ad for a discount on industrial gloves. She Bookmarked it. She did not know why. She closed the laptop.

※

Her mother called at ten.

"Your video," Auntie Jin said. "The whole shop is watching it. Old Zhang cried into his noodles."

"That's good," Xiaoyu said.

"Is it?"

"It's views."

"Views," her mother said, in the voice she used for the word *boyfriend*.

"It's a good video, Ma."

"I know it's a good video. I'm your mother. I know what you can do. I'm asking what it does."

"It doesn't do anything. It's a video."

"Don't be stupid. You made an old blind man famous. Famous is different now. It happens to you whether you want it or not."

"He was already famous. He had a bench. He had a plaque."

"He had a bench because the scenic area felt sorry for him. Now he has a bench because the scenic area is making money from him. There is a difference."

Xiaoyu was quiet. Her mother was quiet too. In the background, someone ordered noodles. The radio was on. The same county station, the same man reading the news.

"Don't make him a circus," Auntie Jin said.

"I'm making him a documentary."

"Same thing, with better lighting."

She hung up before Xiaoyu could answer. That was her mother's way. She always left the last word on the table, like a coin.

※

On Monday, Section Chief Sun called again.

The festival committee had seen the video. The mayor had seen the video. The mayor's wife had seen the video and had cried, which Sun reported as if it were a policy victory.

They wanted the old man in the opening film. They wanted Xiaoyu to produce it. They wanted the grottoes, the cliff, the big Buddha, the moon, the erhu. They wanted the sound of the city. They wanted the soul of Datong.

"He'll need to sign a release," Sun said. "For his image. For the performance."

"He can't read."

"He can sign with a thumbprint."

"That's not what I mean."

"Xiaoyu." Sun's voice changed. It got softer and flatter at the same time, the way a knife gets when it is sharpened. "This is a good thing. For him. For the city. For you. Don't make it complicated."

She looked at the clip on her screen. The old man's hands. The bow hair. The note going out into the cliff and coming back changed.

"I'll ask him," she said.

"Don't ask him. Tell him."

She said she would ask him. She said it in a way that made Sun think she had agreed. She was good at that. She had learned it in Beijing. She had learned it from men who said *don't make it complicated* and then made it complicated.

She hung up. She opened the clip again. She watched the hands. She thought about the weight of the case. She did not tell Sun about the weight. She did not tell anyone. It was not a thing she could put in a video. It was a thing she could feel in her hip, a week later, like a bruise.

INTERLUDE 1

The Comments

March–April

Douyin — @xiaoyu_looks_at_datong

[Video: 4:11. 11.2M views. 1.3M likes. 84,000 comments.]

Caption: He has played at the Yungang Grottoes for ten years. No one knew his name. Now you do.

※

@datong_girl: i'm from datong and i've never seen him. i'm crying in my car outside the supermarket.
@li_wei_88: this is what the city should be famous for. not coal.
@mountain_goat: my dad worked at meiyukou. he says the old man used to play at the mine parties. he says his friend disappeared.
@sophie_in_shanghai: the sound is so sad. why is it so sad?
@erhu_student: his intonation is strange. the bridge might be warped. also his qianjin is too low for the key he's playing in.
@north_west_wind: share this if you love datong
@truth_hunter_88: is this fake? the tears look real but the sound is weird.
@little_sun: my grandmother says he plays like abing. she saw abing once, in wuxi, before the war.
@coaldust: my grandfather died in meiyukou no. 2. thank you for this.
@wang_laoshi: four minutes and i forgot my train stop.
@datong_daily: beautiful. the soul of our city.
@laokuang_2: he's not the soul of datong. he's a man who lost his eyes. don't make him a saint.

@xiaoyu_looks_at_datong: i filmed this because i heard something. please listen before you share.
@maling_1989: he's not an ambassador. he's a man who lost his eyes. he's my uncle. leave him alone.
@duan_cheng: he's a good man. he doesn't want to be famous. leave him alone.
@yanyan_2007: he's my teacher. he's not a saint. he's better.
@skeptic_88: the low frequency is not normal. i'm an erhu player. something is inside that instrument.
@erhu_student: @skeptic_88 yes. i hear it too. it started in the second video. it's getting stronger.
@datong_girl: why are you two arguing about frequencies? the man is playing his heart out.
@erhu_student: because the frequency is the heart. that's the whole point of the instrument.

※

Datong Evening News — 18 March

THE SOUL OF DATONG: A BLIND MUSICIAN'S SONG GOES VIRAL

By Wang Lei

For ten years, Gao Yusheng has played the erhu at the east gate of the Yungang Grottoes. Tourists have filmed him. Some have put money in his case. Most have walked past.

Last week, a four-minute video by a local videographer, Luo Xiaoyu, changed that. The video, titled "The Soul of Datong," has been viewed more than eleven million times. It shows Gao playing "Erquan Yingyue," a piece associated with the blind musician Abing.

"It's the sound of the city," said one commenter. "It's the sound of the mine," said another.

Gao, 58, lost his sight in a battery accident at the Meiyukou No. 2 mine in 2009. He has lived in Yungang Village since 2010. He plays at the grottoes six days a week, weather permitting.

"I don't have a phone," he said. "I don't know what the internet is. I know the tourists are louder now."

The Yungang Scenic Area Management Committee said it is "delighted" by the attention and is considering a "cultural ambassador" program. A spokesperson said, "Mr. Gao represents the spirit of our city: resilient, traditional, and open to the future."

When asked about the program, Gao said, "I'm a man with a bench."

※

Yungang Scenic Area Management Committee — Press Release — 20 March

> *The Yungang Scenic Area Management Committee is pleased to announce that Mr. Gao Yusheng, the celebrated erhu musician of the Yungang Grottoes, will be featured in the upcoming spring cultural season. Mr. Gao's music embodies the spirit of Datong: a city that has transformed itself from a coal capital into a cultural destination. We invite visitors to experience the soul of Datong at the east gate, where Mr. Gao plays daily from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., weather permitting.*
> *Please respect the artist. Do not block the path. Do not use flash photography.*

※

> *@sophie_in_shanghai: i'm coming to datong next month. what else should i see?*
> *@datong_girl: the grottoes. the wall. the noodles. the vinegar. don't go to the fake street.*

> *@sophie_in_shanghai: is the old man always there?*
> *@datong_girl: he's always there. that's the problem.*
> *@li_wei_88: it's not a problem. it's a job.*
> *@datong_girl: it's a job he didn't choose.*
> *@mountain_goat: my dad says the mine paid him off. is that true?*
> *@duan_cheng: don't talk about things you don't know.*
> *@mountain_goat: i know what my dad says.*
> *@duan_cheng: your dad is not always right.*
> *@mountain_goat: neither are you.*

※

Douyin — @xiaoyu_looks_at_datong

[Video: 0:47. 3.4M views. 402,000 likes.]

Caption: I went back today. He remembered my footsteps.

[The camera is low. It shows the old man's hands. The bow moves. The sound is low and thick. A child's voice says, "It's heavy." The old man says, "It's wood." The child says, "It's heavier than yesterday." The video ends.]

> *@little_sun: the child is right. it's heavier.*
> *@erhu_student: the child is right.*
> *@truth_hunter_88: it's a fake. the child is a plant.*
> *@datong_girl: the child is his student. she's twelve. she's not a plant. you're a plant.*
> *@sophie_in_shanghai: what does the child mean, it's heavier?*
> *@erhu_student: i don't know. but i can hear it. the instrument is changing.*
> *@laokuang_2: an instrument doesn't change. a man changes.*
> *@erhu_student: an instrument changes when a man changes it.*

※

Douyin — @xiaoyu_looks_at_datong

[Video: 1:12. 6.8M views. 611,000 likes.]

Caption: He doesn't read the comments. I read them to him. He says, "Tell them I said thank you."

[The old man is sitting on the bench. The wind is in the microphone. He says, "Thank you." The camera shakes. The video ends.]

> *@coaldust: i'm crying again.*
> *@datong_girl: i'm crying again too.*
> *@li_wei_88: this is the best thing that has happened to this city in ten years.*
> *@laokuang_2: the best thing that has happened to this city is that the mines closed.*
> *@li_wei_88: tell that to the men who lost their jobs.*
> *@laokuang_2: tell that to the men who lost their lungs.*
> *@mountain_goat: can you two fight somewhere else? the man is playing.*
> *@sophie_in_shanghai: the man is playing.*

※

A comment that was deleted:

> *@kang_rui_official: Mr. Gao is a treasure of our city. We are proud of him. We will take care of him.*

A reply that was also deleted:

> *@maling_1989: You took his eyes.*

※

A comment that was never deleted, because no one knew who wrote it:

> *@laoyao_1961: The instrument is heavier. The sound is lower. The high notes are gone. I know what is inside it. I have known since the first Sunday. I am not going to tell you. I am going to play.*

CHAPTER 3

The Man Who Talked

17 March — 180 g

The video changed the bench.

Before, the bench was a place where I sat. After, it was a place where people came to see a man sitting. They came in the morning now, before the buses, with their phones already out. Some of them stood at a distance and filmed me without asking. Some of them asked. Some of them put money in the case before I played a note, as if the money were a ticket and the music were the thing they had paid for. Some of them did not put money in at all. The video had made me a public thing, and a public thing is free.

A woman from Guangzhou cried for six minutes. I know it was six minutes because she did not stop, and I counted. She said, "My father loved this instrument." I said, "Did he play?" She said, "No. He listened." I played "Erquan Yingyue" for her. She cried harder. Then she took a photograph of my hands and left.

A young man asked for a selfie. I said, "I can't see the phone." He said, "It's okay, I'll hold it." I said, "Then it's a photo of you." He laughed and took it anyway.

A couple got engaged in front of the cliff while I was playing "Horse Racing." The man got down on one knee. The woman screamed. The swifts flew up. I kept playing. It was the wrong music for the moment, but the moment did not care. The moment had its own music, and it was coming out of the woman's phone.

At noon Xiao Liu came over with his phone. He had been waiting all morning. He held the phone out, then remembered I could not see it, then held it closer, as if closeness were the same as sight.

"Grandpa Gao," he said. "You're famous."

"I'm a man with a bench."

"The bench is famous."

"The bench was always famous. I was just sitting on it."

He laughed. Then he read me the comments. He read them in a loud voice, the way people read to the blind, as if the blind were also deaf. He read the ones about the soul of Datong. He read the ones about the city. He read the ones about my hands. He did not read the ones that said I was fake. I knew they were there. There are always those.

"There's one from a music student," he said. "He says your intonation is strange."

"He's right."

"He says the bridge might be warped."

"He's right about that too."

"Should we get it fixed?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's my bridge."

He laughed again. He was twenty-four. He thought I was funny. I let him.

He had made me an account in the spring. The handle was my birth year. He typed; I dictated. I had only ever dictated one comment: *Tell them I said thank you.* The rest of the comments were his. He read them to me in a loud voice, and I pretended not to know that he had written half of them.

※

I heard her before she said her name.

She walked like a nurse. Nurses walk like they are carrying something invisible. Soft shoes, even steps, no swing in the arms. She stopped at the edge of the flagstones. She did not take out a phone. She did not ask for a song. She stood there for a long time.

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

"I'm not from the video."

"Everyone is from the video now."

"I'm Ma Ling."

The name did not mean anything to me for a second. Then it did. It meant the smell of a hospital corridor in 2009. It meant a girl in a school uniform standing in the doorway of my room, holding a bag of oranges. She was twenty. She looked at my face and then at the wall and then at the bag of oranges, as if she had brought the wrong thing.

"Ma Jun's girl," I said.

"Ma Jun's daughter," she said.

She sat on the other end of the bench. The concrete was cold. She put a cardboard box on her knees. It was the kind of box you get from a supermarket, the kind with a printed apple on the side. The apple was faded. The box had been opened and closed many times.

"I found this in my mother's things," she said. "She died four years ago. I've been carrying it from apartment to apartment. I don't know what to do with it."

"You brought it to me."

"You were his best friend."

"That was a long time ago."

"It's not a long time for me."

She opened the box. I heard the cardboard, the paper. She took things out one at a time and set them on the bench between us. A notebook. A cassette in a plastic case. A cap-lamp battery. A photograph.

"Tell me what they are," I said.

"You can't see them."

"I can see them better if you tell me."

She was quiet. Then she said, "The notebook is black. The cover is oil-stained. There's a rubber band around it. The cassette says 'Meeting, 6/07' in his handwriting. The battery is a miner's lamp battery. It's heavy. It has his name scratched on the side. The photograph is the two of you at the mine. You're both young. You're laughing. My father has his arm around you."

"He always did that," I said. "He was a head shorter."

"He's taller than you in the photo."

"He's standing on a coal bucket."

She laughed. It was a short laugh, surprised out of her. Then she stopped, as if she had remembered where she was.

※

"They told me he talked," she said.

"Who told you?"

"My aunt. The neighborhood. A man from the company came to the house with an envelope. He said my father had cooperated and that we should be grateful. My mother threw the envelope at him. He left it on the step. She burned it in the stove."

"Your mother was a strong woman."

"She was a scared woman. There's a difference."

The wind came off the cliff. It was a dry wind, the kind that takes the water out of your eyes. The swifts were not out yet. It was too early for the swifts.

"Did he talk?" she said.

"Your father talked all the time. He talked to the men. He talked to the company. He talked to me. He talked in his sleep."

"You know what I mean."

"I know what they mean."

"Did he?"

I did not answer. A bus came and went. The ticket scanner said please. A child ran past and shouted something to another child. The sound of the children went up the cliff and came back smaller.

"I don't know," I said.

"You were his best friend."

"That's why I don't know."

"That doesn't make sense."

"It makes the only sense I have."

She was quiet. I heard her breathing. It was even. She was a nurse; she had learned to breathe evenly while people said terrible things to her.

※

"Tell me about the night he left," she said.

"He went to Beijing."

"I know he went to Beijing. Tell me about the night."

"It was raining. Not hard. The kind of rain that gets into your collar. He had a bag with the notebook in it. He had a ticket for the ten-forty bus. He asked me to come."

"And you said no."

"I said I had a gig."

"You were playing."

"I was playing."

"What song?"

"'The Great Happiness.'"

"That's a wedding song."

"It's a song for people who are happy. I played it for four hours."

"And my father went to Beijing."

"He went to Beijing."

"Did you know what he was going to do?"

"I knew he was going to talk to someone."

"Did you know it was dangerous?"

"He knew."

"Did you try to stop him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I thought he was right."

"That's not what I asked."

"I know."

She did not say anything for a while. The wind moved the plastic tape case on the bench. It made a small sound, like a fingernail on a table.

※

"Do you think he's alive?" she said.

"I think he's somewhere."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I have."

"Do you think about him?"

"Every day."

"What do you do?"

"I play."

"That's not the same thing."

"No."

She picked up the photograph. I heard her thumb go over the surface, the way you touch a face in a picture.

"I have a son," she said. "He's five. His name is Xiaobao. He asks about his grandfather. I don't have a photograph of him smiling. I have this one. He's smiling in this one. But he's smiling at you."

"He was always smiling at me. It was a bad habit."

"I don't know what to tell my son."

"Tell him his grandfather talked."

"That's what they say. They say it like a disease."

"Then tell him he talked to me."

"What did he say?"

I thought about the tape. I had not played it yet. I had not heard his voice in ten years. I did not know what was on it. But I knew what he used to say. He used to say it at the end of the meetings, when the tea was cold and the others had gone home. He would put his hand on my shoulder and say it like a joke, because he could not say it like anything else.

"He said I was his zhiyin," I said. 知音 (zhīyīn, "one who knows the sound").

"What does that mean?"

"It means I heard him."

"Did you?"

The question sat between us. It was a simple question. It was the only question. I had been not answering it for ten years.

"I don't know," I said.

She put the photograph back in the box. She put the notebook in. She put the cassette in. She left the battery on the bench.

"Keep the box," she said. "I'll come back."

"The gate opens at seven."

"I know."

She stood. She walked away. She did not stop at the gate. She went straight through, the way a nurse walks when she is needed somewhere else.

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I sat with the box until the light changed. I could not see the light, but I could feel it: the sun going off the wall, the cold coming up through the concrete, the tourists thinning out. The battery was on the bench beside me. It was the same kind of battery that had taken my eyes. I knew its shape. I knew its weight. I knew the little door on the side and the smell of the acid and the gray plates inside.

I put it in the box. I carried the box home.

※

That night I opened the notebook.

I could not read it. I had not read a page since 2009. But I could feel it. Ma Jun wrote hard, with a ballpoint, and the pen had gone through the paper in places. The first pages were soft with handling. The later pages were stiffer. Creases where the notebook had been folded into a pocket. Coal dust in the creases. A smear of something on the last page, something that had dried a long time ago.

I turned the pages with my thumb. I did not know what they said. I knew the shape of his writing: the long loops, the pressure at the start of each line, the way he pressed harder when he was angry. The last page had a list. I could feel the list: a column of names, each one a small set of dents in the paper. Seven names. He had written them down. He had written them down and then he had gone to Beijing with the notebook in his bag.

I put the notebook on the table. I found the cassette player in the drawer. It was an old one, gray, with a handle and a speaker and a play button that stuck. I put in two batteries. I put in the tape. I pressed play.

The tape hissed. Then a chair scraped. Then a man cleared his throat.

※

"—so that's the third time they've moved the safety meeting. Third time. And the sign-in sheet says we were there. We were not there. I have the sheet. I

have a copy of the sheet. Wang Yulan has the original. If anything happens to me, Wang Yulan has the original."

A woman's voice: "Ma Jun, sit down."

"I'm sitting."

"You're standing."

Laughter. A kettle. Someone spat. A chair scraped.

"Sing the song," a man said.

"I can't sing."

"You sing worse than you talk."

"Nobody sings worse than I talk."

More laughter. Then he sang. He was bad. He was loud. He forgot the words. The others joined in. The song was "Seven Lamps." Seven lamps in the old kiln, seven men with black faces. He sang the wrong words. He sang "seven men with black faces" when it should have been "seven lamps in the old kiln," and Wang Yulan corrected him, and he sang it wrong again on purpose. The laughter went on. The kettle went on. The tape hissed.

Then it cut.

※

I stopped the tape. I rewound it. I played the laugh again. Then I played it again. Then I played it a third time. The third time I heard something under the laugh, a sound I had not heard the first two times: a child's voice, far away, at the edge of the tape. Ma Ling. She must have been in the next room. She was eighteen. She was calling her father.

I took the tape out. I put it in the tin with the battery. I sat at the table for a long time.

※

Then I opened the erhu.

The back plate came off easy now. I took Ma Jun's battery from the tin and worked a plate free. I melted it, hammered it thin, and fitted it inside, over the first sheet, leaving the finger's width around the skin.

I took the nail. I wrote.

王玉兰. (Wáng Yùlán, "jade orchid.") The one who kept the original. The one who could prove the sign-in sheet was a lie. The one who was still alive, still in the city, still afraid.

I put the back plate on and tapped the nails in with the handle of the screwdriver. I tuned the strings. I drew the bow.

The note came out lower than before. It had a weight in it now, a low center, like a stone in a pot of soup. It was not a bad sound. It was a sound that made you want to sit down.

"Your daughter has your watch," I said.

The stove ticked. The tape player clicked, once, the way old machines do when they are thinking.

I played the first bars of "Seven Lamps." Then I stopped. I was not ready. I put the erhu in the case and put the case by the bed and lay down in the dark.

CHAPTER 4

Cave Twenty

24 March — 260 g

Old Xu was at the gate when I arrived.

He was seventy. He had been a history teacher in a county middle school for thirty-five years, and now he stood in front of the grottoes four days a week and told tourists things that were mostly true. He carried a thermos of tea, a walking stick, and a canvas bag full of his own book. The book was called *The Stone That Listens*. It cost thirty yuan. He had sold four thousand copies, he said, which was either a lot or a little, depending on how you counted.

He heard my cane on the flagstones and came over. He always came over. He liked an audience almost as much as he liked being one.

"Gao," he said. "I saw your video."

"Everyone saw the video."

"I saw it twice. The second time I watched it for the errors."

"What errors?"

"The title. 'The Soul of Datong.' The soul of Datong is not a man playing an erhu. The soul of Datong is a coal seam that caught fire in 1987 and is still burning under the city. But nobody wants to film that. It doesn't get views."

"You could film it."

"I'm seventy. I don't have the legs."

He laughed at his own joke. Then he looked toward the cliff, the way he always did when he was about to say something he had said before.

"Come," he said. "I have a tour at ten. You can listen. You can correct me. You like correcting me."

"I don't correct you."

"You corrected me about the zhu."

"The zhu is not the erhu."

"Exactly."

※

The tour group was twelve people from Nanjing. Old Xu stood in front of the first cave with his stick held like a pointer. He did not use a loudspeaker. He had a voice that carried. He said the grottoes were carved in the Northern Wei, in the fifth century, when Datong was called Pingcheng and was the capital of an empire that stretched from the Yellow Sea to the Gobi. He said the monk Tanyao convinced the emperor to carve five giant Buddhas, one for each of the five emperors who had come before. He said the Buddhas were the emperors, and the emperors were the Buddhas, and the stone was the place where the two things met.

Then he told them about Gao Jianli.

"Gao Jianli was a musician," he said. "He played the zither. His best friend was Jing Ke, a man who tried to assassinate the King of Qin. The assassination failed. Jing Ke was killed. Gao Jianli changed his name and hid in a wine shop, but his music gave him away. The King of Qin — by then he was the First Emperor — summoned him to play. He loved the music. He had Gao Jianli blinded so he could not try to kill him, and he kept him at court, and he let him play. And then one day Gao Jianli hid pieces of lead inside his instrument, and when he was close enough, he struck at the emperor with it. He missed. He was blind. He was executed."

The group was quiet. A woman in a red jacket said, "That's so sad."

"It is a story about many things," Old Xu said. "It is a story about art and politics. It is a story about the fact that the emperor loved the music and feared the man. He did not blind him because he hated him. He blinded him because he loved the music and could not trust the man who made it. That is the part they leave out."

"He played a zhu," I said.

Old Xu turned. "What?"

"He played a zhu. The zhu is a box you strike. The erhu is a box you bow. Both are boxes with strings. The principle is the same."

The tour group looked at me. They had not noticed me before. I was a man on a bench, and now I was a man on a bench who had spoken.

"You know the story," Old Xu said.

"I know the name."

"Gao Jianli. Gao Yusheng. You see the coincidence."

"My mother saw it. She named me for the sound, not the man."

"What sound?"

"The sound of jade. Yusheng. Jade sound. She wanted me to be a musician."

"She got her wish."

"She got half of it."

Old Xu laughed. The tour group laughed, a little late, the way tour groups do. Then Old Xu took them up the stairs to Cave Twenty.

※

I followed.

The stairs are wide and shallow, cut into the cliff. There are forty-two of them. I know because I have counted them. At the top there is a railing, and beyond the railing the cliff opens into a shallow room with no roof. The front wall fell down centuries ago. The Buddha sits in the open.

Old Xu described him to the group. "He is thirteen point seven meters tall. He is seated. His hands are in his lap. His right hand is raised, but the hand is gone — it broke off, or it was taken, nobody knows. The face is the face you have seen in every book about the grottoes. The eyes are half-closed. He is looking at something that is not us."

The group took photographs. The shutters clicked. A phone made the sound of a phone taking a photograph, which is a sound like a coin dropped on a table. The wind came over the top of the cliff and went into the cave and came out through the Buddha's chest. It made a low sound, a sound like a note held too long.

I stood at the railing. I could feel the size of the cave on my face. The air was colder at the top of the stairs. The stone was warmer. The two things happened at once.

"How tall?" I said.

"Thirteen point seven meters," Old Xu said.

"That's not what I asked."

"What did you ask?"

"How big does he sound?"

Old Xu was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "He sounds like the valley."

"Yes," I said. "He does."

※

Secretary Zhou arrived at eleven.

I heard him before I saw him — not that I see. I heard his shoes. They were good shoes, leather, with a hard heel. They made a sound on the flagstones that was different from the tourists' shoes. Tourists scuff. Shoes like that do not scuff. They strike and lift, strike and lift, as if the ground were a thing to be dealt with.

He stopped in front of me. He smelled of cologne and clean paper.

"Mr. Gao," he said. "My name is Zhou. I work for Mr. Kang Rui."

"I know who you work for."

"Mr. Kang has asked me to extend a personal invitation."

"I don't accept personal invitations."

"It is also a professional invitation. There is a fee."

"I don't accept professional invitations either."

"Mr. Kang said you would say that."

"Mr. Kang is a good guesser."

"Mr. Kang is a good listener."

That was a good line. I gave him credit for it. I did not give him anything else.

He put a folder on the bench beside me. I heard the paper, the stiff cover, the little click of a pen.

"The festival," he said. "September twenty-ninth. The opening ceremony. Mr. Kang would like you to play. Not the whole night. One piece. Maybe two. The city will be watching. The province will be watching. There will be cameras."

"There are always cameras now."

"These are better cameras."

"What's the fee?"

"Fifty thousand."

It was a lot of money. It was also a number designed to be a lot of money, a number that said *we know what you are worth and we are prepared to pay it and you should be grateful*. I did not say anything.

"Mr. Kang would like to meet you first," Zhou said. "Before you decide. He has a house in the hills. He would send a car."

"I know Mr. Kang."

"He said you would say that."

"Then he knows me."

Zhou was quiet. I heard him pick up the folder and put it down again. The paper made a sound like a wing.

"There is also the matter of the video," he said. "The young woman's video. The city would like to use it. Mr. Kang would like to use it. There is a fee for that as well. For her, I mean. And for you."

"The video is hers."

"She has agreed."

"Then why are you asking me?"

"Because your face is in it."

"I don't have a face."

"Your hands, then."

He said it without missing a beat. I liked him for it. He was a man who had been trained to say the true thing in a way that made it sound like a compliment.

"I'll think about it," I said.

"Mr. Kang would like an answer by Friday."

"Mr. Kang can wait until Friday."

Zhou put the folder on the bench. He put a card on top of it. The card had raised letters. I could feel them with my thumb: his name, a phone number, the name of the company.

"Friday," he said. Then he walked away. His shoes struck and lifted, struck and lifted, until the sound was gone.

※

Old Xu came back after his tour. He sat down heavily. He opened his thermos. The tea smelled of jasmine and something older, something like wet leaves.

"Was that Kang Rui's man?" he said.

"Yes."

"What did he want?"

"The festival."

"Are you going to do it?"

I did not answer. Old Xu drank his tea. He made a sound with his mouth, the sound old men make when tea is hot and good.

"Kang Rui paid for the wall," he said. "He paid for the fake street. He paid for the festival. He is building the mining heritage park. He is building his own stupa. The emperors carved themselves as Buddhas. Kang Rui is carving himself as a patron. It is the same thing, with better lighting."

"A patron is not a Buddha."

"A patron is a Buddha with better lawyers."

I laughed. Old Xu laughed. A tourist looked at us, then looked away.

"The thing about Kang Rui," Old Xu said, "is that he is not a liar. That is what makes him dangerous. He believes everything he says. He believes he saved the city. He believes he saved you. He probably believes he is a good man. A man who believes he is a good man will do terrible things and sleep well."

"He sleeps well?"

"He has a house in the hills and a wife in Sanya. I don't know how he sleeps."

I thought about the folder on the bench. Fifty thousand. One piece. Maybe two. The city watching.

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

"Because you are going to do it," Old Xu said. "And I want you to know what you are doing."

"I haven't decided."

"You decided when you heard the fee."

He was right. I hated that he was right. I hated it because he was right for the wrong reason. He thought I had decided because of the money. I had decided

because of the stage. The stage was the thing. The stage was the only place where the music and the man could be in the same room as the emperor.

※

I went back up the stairs alone after Old Xu left.

The tourists were gone. The light was going. The cliff was warm on one side and cold on the other. I stood at the railing and listened.

The cave was not silent. It was never silent. The wind came over the top and went into the cave and came out through the Buddha's chest. The swifts were in the niches, moving, making their small dry sounds. The stone was doing what stone does: it was holding the heat of the day and letting it go slowly.

I thought about Gao Jianli. I thought about the lead in the zhu. I thought about the emperor, sitting in his hall, listening to the music of the man he had blinded. I thought about the moment when the music stopped and the man stood up with the instrument in his hands.

I did not think about the miss. I thought about the *before*: the moment when the emperor was still listening, and the musician was still playing, and the lead was still hidden, and the whole thing was still music.

That was the moment I wanted. Not the swing. The moment before.

I took out my phone. It was a cheap phone with big buttons and a voice that read the screen. I had never used it to call anyone but Auntie Jin and the hospital. I pressed the number on Zhou's card, one digit at a time, the way I had learned.

He answered on the second ring.

"Mr. Gao."

"Tell Mr. Kang I'll play."

"Mr. Kang will be pleased."

"I'm sure he will."

"Friday," Zhou said. "The car will come at ten."

"Friday," I said.

I hung up. The cave was still there. The Buddha was still there. The wind went into the cave and came out through his chest.

※

That night I added the third layer.

I took a plate from the tin, melted it, hammered it thin, and fitted it over the first two sheets, leaving the finger's width around the skin.

I took the nail. I wrote.

侯德山. (Hóu Déshān, "virtuous mountain.") Old Hou. The shot-firer. Deaf in one ear. He had a voice like a bullhorn and a laugh like a cough. In 2005, when the roof came down, he felt it through the floor before anyone heard it. He shouted. Three men got out. Three men did not. One of the men who did not was Luo Cheng, Xiaoyu's father. Old Hou testified to the safety board. He said the company had known about the crack for a month. He said he had reported it. He said the report had been lost. The company said he was deaf and confused. He was deaf in one ear. He was not confused.

He died in 2016. Alone. His lungs. I went to the funeral. There were four people there, including me and the man who sold the wreaths.

I closed the soundbox. I tuned the strings. I drew the bow.

The note came out lower. It had a floor now, a bottom, a place where it stopped and sat. It was not a bad sound. It was a sound that made the room feel smaller.

I lifted the erhu off my knee. I held it by the neck, the way you hold a thing you are going to put down. Then I swung it, once, at the air.

The air made a sound. Not the erhu. The air. A low sound, a sound like a coat being taken off. The erhu went through the air and stopped at the end of my arm, and the strings rang, and the sound went out into the courtyard and came back off the date tree.

I stood there with the erhu in my hand. The stove ticked. The erhu was warm against my palm.

"He sounds like the valley," I said.

I did not know if I meant the Buddha or the instrument. It did not matter. They were both stone, and they were both listening.

CHAPTER 5

The Comments

31 March — 340 g

By the end of March, the comments were a job.

Xiaoyu read them in the morning, before she got out of bed, with the phone held above her face and the blanket pulled up to her chin. She had started categorizing them. There were the **soul** comments, which said the video had made them cry and the city was beautiful. There were the **coal** comments, which said the city was not beautiful and the video was propaganda. There were the **fake** comments, which said the old man was a paid actor and the tears were glycerin. There were the **thirst** comments, which she did not read twice. There were the **local** comments, which were the only ones that scared her, because they knew things.

> *@datong_girl: my mother says she knows him. she says he used to play at the mine. she won't say more.*
> *@laokuang_2: he's not the soul of datong. he's a man who lost his eyes. don't make him a saint.*
> *@erhu_student: the low frequency is getting stronger. i compared the march video to the april one. something is wrong with his instrument.*
> *@sophie_in_shanghai: i want to visit datong now. is it safe?*
> *@truth_hunter_88: the way he turns his head is creepy. is he really blind?*
> *@little_sun: my grandmother says the grottoes are older than the city. the city is just the dust the grottoes shook off.*
> *@north_west_wind: the city should give him a pension. he shouldn't have to play for tourists.*

She screenshot the **@erhu_student** comment and sent it to herself. She did not know why. She had been thinking about the low frequency since the night she had seen it on the waveform. She had listened to it again and again, with the volume up and the lights off, and it had begun to feel like a thing in the room with her, a thing that was waiting to be named.

※

The meeting was on Tuesday, on the third floor of the scenic area office.

Director Sun had a new haircut and a new jacket. He had a projector and a clicker and a slide that said **YUNGANG INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL TOURISM FESTIVAL — OPENING FILM — V3**. He had a pot of tea and four cups. He had Xiaoyu and two men from the television station and a woman from the city publicity office whose name Xiaoyu forgot immediately.

"The film is six minutes," Sun said. "It opens with the cliff. Then the Buddha. Then the city. Then the mine. Then the future. The old man is the bridge. He is the past and the future. He is the sound of the city."

"He's a person," Xiaoyu said.

"Of course he's a person. A person is better than a symbol. A symbol is dead. A person is alive." Sun clicked the clicker. A photograph of Gao appeared on the screen. It was a still from Xiaoyu's video, his hands on the bow, the skin of the erhu catching the light. "This is the shot. This is the shot we open with. The hands. No face. The face comes later, at the end, when he plays for the Buddha."

"The Buddha doesn't need a soundtrack."

Sun laughed. The two men from the television station laughed. The woman from the publicity office did not laugh, because she was looking at her phone.

"We need a release from him," Sun said. "And we need him at the rehearsal on the twenty-eighth. The performance is at nine. The moon rises at seven forty. The lights go on at eight. He plays at nine. The fireworks at nine fifteen. The mayor speaks at nine twenty."

"The mayor speaks after the music?"

"The mayor speaks after the fireworks. The music is the overture. The mayor is the main event."

"What am I?"

"You're the one who makes the overture."

She looked at the program on the table. It was a single sheet of paper, printed on both sides. **19:00 — GATES OPEN. 19:40 — MOONRISE. 20:00 — LIGHTS. 21:00 — THE SOUL OF DATONG — GAO YUSHENG, ERHU. 21:15 — FIREWORKS. 21:20 — MAYOR FENG. 21:35 — MR. KANG RUI.**

"Kang Rui speaks last," she said.

"Mr. Kang speaks last."

"What does he speak about?"

"The future."

She looked at the sheet. The name **KANG RUI** was in bold. The largest name on the program. Larger than the mayor's. Larger than the Buddha.

※

She went to the mine on Thursday with Duan Cheng.

The mine was west of the city, past the last of the new apartment blocks, where the road turned to gravel and the air turned to grit. The shaft head was still there, a steel tower with a wheel on top, painted blue, rusting at the joints. The buildings around it were empty. The windows were boarded. The coal gangue hill was still burning somewhere inside itself; she could smell it, a smell like hot metal and old socks. The heritage park was half-built: a concrete plaza, a visitors' center with a glass front, a wall.

The wall was the thing she had come to see. It was black stone, polished, with names cut into it. The names were in columns. There were hundreds of them. At the top it said **IN MEMORY OF THE MINERS OF MEIYUKOU NO. 2**.

Duan walked beside her with his hands in his pockets. He was fifty-five, thick through the shoulders, with a face that had been in the sun too long. He had been Gao's shift mate, Sun had told her. He had been at the mine for thirty years. Now he was the security supervisor at the scenic area, which meant he stood at the gate and told people not to climb the cliff.

"Which names are these?" she said.

"Men who died in the mine."

"All of them?"

"The ones the company acknowledged."

She walked along the wall. The names were cut deep. She touched them. They were cold. She found a cluster of names from 2005, and she stopped.

"Roof fall," Duan said. "Three men."

She read the names. **LIU GUOQIANG. ZHANG HEPING. LUO CHENG.**

Luo Cheng. Her father. She had known he would be there. She had not known how it would feel to see his name in stone, in a row, with two other men. It felt like reading his name in a newspaper. It felt like reading a word she had known all her life and had never seen written down.

"Did you know him?" Duan said.

"He was my father."

Duan was quiet. He took his hands out of his pockets. He looked at the wall, then at her, then at the wall again.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Did you know him?"

"Everyone knew Luo Cheng. He sang. He was the one who sang at the parties."

She had known that. She had forgotten it. Her father had sung. He had a good voice. He used to sing in the kitchen, badly, on purpose, to make her mother laugh. She had not thought about that in years.

"Who else is missing?" she said.

"Missing?"

"From the wall. Who else should be on it?"

Duan looked at her. His face did not change. His hands went back into his pockets.

"The wall is for men who died in the mine," he said.

"What about men who died because of it?"

"That's a different wall."

"Is there a different wall?"

"Not yet."

She walked to the end of the wall. There was a gap between the last column and the edge, a space of black stone with nothing cut into it. It was the size of a name. It was the size of several names.

"Ma Jun," she said.

Duan did not move.

"Ma Jun," she said again. "Was he a miner?"

"He was a safety inspector."

"Was he on the wall?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He didn't die in the mine."

"Where did he die?"

Duan looked at the burning hill. The smoke came off it in a thin line, like a thread pulled through cloth.

"Who said he died?" he said.

※

She interviewed Gao on Saturday, on the bench, with the second camera and the lav.

He was different today. He had been different since the phone call with Zhou, though she did not know about the phone call. He was quieter. He played less. He sat with the erhu across his knees and his hands still, and when she asked him questions, he answered them in a voice that seemed to come from a room behind his face.

"Tell me about the men you played with," she said.

"There were seven of us."

"Seven."

"Seven. We met in an old brick kiln behind the village. We talked about the mine. We talked about the safety meetings that were moved and the sign-in sheets that were signed by men who were not there. We talked about the wages. We talked about the men who died. We sang a song."

"What song?"

"七盏灯 (Qī Zhǎn Dēng, 'Seven Lamps'). It was a folk tune. Ma Jun wrote the words. There were seven verses. One for each of us."

"Will you sing it?"

"I don't sing."

"Will you play it?"

He was quiet. His hand went to the neck of the erhu. His thumb found the qianjin and moved it a hair, the way he did when he was thinking.

"Not today," he said.

"Can you tell me the words?"

He was quiet again. Then he said, "Seven lamps in the old kiln, seven men with black faces. One lamp went out in the spring wind. Six lamps, six lamps."

"That's sad."

"It's a counting song. Children sing counting songs. This one just counts down instead of up."

She looked at the waveform on her phone. The low hum was there, under his voice, steady, like a second person breathing in the room.

"What's in the case?" she said.

"An erhu."

"It's heavier than an erhu."

"It's a heavy erhu."

"Mr. Gao."

"Miss Luo."

She laughed. He did not. She looked at his hands. They were resting on the erhu. The fingers were thick at the joints. The nails were cut short. There was a callus on the side of the left index finger, where the string pressed.

"I'm not trying to trick you," she said. "I'm trying to understand."

"Understanding is a trap," he said. "It makes you think you're finished."

※

She saw Ma Ling at the noodle shop that evening.

Ma Ling was sitting at the back table with a bowl of noodles and a paper folder. She was wearing a gray coat and no makeup. She looked up when Xiaoyu came in, and Xiaoyu knew immediately that she had been waiting.

"You're the video girl," Ma Ling said.

"You're Ma Jun's daughter."

"Sit down."

Xiaoyu sat. Auntie Jin brought a bowl of noodles without being asked. The steam came up between them. The radio was on. The man was reading the news. The city was preparing for the festival. The tickets were on sale.

"You're making a film about my father's friend," Ma Ling said.

"I'm making a film about the city."

"You're making a film about the city and using my father's friend as the soundtrack."

"That's one way to put it."

"It's the only way to put it."

Xiaoyu ate. The noodles were good. Her mother's noodles were always good. She had eaten them her whole life. She had never told her mother that.

"Did you know my father?" Ma Ling said.

"No."

"Your father was Luo Cheng."

Xiaoyu stopped eating.

"How do you know that?"

"My father wrote about him. In the notebook. He wrote about all of them. The three men who died in 2005. The seven in the kiln. The safety meetings. The sign-in sheets. He wrote everything down. He wrote down your father's name and the date he died and the name of the man who signed the sheet saying the roof was safe." Ma Ling's voice was even. It was the voice of a nurse giving a diagnosis. "The man who signed the sheet is now the chairman of the company."

Xiaoyu put down her chopsticks. The radio went on. The steam went up. Her mother was at the front, wiping a table, pretending not to listen.

"Why are you telling me this?" Xiaoyu said.

"Because you're making a film about the soul of Datong. I thought you should know what the soul is made of."

"I know what it's made of."

"Do you?"

"I know it's not beautiful."

Ma Ling looked at her for a long time. Then she opened the paper folder and took out a photograph. It was old, creased, black-and-white. She slid it across the table.

"That's my father," she said. "That's your father. That's the old man. They're at the mine. They're young. They're laughing."

Xiaoyu looked at the photograph. Her father was on the left, in a work jacket, with his arm around a thin man with a big laugh. The thin man was Ma Jun. On the right, younger than she had ever seen him, was Gao. He had eyes. He was looking at the camera. He was smiling with his whole face.

"He had eyes," she said.

"Everyone had eyes."

※

She drove to the grottoes that night with the release form in her bag. She did not know why she went at night. She told herself it was because she had forgotten to get his thumbprint, and the festival was coming, and Sun would call her in the morning. She told herself it was a practical thing.

The village was dark. The noodle shop was closed. The gate to the scenic area was locked. She parked on the road and walked along the wall to the east, where the path went up to the courtyard houses.

She heard him before she saw him. The erhu made a sound she had not heard before: a low, heavy sound, like a door swinging on a hinge. Then a whoosh. Then the sound of the strings ringing.

She stopped at the corner of the wall and looked.

He was in the courtyard, under the date tree. The stove was lit inside. The door was open. The light from the stove came out and made a square on the ground. He stood in the square with the erhu in his right hand, holding it by the neck, the way you hold a hammer. He lifted it. He swung it.

The erhu went through the air and stopped a hand's width from the trunk of the date tree. The strings rang. The air rang. He held the position for a moment, his arm straight, the instrument trembling at the end of it. Then he lowered it.

He did it again. The same swing. The same stop. The same hand's width.

He did it a third time. Then he stood still. He turned his head toward the wall where she was standing.

"I know you're there," he said.

She did not answer. Her heart was going hard. She felt like a girl who had been caught looking through a window.

"You breathe like a camera," he said.

She stepped out from the wall. The light from the stove caught her shoes.

"I brought the release form," she said.

"Did you get it?"

"Get what?"

"The shot."

She looked at the erhu in his hand. It was a small thing. It was a heavy thing. It was the thing she had lifted in March and almost dropped.

"I didn't film it," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know what it is."

He was quiet for a moment. The stove ticked. The date tree moved in the wind.

"Good," he said.

He walked past her into the house. The door closed. She stood in the courtyard with the release form in her hand and the sound of the swing still in her ears.

※

She did not tell Sun. She did not post it. She did not tell Ma Ling. She drove home and lay on her bed with her headphones on and listened to the recording of the interview, the low hum under his voice, the second person breathing in the room.

She thought about the hand's width. She thought about the fact that he had stopped. She thought about the fact that he had done it three times, and each time he had stopped in the same place, and the same place was not the tree.

She did not sleep. At four in the morning she got up and opened her laptop and looked at the forum post again.

> *Subject: Meiyukou No. 2 — battery accident?*
> *Posted by: laokuang*
> *Date: 14 August 2010*
> *A man named Gao, an electrician, was blinded at Meiyukou No. 2 last year. Official story: battery charging accident. But the battery was not on charge. He was asking about Ma Jun. The company paid the family. The case is closed.*

She read it until the words stopped meaning anything. Then she closed the laptop and watched the sky get light.

CHAPTER 6

The Notebook

7 April — 340 g

The notebook smelled of coal and cigarettes and something older, something like the inside of a coat that had been left in a damp room.

Ma Ling put on the latex gloves before she opened it. She did not know why. She was not a detective. She was a nurse. She wore gloves when she touched things that might be infected. The notebook was not infected. It was her father's.

She had put Xiaobao on the kindergarten bus at seven forty. He had wanted to bring the notebook for show-and-tell. She had said no. He had asked why. She had said, "It's not a toy." He had said, "It's a book." She had said, "It's a book about work." He had accepted that, because he was five and the world was still made of simple categories.

The apartment was on the sixth floor of a building near the hospital. One bedroom, a kitchen with a rice cooker and a jar of pickles, a window that looked at another window. Her hospital ID was on the table. Her mother's photograph was on the shelf, next to a plastic orchid that Xiaobao had won at a school fair. The box from her mother's things was open on the chair beside her.

She took out the notebook. The rubber band was perished. It broke when she touched it. The cover was black, oil-stained, soft at the corners. The pages were swollen with damp. She opened it.

Her father's handwriting was bad. He pressed hard. The pen had gone through the paper in places. The letters were cramped at the end of each line, as if he were trying to fit more into the page than the page could hold.

The first entries were from 2003.

> *12 March 2003. Seven of us. The old kiln. Wang Yulan brought the minutes book. Gao brought the erhu. Duan sat by the door. We*

> *talked about the safety meeting. The meeting was moved three times. The sign-in sheet says we were there. We were not there.*

She turned the page.

> *4 June 2003. The company says the mine is safe. The company says the mine is the safest in Shanxi. The company says the accident rate is down. The accident rate is down because they do not count the accidents. Old Hou says they do not count the men either.*

She turned the page. The entries were not daily. They were not even weekly. They were written when something happened, and the gaps between them were the shape of her father's life: long stretches of nothing, then a burst of dates, then nothing again.

> *19 August 2005. The roof came down at 4:20 in the afternoon. Three men. Luo Cheng, Liu Guoqiang, Zhang Heping. The crack was reported on the 12th. The report was lost. The company says there was no report. I have a copy. I have it in the kiln.*

Ma Ling stopped. She knew Luo Cheng's name. Everyone in the old neighborhood knew it. Luo Cheng had sung at the mine parties. He had a daughter, a small girl with a loud voice. Xiaoyu. She was a videographer now. She had made the video of Gao. The world was smaller than it looked.

She turned the page.

> *2 October 2005. The company paid the families. Three hundred thousand each. The families signed. The company says the mine is safe. The company says the men were careless. The men were not careless. The roof was careless.*

> *14 May 2007. A man from Taiyuan came. A reporter. He sat in the kiln for two hours. He took a copy of the notebook. He said the article would run in two weeks. It did not run. The editor says it is not the right time. The right time is never.*

> *3 March 2008. The water came in at the lower level. Four men. The company says it was a natural inflow. The company says the men ignored the warning. The men did not ignore the warning. The warning was not given.*

> *11 January 2009. They are watching the kiln. Duan saw a car on the road. He says it is nothing. It is not nothing.*

Ma Ling read the last entry three times. *Duan saw a car on the road. He says it is nothing. It is not nothing.*

She turned to the next page. It was almost blank. There was one line at the top, pressed so hard that the pen had torn the paper.

> *2 March 2009. I am going to Beijing. The notebook goes with me. If I don't come back, the notebook is in the kiln. Tell Ling I am sorry. Tell her I talked too much.*

She put the notebook down.

The kitchen was quiet. The refrigerator hummed. A bus went by on the road below, and the window rattled, and then the bus was gone.

She picked the notebook up again.

The last page had a list. Seven names in a column, written in the same hard hand. She recognized three: Gao Yusheng. Duan Cheng. Wang Yulan. The other four were names she had heard in the neighborhood, the way you hear the names of roads you have never driven on. Hou Deshan. Li Xiaobo. Zhao Deshun. Ma Jun.

Her father had written his own name at the bottom of the list. He had written it the way you sign a letter.

Under the list, in smaller letters, he had written: *Ling, tuition, 4,000.*

She had been twenty when he disappeared. She had been in her second year of nursing college. The tuition had been four thousand yuan. She had never known where it came from. Her mother had said, "Your father left it." Her mother had said it in a voice that did not invite questions.

Ma Ling took off the gloves. She put them on the table. She looked at the notebook for a long time. Then she went to the window and stood there, and the window looked at the other window, and the other window looked back.

※

At the bottom of the box, under the notebook, there was an envelope.

It was brown, thin, creased at the corners. It was addressed to her mother in a hand that was not her father's. The postmark was **Beijing, 14 April 2009**.

She opened it with a knife. Inside was a single sheet of paper, folded in three.

> *I am all right. Don't look for me. Give the notebook to Ling when she is old enough.*
> *— Jun*

The postmark was April. The company had told her mother that he had gone to Inner Mongolia in March. The company had told her mother that he had a job at a mine in Inner Mongolia, that he was doing well, that he would send money. The company had told her mother a lot of things.

He had been in Beijing in April. He had mailed the notebook. He had written *I am all right.* Then he had disappeared.

Ma Ling put the letter in a plastic sleeve. She put the envelope in the sleeve with it. She photographed both sides with her phone. Then she sat down on the kitchen floor, with her back against the cupboard, and looked at the box.

※

She drove to the mine on Saturday.

It was west of the city, past the last of the new apartment blocks, where the road turned to gravel and the air turned to grit. The shaft head was still there: a steel tower with a wheel on top, painted blue, rusting at the joints. The buildings around it were empty. The windows were boarded. The coal gangue hill was still burning somewhere inside itself. She could smell it through the car window, a smell like hot metal and old socks.

The heritage park was half-built. There was a concrete plaza, a visitors' center with a glass front, and a wall.

The wall was black stone, polished, with names cut into it. The names were in columns. There were hundreds of them. At the top it said **IN MEMORY OF THE MINERS OF MEIYUKOU NO. 2**.

She walked along the wall. The names were cut deep. She touched them. They were cold. She found the 2005 cluster, and she stopped.

LIU GUOQIANG. ZHANG HEPING. LUO CHENG.

She read them three times. She had known Luo Cheng's name. She had not known the other two. She had not known that the wall would make her feel like a child again, standing in a kitchen while the adults talked about something that had happened to someone else.

She looked for her father's name. She walked the whole wall twice. She looked at the end, where the columns stopped and the black stone went on for another half meter before the edge. There was a gap there. It was the size of a name. It was the size of several names.

A worker in a yellow vest came out of the visitors' center. He was young, with a cigarette behind his ear and a phone in his hand.

"You can't touch the wall," he said.

"I'm looking for a name."

"Whose?"

"Ma Jun."

He looked at the wall, then at her. He did not look at the gap.

"Not here," he said.

"Why not?"

"The wall is for accident victims."

"He was a miner."

"He was a safety inspector."

"He was a miner."

"He didn't die in the mine."

She looked at the gap. The black stone was smooth. The sun was on it. It was warm.

"Where did he die?" she said.

The worker took the cigarette from behind his ear and put it in his mouth. He did not light it.

"Missing persons are not our department," he said. He walked back into the visitors' center.

※

She found Duan at the scenic area gate.

He was standing in the shade of the ticket office with his hands in his pockets, watching the buses. He was fifty-five, thick through the shoulders, with a face that had been in the sun too long. He had been her father's friend. He had sat by the door of the kiln. He had seen a car on the road and said it was nothing.

"Uncle Duan," she said.

He turned. He looked at her for a moment, and then his face did something complicated, something that was almost a smile and almost not.

"Ma Ling," he said. "You've grown."

"It's been ten years."

"Yes."

She stood in front of him. The buses came and went. The ticket scanner said please. The tourists walked past with their phones.

"My father is not on the wall," she said.

Duan looked at the wall of the ticket office, then at the ground, then at her.

"The wall is for men who died in the mine," he said.

"He was in the mine."

"He was a safety inspector."

"That's what the worker said."

"Then it must be true."

"Where did he go?"

"Inner Mongolia."

"Where in Inner Mongolia?"

"I don't know."

"You were his friend."

"I was his friend."

"Then why don't you know?"

Duan took his hands out of his pockets. He looked at the buses. A bus was pulling in, and the brakes made a sound like a cough. He waited until the sound was gone.

"Your father was a good man," he said. "Don't make trouble for him."

"What kind of trouble?"

He did not answer. He looked at her for a moment longer, and then he turned and walked toward the gate. His shoes made a sound on the flagstones, a sound like a man walking away from something he had been carrying for a long time.

※

Back in Taiyuan, she went through the rest of her mother's papers.

She found it in a manila envelope at the bottom of a plastic storage box, under a stack of hospital receipts and a broken rosary and a photograph of a beach she had never been to.

It was a carbon copy. The paper was thin and gray, the kind that made your fingers black. The report was three pages long.

> *ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION REPORT MEIYUKOU NO. 2*
> *— 14 AUGUST 2009*
> *Subject: Gao Yusheng, male, 48, electrician.*
> *Incident: On 13 August 2009, the subject was found in the charging room with injuries to the face and eyes. The subject was transported to the company clinic and then to the provincial hospital.*
> *Cause: The subject was found to have improperly handled a lead-acid battery during a charging procedure. The battery exploded. The subject sustained chemical burns to the face and eyes.*

> *Outcome: Permanent loss of sight in both eyes.*
> *Compensation: The company has paid the subject's medical expenses and a compassionate allowance. The subject has signed a settlement.*
> *Conclusion: The case is closed.*

At the bottom of the last page there was a signature. It was in blue ink, in a hand that was large and careful, the hand of a man who had learned to write late and had never stopped being proud of it.

Kang Rui.

Ma Ling read the report twice. Then she read the date again.

The incident was 13 August 2009. Her father had disappeared in March. The report was dated 14 August. The same company security office had handled both cases. The same signature was on both files.

She thought about Gao sitting on the bench with the erhu on his knees. She thought about the scars around his eyes. She thought about the way he had said, "It was written down as one."

She put the report in a plastic sleeve. She put the sleeve in her bag. She sat at the kitchen table with her hands flat on the wood.

※

She drove to the grottoes that evening.

She parked on the road below the east gate. The scenic area was closed. The lights were off. The cliff was a dark shape against a darker sky. She could see the bench, a small gray thing at the foot of the wall, and she could see the old man.

He was alone. He had the erhu in his hands. He was not playing. He was lifting it, and setting it down, and lifting it again. The movement was slow and deliberate, the way a man might lift a stone to see how heavy it was, or a baby to see if it was sleeping.

He did it three times. Then he put the erhu in the case and sat with his hands on his knees.

Ma Ling watched him from the car. She did not get out. She did not know what she would say. She did not know what she wanted from him. She knew what she wanted from her father, and her father was not there.

She started the car. The engine was loud in the quiet. The old man turned his head toward the sound. She did not know if he could hear her. She drove away.

CHAPTER 7

The Old Kiln

14 April — 340 g

I wake with the smell of straw in my nose.

The kiln is not there anymore. The village filled it in and poured a parking lot over it. But the smell is still in my nose, and the sound of the erhu in the brick chamber is still in my hands. The chamber was round. The sound went around it before it went out. It came back to me a half-beat late, like a man repeating the end of my sentence.

I get up. I put water on the stove. I do not drink it. I sit at the table with the erhu in its case. The case is heavier than it was last month. I lift it and set it down. I lift it and set it down. I am not sure why I do this. A man checks the weight of a thing he is carrying because he wants to know if he can carry it.

The festival is in five months. Kang Rui has sent a contract. Zhou has sent a schedule. Xiaoyu has sent a message through Xiao Liu: *They want the song. They want the one you played at the kiln.* I did not answer. There is no one left who knows what the song is except the people who were there, and two of them are dead, and one of them is gone, and one of them is Duan.

I open the case. I take out the erhu. I run my thumb along the soundbox. The lead is inside it. It is a low, cold weight. It has a grain, like wood. I can feel the edges of the sheets where they overlap.

I think about the kiln.

※

1. The first meeting.

The kiln was behind the village, in a hollow in the loess. It was a brick dome, half-collapsed, with a chimney that no longer drew. The floor was dirt. Someone had laid straw down. Someone else had put a plank across two bricks for a table.

The rain came through the collapsed part of the roof and made a dark patch on the floor, and the patch got bigger while we talked.

There were seven of us.

Ma Jun stood on a coal bucket because he was the shortest man in the room and he did not like it. He had a pamphlet in his hand. He read from it in a loud voice. "Article twenty-four. The enterprise shall provide safety training to all employees. Article twenty-five. The enterprise shall not require employees to work in conditions that endanger their lives."

"That's the law," said Wang Yulan. She was thin and sharp and had a pencil behind her ear. She wrote in a notebook. "Read it again. I want to get it right."

Ma Jun read it again. Wang Yulan wrote it down.

Old Hou sat close to Ma Jun because he was deaf in his left ear. He was small and wrinkled and had a voice like a bullhorn. "What?" he said. "What did he say?"

"He said the mine is supposed to be safe," Li Xiaobo said. Li Xiaobo was the youngest. He was twenty-seven. He had a thin face and a way of looking at the door when he talked, as if he expected someone to come through it.

"The mine is not safe," Old Hou said. "The mine has never been safe. I have been in the mine for thirty years. I have seen four men killed by the roof and two by the gas and one by the water. The company says the mine is safe. The company is a liar."

"Old Hou," Ma Jun said. "Not so loud."

"Why not? I'm deaf. I can't hear myself."

Everyone laughed. Zhao Deshun, who was the cook at the mine canteen, poured tea from a thermos. He was sixty and round and had a bad hip. He poured the tea into a row of enamel cups. The cups did not match. One of them had a chip in the rim. One of them said **MODEL WORKER** in red letters.

"Drink," Zhao Deshun said. "The tea is the only thing in this mine that is not a lie."

Duan sat by the door. He was forty, thick through the shoulders, with a face that was already old. He did not drink the tea. He watched the road through the gap in the wall.

"There's a car," he said.

Everyone stopped.

"Whose car?" Ma Jun said.

"I don't know. It's a black car. It went past the village and it did not stop."

"It's nothing," Ma Jun said. "It's a farmer with a new car."

"There are no farmers with new cars," Wang Yulan said.

"There are now," Ma Jun said. "That's the whole problem."

He climbed down from the coal bucket. He stood in the middle of the kiln. He was not a tall man, but he had a way of standing that made the room arrange itself around him.

"We are a reading group," he said. "We read the safety regulations. It is legal. We are not a union. We are not a party. We are seven people who read the law out loud in a brick kiln because the company will not read it to us. That is all we are."

"For now," Old Hou said.

"For now," Ma Jun said. "For now is enough."

He looked at me. "Play the song," he said.

"I don't have the song," I said.

"You have the tune. I have the words. We'll put them together."

He taught us the words line by line. *Seven lamps in the old kiln, seven men with black faces.* He sang it badly. He always sang badly. He sang the wrong words and then insisted they were the right words. Wang Yulan corrected him. He sang them wrong again on purpose. Old Hou could not hear the tune, so he hummed something else, something in a different key, and it made the whole thing sound like two songs fighting.

I played the erhu. The chamber was round, and the sound went around it. It came back to me a half-beat late. For a moment I was playing with a second musician, a musician who knew what I was going to play before I played it.

Zhao Deshun poured more tea. Li Xiaobo laughed. Duan watched the road.

That was the first night. It was not a revolution. It was seven people in a brick kiln, singing badly, drinking tea from a chipped cup.

※

1. The journalist.

His name was Chen. He came from Taiyuan. He wore a raincoat that was too big for him and glasses that were always slipping down his nose. He sat in the kiln for two hours and did not drink the tea.

Ma Jun gave him the notebook. Not the original. A copy. He had made it on the photocopier at the mine office, one page at a time, at night, when the secretary had gone home.

Chen read it. He was quiet for a long time.

"This is good," he said. "This is very good. The dates. The names. The copies of the reports. This is a story."

"Will it run?" Ma Jun said.

"It will run. I have an editor who is not afraid. Two weeks."

The article did not run. Two weeks later, Ma Jun got a phone call. He listened. He said, "I see." He said, "Thank you." He hung up.

He came to the kiln that night. He stood in the middle of the room. He did not stand on the coal bucket. He did not need to.

"They killed it," he said.

Wang Yulan put her pencil down. "Then we stop."

"We don't stop."

"We stop. We have families. Li Xiaobo has a mother. Zhao Deshun has a granddaughter. I have a daughter."

"I have a daughter too," Ma Jun said.

"Then think about her."

"I am thinking about her. That's why I'm not stopping."

Old Hou said, "If we stop, they win."

"Old Hou," Wang Yulan said, "you can't hear half of what they say. You don't know what we're risking."

"I know what I'm risking," Old Hou said. "I've been risking it for thirty years. You've been risking it for four."

Duan sat by the door. He did not say anything. He watched the road.

※

1. The bus station.

It was raining. Not hard. The kind of rain that gets into your collar and stays there. The bus station was a concrete shed with a tin roof and a row of plastic seats. The fluorescent light over the ticket window buzzed. Ma Jun stood under it with a canvas bag.

The bag had the notebook in it, wrapped in a plastic bag, wrapped in a shirt. He had a ticket for the ten-forty. He had a new coat. He had shaved.

"You came," he said.

"I came."

"You're in your good shirt."

"I have a gig."

"The wedding."

"The coal company's deputy manager's daughter. Three hundred yuan."

"Three hundred."

"It's a lot of money."

"It's not a lot of money."

"It's a lot of money to me."

He laughed. Then he stopped laughing. He looked at me. His face was tired. He had been tired for years, but that night he looked tired in a different way. He looked like a man who had already left.

"Come with me," he said.

"I can't."

"You can. The bus has two seats. We can be in Beijing by morning. We can go to the newspaper together. You can play for them. They'll listen to you. You have a face people trust."

"I have a gig."

"You always have a gig."

The rain came off the tin roof in a line. It made a sound like a curtain being pulled.

"I'll come after," I said. "I'll take the morning bus. I'll meet you there."

He looked at me for a long time. Then he said, "You're a good man, Gao."

"Don't."

He smiled. It was his old smile, the one he used when he was about to say something he did not mean.

"Tell Ling I'm sorry," he said. "She's at her mother's. Tell her I'll call."

"Tell her yourself."

"I'll call."

The bus came. The doors opened. He got on. He sat by the window. He looked at me through the glass. The glass was wet. I could not see his face clearly. I raised my hand. He raised his.

The bus pulled away. The red taillights went down the road and got smaller and then they were gone.

I stood in the rain for a while. Then I went to the wedding.

※

The wedding was at the coal company's guesthouse. Two hundred people. A whole roast sheep. A stage with a red banner and a photograph of the bride and groom that had been blown up to the size of a door. The bride's mother cried. The groom got drunk and sang a song about the moon. I played "The Great Happiness" for four hours.

I played it on the erhu. The erhu is not a wedding instrument. It is a mourning instrument, a storytelling instrument, an instrument for the road. But the company liked me, and the deputy manager had heard me at the mine, and three hundred yuan was three hundred yuan.

I played until midnight. I played through the speeches and the toasts and the karaoke. I played through the moment when the groom's mother fell off the stage and had to be helped up. I played through the rain, which kept coming, and the guests, who kept drinking, and the bride, who looked at the door.

My phone was in my pocket. It did not ring.

※

I come back to the present.

The stove is ticking. The erhu is on my knees. The lead is inside it. I have added two sheets since the last time I played the song. Li Xiaobo, the young one, who left for Inner Mongolia and came back and now drives a taxi in Taiyuan. Zhao Deshun, the cook, who died in 2016 with fluid in his lungs and a photograph of his granddaughter on the bedside table.

I write their names. My hand is steady. The nail goes into the lead. The lead is soft. It takes the letters the way a soft road takes a boot.

Then I play "Seven Lamps." 七盏灯 (Qī Zhǎn Dēng, "Seven Lamps").

The low register is changed. The tune sounds like it is being played underwater. The notes come up slowly, one by one, and each note has a weight in it, a stone in the belly. The song counts down. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

I hear Ma Jun's voice in the resonance. It is not a ghost. It is the instrument. The instrument is full of him. It is full of all of them. The song is the only place where they are still seven.

I stop.

"I'm sorry," I say.

The stove ticks. The kiln is a parking lot. The rain is not falling. The bus has gone.

I put the erhu in the case. I put the case by the bed. I lie down. I do not sleep. I listen to the note go out into the room and come back changed.

INTERLUDE 2

The Cassette

6 July 2007

[The tape begins mid-sentence. Hiss. A chair scrapes. A kettle begins to whistle, then stops.]

MA JUN: —which is why I keep saying it. The sheet says we were there. We were not there. The sheet has our names on it. My name. Wang Yulan's name. Old Hou's name. We were not there.

WANG YULAN: Read the date.

MA JUN: The date is the fourteenth of June.

WANG YULAN: What did we do on the fourteenth of June?

MA JUN: We were here. In the kiln. We were reading the regulations.

WANG YULAN: Write that down.

MA JUN: I am writing it down. I am writing it down in the notebook. The notebook is the only thing in this city that does not lie.

OLD HOU: What?

MA JUN: The notebook does not lie!

OLD HOU: Louder.

MA JUN: THE NOTEBOOK DOES NOT LIE!

OLD HOU: It's a notebook. It can't lie. It's a notebook.

ZHAO DESHUN: Tea.

[A thermos is opened. Liquid pours. The cups are enamel. One of them has a chip in the rim.]

ZHAO DESHUN: Drink it while it's hot. The tea is the only thing in this mine that is not a lie.

LI XIAOBO: Can they arrest us for this?

MA JUN: For drinking tea?

LI XIAOBO: For the notebook. For the meetings. For the reading.

MA JUN: They can arrest us for anything. That's not the point.

LI XIAOBO: What's the point?

MA JUN: The point is that when they arrest us, they have to say why. And when they say why, people will hear it. And when people hear it, they will know. That's the point.

LI XIAOBO: That's not a very good point.

MA JUN: It's the only point I have.

[Laughter. The erhu plays a phrase. It is "Seven Lamps," but slow, the way a man hums to himself.]

WANG YULAN: Play it properly.

GAO: It's not a proper song.

WANG YULAN: It's our song.

GAO: It's a counting song. Children sing counting songs.

MA JUN: Children are smarter than us. They count down. We count up. That's the whole difference.

[The erhu plays the phrase again. Old Hou hums along in the wrong key.]

OLD HOU: Seven lamps in the old kiln, seven men with black faces—

MA JUN: You're singing it wrong.

OLD HOU: I can't hear you.

MA JUN: You're singing it wrong!

OLD HOU: I'm singing it the way I hear it.

MA JUN: That's the problem!

[Laughter. The kettle begins to whistle again. Zhao Deshun takes it off the stove.]

WANG YULAN: The journalist is coming on Tuesday.

MA JUN: Wednesday.

WANG YULAN: Tuesday.

MA JUN: I told him Wednesday.

WANG YULAN: I told him Tuesday. I wrote it in the minutes. Tuesday.

MA JUN: Then it's Tuesday. I'll be here.

WANG YULAN: Bring the notebook.

MA JUN: I'll bring the notebook.

WANG YULAN: Bring a copy. Not the original.

MA JUN: I'll bring a copy.

WANG YULAN: And don't talk too much.

MA JUN: I never talk too much.

[Laughter. Someone spits. A chair scrapes.]

LI XIAOBO: What if they kill us?

[Silence. The erhu stops.]

MA JUN: They're not going to kill us.

LI XIAOBO: They killed the men in 2005. They killed them by not fixing the roof. That's the same thing.

MA JUN: It's not the same thing.

LI XIAOBO: It's the same result.

MA JUN: It's not the same thing.

LI XIAOBO: You keep saying that.

MA JUN: Because it's true.

LI XIAOBO: It's true and it doesn't help.

[Silence. The kettle ticks as it cools.]

ZHAO DESHUN: Have another cup.

LI XIAOBO: I don't want another cup.

ZHAO DESHUN: Have one anyway. It's bad luck to leave a cup empty.

LI XIAOBO: That's not a real superstition.

ZHAO DESHUN: It's real if I say it is.

[Laughter, quieter this time.]

MA JUN: All right. Let's sing it properly. All of us. From the top. Gao, play it slow.

GAO: It's already slow.

MA JUN: Slower.

[The erhu plays. The seven sing. They are bad. They are loud. They are alive.]

> *Seven lamps in the old kiln, seven men with black faces. One lamp went out in the spring wind. Six lamps, six lamps.*

> *Six lamps in the old kiln, six men with black faces. One lamp went out in the summer rain. Five lamps, five lamps.*

> *Five lamps in the old kiln, five men with black faces. One lamp went out in the autumn frost. Four lamps, four lamps.*

[A chair scrapes. The door opens. The wind comes in.]

DUAN: There's a car.

[The singing stops.]

MA JUN: Whose car?

DUAN: I don't know. It's black. It went past the village and it didn't stop.

MA JUN: It's nothing.

DUAN: It's not nothing.

MA JUN: It's a farmer with a new car.

DUAN: There are no farmers with new cars.

MA JUN: There are now. That's the whole problem.

[Silence. The wind. The door closes.]

WANG YULAN: Maybe we should stop.

MA JUN: We're not stopping.

WANG YULAN: Maybe we should stop for a while.

MA JUN: We're not stopping.

OLD HOU: What?

MA JUN: WE'RE NOT STOPPING.

OLD HOU: Good.

[The erhu plays a single note. It holds. The tape hisses.]

MA JUN: Gao. Play the last verse.

GAO: There's no last verse. There's only one lamp.

MA JUN: Then play the one lamp.

[The erhu plays. The note goes out into the kiln and comes back changed. The tape hisses. The tape cuts.]

※

[Tape 2. Side B. The recording is worse. The voices are farther from the microphone. There is a sound like rain on a tin roof.]

MA JUN: —and if I don't come back, the notebook is in the kiln. Under the loose brick. The third one from the door.

WANG YULAN: Don't talk like that.

MA JUN: I'm not talking like that. I'm talking like a man who is going to Beijing.

WANG YULAN: You're talking like a man who is saying goodbye.

MA JUN: I'm saying goodbye to the kiln. I'll be back in a week.

WANG YULAN: Then say it like that.

MA JUN: I'll be back in a week.

WANG YULAN: Good.

[Silence. The rain.]

MA JUN: Wang Yulan.

WANG YULAN: What?

MA JUN: If I'm not back in a week, don't let them say I talked.

WANG YULAN: You did talk. You talked to everyone.

MA JUN: You know what I mean.

WANG YULAN: I know what you mean.

MA JUN: Don't let them say it.

WANG YULAN: I won't.

MA JUN: Promise me.

WANG YULAN: I promise.

[The tape hisses. The rain. A chair scrapes. The tape cuts.]

CHAPTER 8

The Patron

21 April — 480 g

Kang Rui came on a Tuesday, at eleven, with the sun on the wall and the swifts out.

I heard the cars before I heard the people. Two cars, heavy, with good engines. They stopped at the gate. The doors opened. Four people got out, then two more. The shoes told me who they were: one pair of soft leather, one pair of hard heels, two pairs of rubber-soled shoes that moved in a way that meant business, and one pair of good shoes that did not hurry.

"Mr. Gao," Zhou said. "Mr. Kang Rui."

The good shoes came across the flagstones. They stopped in front of me. I smelled cologne, clean and expensive, and under it the smell of a man who had been ill: a faint medicinal sweetness, like the inside of a hospital corridor.

"Old friend," Kang Rui said.

His voice was not what I expected. It was soft. It had a rasp in it, the rasp of a man who had spent years talking over the noise of machines and had learned to keep his voice low instead. He took my hand. His hand was dry and warm. The skin was thin. I could feel the bones.

"Mr. Kang," I said.

"Kang Rui. We are old men. We don't need the mister."

"We are not old friends."

"We are old something," he said. "Sit down. I'll sit down. My knees are bad."

He sat on the bench beside me. The entourage arranged itself behind him. The photographer's camera made a small sound. The woman from publicity said, "Mr. Kang, the light is better on the other side." Kang waved his hand.

"Later," he said. "First, the music."

※

I played "Erquan Yingyue."

I did not play it for him. I played it for the cliff. The cliff was the audience I had chosen, and the cliff did not want anything from me, and that was why I could play for it. But Kang Rui was there, four feet away, and his breathing was in the music. He breathed slowly. He did not move. When I finished, he was quiet for a long time.

"I have heard that piece a hundred times," he said. "I have heard it in Beijing. I have heard it in Shanghai. I have heard it played by men with better instruments and better hands. I have never heard it like that."

"It's the instrument," I said.

"It's the man."

"It's the instrument."

He laughed. It was a good laugh, low and real. "You are a stubborn man," he said.

"I'm a blind man."

"Same thing," he said. "A blind man is stubborn about what he can hear."

※

We walked to Cave Twenty. Kang used a cane, though he did not lean on it. The bodyguards walked behind us. Zhou walked beside Kang with a tablet. The woman from publicity walked ahead and took photographs of Kang walking with the blind musician. The photographer took photographs of the woman taking photographs.

The woman from publicity came over. She had a tablet and a smile. "Mr. Gao," she said, "could you look toward the cliff? It's better for the photograph."

"I can't see the cliff," I said.

"You don't have to see it. You just have to look."

I turned my face toward the cliff. The camera clicked. Kang Rui said, "He is looking at the stone. The stone is looking back. That is the photograph."

Everyone laughed. I did not.

"The restoration is going well," Kang said. "We have a team from Beijing. They are scanning every cave. Three-dimensional. You can see the cracks in the stone before they open. We are putting the whole mountain into a computer."

"The mountain is not in the computer," I said.

"The mountain is in the computer and in the world," he said. "That is the point. The computer will last. The stone will not."

"The stone has lasted fifteen hundred years."

"The stone is dying," he said. "The coal dust is in the pores. The water is in the cracks. The wind takes a little every year. The computer is how we keep it."

"The computer is how you keep the picture," I said. "The stone is how you keep the stone."

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "You are a poet."

"I'm a musician."

"Same thing."

※

At the top of the stairs, he stopped. The great Buddha sat in the open. The wind went into the cave behind him and came out through his chest. The swifts made their small dry sounds in the niches.

"My father brought me here when I was six," Kang said. "He was a teacher. He had no money. He bought me a steamed bun and told me the Buddha was an emperor. I did not believe him. I said, 'An emperor is a man.' He said, 'Yes. That is the problem.'"

"What did he mean?"

"He meant that a man can make himself a god if he has enough stone." Kang laughed. "He was a teacher. He was always saying things like that. He died in 1976. He never saw the wall. He never saw the festival. He would have hated it."

"Why?"

"Because he was a teacher. Teachers hate everything that is expensive."

I laughed. I did not want to. It came out anyway.

"He would have liked you," Kang said. "He liked stubborn men."

"Did he like you?"

"No," Kang said. "He thought I was a liar. He was right."

He took a silver case from his pocket. He opened it. He took out a pill. Zhou gave him a bottle of water. He swallowed the pill and sat down on the edge of the stone. The bodyguards moved closer. He waved them back.

"My heart," he said. "It is a small machine and it is tired."

He looked at the Buddha. The wind came over the top of the cliff and went into the cave and came out through the Buddha's chest.

"I have a son in Shanghai," Kang said. "He does not call. I built a city for a boy who does not call."

"Maybe he is busy."

"He is busy. Everyone is busy. That is what we say."

He put the silver case away. "You have no children," he said.

"No."

"That is a kind of luck," he said. "Or a kind of punishment."

"Yes."

"Which?"

"I don't know."

※

We walked back down. Kang talked about the festival. He talked about the opening film, the lights, the moon, the television broadcast. He talked about the city's future. He talked about the mine.

"The heritage park will open in October," he said. "The wall. The museum. The visitors' center. The children will come and learn what the mine was. They will see the tools. They will see the lamps. They will see the photographs. They will understand."

"Will they see the names?" I said.

"The names are on the wall."

"All of them?"

He stopped walking. I heard his cane settle on the stone.

"We are adding names," he said.

"Which names?"

"The ones who deserve it."

"Who decides?"

"I do."

He said it without irony. He said it the way a man says the time. Then he said, "With the committee."

"Of course."

"The committee is a formality. I decide. The committee agrees."

"And the men who are not on the wall?"

"Which men?"

"The men who died because of the mine but not in the mine. The men who were disappeared. The men who talked."

Kang was quiet. The bodyguards shifted. Zhou's tablet clicked.

"You have a good memory," Kang said.

"I have a good ear."

"Same thing."

※

We were back at the bench. The entourage stood in a loose half-circle. The photographer was taking pictures of the cliff. The woman from publicity was on her phone.

"May I hold it?" Kang said.

"Hold what?"

"The erhu."

I hesitated. I do not know why. I had let Xiaoyu hold it. I had let Ma Ling see the inside. But Kang's hands were different. Kang's hands had signed the report.

I gave it to him. He took it in both hands. He was not gentle. He lifted it the way a man lifts a thing to see how heavy it is. His hands dropped a little.

"It's heavy," he said.

"It's old wood."

"It's heavier than old wood."

"It's a heavy instrument."

He held it for a long time. I heard his thumb move on the soundbox. I heard the strings hum, a faint sympathetic sound, the sound a string makes when a hand comes near it.

"This old thing," he said. "Let me give you a new one. A master in Shanghai. I'll have it sent. Rosewood. Silver fittings. A skin from a python raised for the purpose. It will sing."

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"I don't want a new one."

"A gift is not a bribe."

"Then it's a gift I can refuse."

"You can refuse it," he said. "But it will be in your house."

He gave the erhu back. He held it a moment too long. Then he let go.

I did not tell him what I remembered. I remembered the hospital in 2009. The room had a window that did not open. The bed was hard. There was a smell of disinfectant and burnt meat. A man came to visit me. He wore good shoes. He stood at the foot of the bed and said, "You are still our musician."

I could not see him. I knew his voice.

I said, "You took my eyes."

He said, "The battery took your eyes. The company has paid."

He said, "You will play again. We will find you a teacher. We will find you a stage."

I said, "I don't want a stage."

He said, "Everyone wants a stage."

He left. The good shoes went down the corridor. I heard them for a long time.

※

"You've been well, old man," he said.

"I've been well."

"You don't look well."

"I'm blind."

"That's not what I mean."

He touched my shoulder. His hand was light. It was the hand of a man who had learned to touch people without leaving a mark.

"We are both old," he said. "We should be kind to each other."

"I'm kind," I said.

"I know," he said. "That's what makes you dangerous."

He laughed. He turned. The entourage turned with him. The photographer took one last photograph: Kang Rui walking away, the blind musician on the bench, the cliff behind them. The photograph would be in the newspaper the

next day. The caption would say that the chairman of the festival had visited the soul of Datong.

The cars started. The doors closed. The engines went down the road and got smaller and then they were gone.

※

That night I wrote Duan Cheng's name.

I took the erhu out of the case. I opened the back. I melted a plate and fitted it over the other sheets. I took the nail.

I stopped.

Duan had sat by the door of the kiln. Duan had watched the road. Duan had seen the black car and said it was nothing. Duan had taken care of me for ten years. Duan had brought me lunch — millet porridge in a thermos, pickles in a jar. Duan had fixed my roof after the storm in 2013. Duan had driven me to the hospital when my shoulder went bad. Duan had sat in the waiting room for six hours. He had not complained. He had never asked for anything. He had been kind.

That was the problem. Kindness is a place a man can hide.

I did not know what Duan had done. I knew only that he had done something, and that he had been doing it for ten years, and that he had been doing it in the shape of kindness.

I wrote his name.

段成, Duàn Chéng, "to become complete."

The nail went into the lead. The lead took the letters.

I fitted the plate. I tapped the nails. I tuned. I drew.

The note came out lower. It had a floor now, a bottom, a place where it stopped and sat. It was a sound with a floor under it.

"Duan," I said.

The stove ticked. The name was in the lead.

I did not know if I was naming a friend or a betrayer. I put the erhu in the case and put the case by the bed and lay down in the dark.

※

CHAPTER 9

The Documentary

PART TWO

The Weight

5 May — 560 g

The documentary had a budget now. That was the first problem.

Eighty thousand yuan, a crew van, a drone, a second camera, a sound kit, and a **script** approved by Director Sun. The script was four pages long. It had a title, *The Soul of Datong*, and a subtitle, *A City Remembers*. It had a voiceover that Xiaoyu had written in one night, and that Sun had edited in one morning, and that was now a thing neither of them entirely believed.

> *The city was built on coal. For a hundred years, the coal was the city. Then the coal went away. What remains is the stone, and the people who remember.*

She read it into the microphone on the first day. Her voice sounded like a tourism advertisement. She read it again, lower, slower. It sounded like a tourism advertisement with a cold.

Da Yang, the cameraman, was eating sunflower seeds in the van. He had been a cameraman for the provincial station for fifteen years and had been fired for reasons he described as "politics, mostly, and a woman." He had a hernia and a bad knee and a way of holding the camera that made it look like a part of his body.

"The old man is a natural," he said.

"He can't see the camera," Xiao Wu said. Xiao Wu was twenty-three and carried the boom mic like a sword.

"That's why he's a natural," Da Yang said. "He doesn't know he's being looked at. The rest of us know. The rest of us are always being looked at. It ruins the face."

"He's blind," Xiao Wu said.

"Same thing," Da Yang said.

※

They filmed Gao at the mine on the first morning.

The heritage park was still half-built. The plaza was concrete. The visitors' center was glass. The wall was black stone. Gao walked the site with his cane. He stopped every few steps. He turned his head. He tapped the cane on the concrete.

"They poured a floor over the mine," he said.

"Is that bad?" Da Yang said.

"It's loud."

"Loud?"

"The mine used to have a sound. The shaft had a sound. The wind came up it. Now there is a floor, and the floor has a different sound. It is a dead sound. Concrete is dead. The mine was alive."

Da Yang looked at Xiao Wu. Xiao Wu shrugged.

"Can you say that again?" Da Yang said.

"I can say it as many times as you want," Gao said. "It will be true every time."

※

They found Wang Yulan's shop on the second afternoon.

It was a narrow storefront between a pharmacy and a mobile-phone repair kiosk. The sign said **WANG'S GROCERY** in faded red letters. The window was full of cigarette cartons and vinegar bottles and a handwritten sign that said **NO CREDIT**. Inside, the air was thick with the smell of tobacco and soy sauce and old cardboard. A woman sat behind the counter with a cigarette in her hand and a television playing a costume drama on a small screen.

Wang Yulan was fifty-one. She was thin, with a face that had been pretty once and had been worn down to something sharper. She looked at Xiaoyu, then at the camera, then at Xiaoyu again.

"No," she said.

"I haven't asked yet."

"No."

Xiaoyu put a plastic bag on the counter. Three packs of cigarettes. Two bottles of Shanxi vinegar. A box of milk candy.

"I'm not buying you," Wang Yulan said.

"I'm buying cigarettes," Xiaoyu said. "The vinegar is for my mother. The candy is for you."

Wang Yulan looked at the bag. She looked at the camera. She took the cigarettes out of the bag and put them in the rack behind her.

"Five minutes," she said. "No camera."

Xiaoyu put the camera on the counter, lens down. Da Yang went outside to smoke. Xiao Wu stood by the door with the boom mic down at his side.

"You knew my father," Xiaoyu said.

Wang Yulan lit a cigarette. She did not offer one.

"Luo Cheng," she said. "The singer."

"Yes."

"He was a good man. He sang at the mine parties. He sang 'The Great Happiness' at my wedding. He was drunk. He forgot the words."

"He died in 2005."

"Yes."

"Were you there?"

"I was on the surface. I was pregnant. I heard the roof go. It sounded like a door closing in a very big house."

Xiaoyu's throat was dry. She had not expected the door.

"Did you know Ma Jun?" she said.

Wang Yulan smoked. The television costume drama went on. A woman on the screen was crying.

"Ma Jun was a good man," Wang Yulan said. "He talked too much."

"That's what everyone says."

"Because it's true."

"Did he talk to you?"

"He talked to everyone. That was his problem. He thought if he explained it well enough, people would do the right thing. He was wrong. People do the right thing when it is easy and the wrong thing when it is hard. Ma Jun never understood that."

"Were you part of the group?"

Wang Yulan looked at her. The cigarette burned. The ash was long and gray.

"I kept the minutes," she said.

"Where are they?"

"Burned."

"Why?"

"Because I have a daughter," Wang Yulan said. "She is a teacher. She has a daughter. I burned them the year after Ma Jun disappeared. I burned them in the stove. I watched the paper go. It took a long time. The notebook had a plastic cover."

Xiaoyu looked at the counter. Under the register, under a stack of lottery tickets, there was a corner of something black. A notebook. It had a plastic cover.

She did not say anything.

Wang Yulan saw her look. She put her hand on the counter, over the lottery tickets, and the corner of the notebook disappeared.

"Five minutes," she said. "Time's up."

※

Duan was at the gate on the third morning. Xiaoyu did not tell him the camera was running. She had Xiao Wu put the mic in the booth. She stood beside Duan with her hands in her pockets and asked him about the old days.

He talked about the mine. He talked about the shift changes and the canteen and the man who sold illegal lottery tickets in the changing room. He talked about the winter the pipes froze. He talked about the summer the coal gangue hill caught fire and burned for a month.

Then she asked about the group.

"Which group?"

"The reading group. The seven."

Duan looked at the ticket booth. He looked at the buses.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"Ma Jun. Wang Yulan. Old Hou. Zhao Deshun. Li Xiaobo. Gao. You."

He was quiet for a long time. The buses came and went. A child dropped an ice-cream cone and cried.

"We all did what we had to do," Duan said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means what it means."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the answer I have."

He cleared his throat. He looked at her, and for a moment his face was not the face of a security supervisor. It was the face of a man who had been carrying something for a long time and had forgotten how to put it down.

"Your father was a good man," he said. "Don't make trouble for him."

"He's dead."

"That's what I mean."

He walked away. Xiaoyu watched him go. Then she went into the ticket booth and took the recorder out from under the counter. The red light was still on.

※

Director Sun called that afternoon.

"The mayor's office has seen the rough cut," he said. "They like it. They want more of the old man. Less of the mine."

"The mine is the story."

"The mine is the past. The festival is the future. Don't confuse them."

"The soul of Datong is the mine."

"The soul of Datong is what we say it is," Sun said. "That's what a brand is."

Xiaoyu was quiet. She was standing in the parking lot of the scenic area, with the drone case at her feet and the cliff behind her.

"I'm not making a brand," she said.

"You're making a six-minute film for a festival," Sun said. "That's a brand."

※

They filmed Gao at the old kiln on the last evening.

The kiln was a parking lot now. The asphalt was new and black. There was a white line painted down the middle. A sign said **NO PARKING AFTER 8 P.M.** The village had put a plastic bench at the edge of the lot, and a trash can, and a small sign that said **CULTURAL HERITAGE SITE** in four languages.

Gao stood in the middle of the parking lot. He had the erhu. He did not know where the kiln had been, exactly. He turned around twice. Then he stopped.

"Here," he said. "It was here."

The camera was on a tripod. The sun was going down. The sky was the color of weak tea. Da Yang said, "Whenever you're ready."

Gao played "Seven Lamps."

The sound was huge. It was too big for the parking lot. It went out across the asphalt and into the village and came back off the houses. The low register was a room. The high register was a wire. The tune counted down. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

Da Yang lowered the camera. Xiao Wu took off his headphones. The village was quiet. A dog barked, once, and then stopped.

"What the hell is in that thing?" Da Yang said.

"An erhu," Xiaoyu said.

She knew it was a lie. She did not know why she told it.

※

That night she listened to the audio.

She had recorded the kiln on the boom mic and on the camera's internal mic. She imported both tracks. The boom track was clean. The camera track was dirty, full of wind and a car and a dog. She soloed the boom.

The song was there. Under the song was the hum. Stronger than it had been in March. Not the wind. Not the microphone. In the instrument. A low steady note, below the tune, below the breath, a note with a grain in it, like a voice held under water.

She put on headphones. She closed her eyes. She listened.

It sounded like a second person in the room.

She took the headphones off. The room was silent. The refrigerator hummed. A car went by. She put the headphones back on.

The hum was still there.

CHAPTER 10

What the Skin Remembers

19 May — 560 g

Yanyan came on Sunday afternoon with her schoolbag and her glasses and a runny nose.

She was twelve. She was partially sighted: she could see light and shape and the difference between a red cup and a blue cup, but she could not see the strings on the erhu, and she could not see the frets that were not there, and she could not see the small white scar on my left thumb. She could see the soundbox. She could see the shape of it. She could see the way the light came off the python skin.

Her mother sold incense and plastic Buddhas at the west gate. Her father drove a delivery van for a bottled-water company. She had been fully sighted until she was three, when a fever went into her eyes and took most of the left one and a third of the right. She could see the world the way you see it through a wet window: shapes, colors, light. She could not see the strings, but she could hear them. She had perfect pitch. She could tell when the erhu was a quarter-tone flat before I could.

She put her schoolbag on the ground and sat on the low stool. She took out her erhu. It was a child's erhu, a little smaller than mine, with a soundbox painted red. She put it on her knee. She played "Horse Racing."

It was bad. It was enthusiastic. She got the bow tangled in the strings twice. She played the fast part too fast and the slow part too fast. She finished with a flourish that was not in the score and looked up at me.

"Well?" she said.

"Your elbow," I said.

"What about my elbow?"

"Your elbow is doing the work. It should be your wrist."

"You said the elbow last week."

"I said the elbow for the long bow. This is the short bow. The short bow is the wrist."

"That's not what you said."

"It's what I meant."

She made a sound with her mouth, a sound that meant she did not believe me but was willing to continue. She was twelve. She had already learned that adults were often wrong and that it was not worth arguing about.

"Again," I said.

She played it again. It was still bad. It was a little better. The bow caught the string and the note came out clean, and she smiled, and the smile was the best thing I had heard all week.

※

"Who taught you?" she said.

"An old man named Pei."

"Was he blind?"

"Yes."

"Was he good?"

"He was the best erhu player in Datong. He played in the train station. He sat by the ticket window with a tin cup and a bottle of baijiu and he played for the people getting on the train. He played 'Erquan Yingyue' and 'River Water' and a song he made up about a woman who left him for a coal merchant."

"Did she?"

"I don't know. He made it up."

Yanyan laughed. Then she said, "Was he your friend?"

"He was my teacher."

"That's not what I asked."

I was quiet. The date tree moved in the wind. The stove ticked.

"He was my friend," I said. "He was the first person who told me I was good."

"Were you good?"

"I was young. I was loud. I was good enough to be told I was good."

"What happened to him?"

"He died in 1988. Tuberculosis. He smoked three packs a day and drank a bottle of baijiu a day and played the erhu for twelve hours a day. He was sixty-one. He looked ninety."

"Did you play at his funeral?"

"I played 'Erquan Yingyue.' It was the worst I ever played. I could not hear the strings. I could only hear the room."

I met him in the winter of 1979. I was eighteen. I had come to the station to meet my uncle, and the train was late, and I heard the erhu. He was sitting by the ticket window with his legs crossed and the erhu on his knee. He had a tin cup with a few coins in it and a bottle of baijiu beside him and a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He was playing "River Water." The notes went up the platform and came back off the roof. I stood there for an hour. When he stopped, I said, "Teach me." He said, "Can you carry a tune?" I said, "I can carry anything." He laughed. He had a laugh like a broken bell. He said, "Come tomorrow. Bring tobacco."

※

"Have you heard of Abing?" I said.

"The blind one?"

"阿炳, Ā Bǐng, 'bright.' The blind erhu player of Wuxi. His real name was Hua Yanjun. He was a Taoist. He lost his sight when he was thirty-four. He played in the streets. He made 'Erquan Yingyue.' He died in 1950, poor, with nothing. His erhu was lost. The music survived."

"In 1950, a team of musicologists recorded him in a rented room in Wuxi. He was sick. He had not played for two years. They recorded six pieces. Three erhu, three pipa. 'Erquan Yingyue' was one of them. The recording is bad. You can hear the room. You can hear his breath. You can hear the street. He died a few months later. His erhu was lost. Some say it was buried with him. Some say a neighbor took it. The music survived. That is the only thing that survived."

"Did he have a friend?"

"He had a wife. She led him through the streets with a stick."

"Did she hear him?"

"She must have."

"Did you have a friend?"

"Yes."

"Did he hear you?"

I thought about Ma Jun. I thought about the kiln. I thought about the bus station.

"I don't know," I said.

Ma Jun used to sit in the kiln and listen. He did not talk when I played. That was the only time he did not talk. He would lean back against the brick and close his eyes and put his hands on his knees. When I finished, he would be quiet for a moment. Then he would say, "Again." Not "beautiful." Not "good." "Again." That was his way of saying he heard me.

"That's sad," Yanyan said.

"Yes."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "Old Pei said something to you. I can tell. You say it in your head."

"What do I say?"

"The string is a thin thing."

I laughed. It surprised me.

"He said that," I said. "He said, 'The string is a thin thing. It holds.'"

"It holds what?"

"The note. The hand. The person. Everything."

"That's a lot for a string."

"Yes."

※

I played for her.

I played "Erquan Yingyue." The instrument was heavy on my knee. The lead was inside it. The sound came out lower than it had in March. It came out slow. It came out like a man walking up a hill with a full bucket.

Yanyan listened. She did not move. When I finished, she reached out and put her hand on the soundbox. She held it there. She was quiet for a long time.

"It's full," she said.

"It's wood."

"It's full of something."

"It's an old instrument."

"It feels like a stomach."

I laughed. She took her hand away.

"What does a full stomach feel like?" I said.

"Like it has something in it that is not food," she said.

※

That night I added three layers.

The first was Luo Cheng. The singer. Xiaoyu's father. He had a voice like a bell and a laugh like a bell and he sang "The Great Happiness" at every wedding in the neighborhood, including the wedding of a man he did not like, because the man had asked him and because he could not say no. He died in the roof fall in 2005. He was forty-three. His daughter was thirteen. She was in the school choir. She had his voice.

The second was Liu Guoqiang. The laugh. He laughed at everything. He laughed at the safety meetings, at the foreman, at the price of pork, at his own bad luck. He laughed when the roof came down. Old Hou said he heard it. Old Hou said Liu Guoqiang laughed all the way down.

The third was Zhang Heping. The hands. He had big hands, scarred across the knuckles, and he could fix anything. He fixed the kiln door. He fixed the kettle. He fixed Wang Yulan's radio. He had a wife and three sons and a daughter who was studying to be a pharmacist. He was fifty-one.

I wrote their names. The lead took the letters. The instrument grew heavier. It was 640 grams now. I could feel it in my shoulder when I lifted it.

I played "Seven Lamps."

The song was almost unrecognizable. It was slow. It was dark. It was beautiful in a way that had nothing to do with the tune. The tune was a frame. The weight was the picture.

I stopped.

"The string is a thin thing," I said.

I did not finish.

※

Yanyan came back the next Sunday. She played "Horse Racing" again. It was better. She had been practicing. She had also been thinking.

"Grandpa Gao," she said.

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"What do you mean?"

"With the box. You're going somewhere. You're not taking it to the grottoes. You're taking it somewhere else."

I was quiet. The stove ticked. The date tree moved.

"I'm going to the festival," I said.

"That's not what I mean."

"I know."

She looked at me. Her glasses caught the light. She could see the shape of my face, and I could not see hers, but I could hear her breathing, and her breathing was the breathing of a child who has decided to be brave.

"Will you come back?" she said.

"I don't know."

"That's not a good answer."

"It's the only one I have."

She nodded. She picked up her erhu. She played "Horse Racing" again, badly, beautifully, all the way to the end.

I listened. The string was a thin thing. It held.

CHAPTER 11

The Accident Report

2 June — 640 g

The lawyer's office was above a pharmacy on Yingze Street. The stairs smelled of cough drops and carpet cleaner. Ma Ling climbed them in her work shoes, with the plastic sleeve under her arm, and by the time she reached the third floor she had decided not to cry.

Lawyer Chen was sixty. He had known her father. He had come to the house after the disappearance, once, with a bag of oranges and a business card. He had not been able to do anything then. He had not been able to do anything for ten years. He was honest about it, which was why she had come.

He read the report. He read it slowly, with his glasses pushed up on his forehead and his lips moving a little. When he finished, he took his glasses off and put them on the desk.

"Where did you get this?" he said.

"My mother's things."

"Does anyone else have a copy?"

"I don't know."

"Does the company know you have it?"

"I don't know."

He nodded. He tapped the report with his finger.

"The civil claim is dead," he said. "The injury was in 2009. The limitation period is long gone. Even if it weren't, you would be suing a company that has been restructured three times. The entity that employed him does not exist. The entity that exists is a holding company with a registered capital of fifty million and a lawyer in Beijing."

"What about the criminal case?"

"Intentional injury causing serious disability. The limitation is ten years. We are at the edge. The evidence is a carbon copy of a report that the company wrote

about itself. The only witness is a blind man who has never said publicly that anyone did anything to him. The signature is a signature. It proves he signed a report. It does not prove he ordered the battery."

"He ordered the battery."

"Probably."

"Probably is not a word you use in court."

"No," Chen said. "It is not."

He looked at her. He had a kind face, tired, with deep lines around the mouth.

"Take the money," he said. "If they offer it. Put it in your son's account. Let him go to a good school. That is what your father would have wanted."

"My father would have wanted the truth."

"Your father would have wanted you to be safe."

"He would have wanted both."

"Yes," Chen said. "That is the problem with the dead. They want everything."

※

The company office was in a new building on the east side of the city, glass and gray stone, with a security desk and a row of turnstiles and a portrait of Kang Rui in the lobby. The portrait was three meters high. In it, Kang Rui was standing in front of the grottoes with his hands clasped behind his back. He was not smiling. He looked like a man who had been told to look serious and had complied.

Zhou met her on the twelfth floor. His office was small and clean. There was a tablet on the desk, a glass of water, a photograph of a woman and a child. He offered her tea. She said no. He offered her a seat. She sat.

"You have the report," he said.

"I have the report."

"May I see it?"

She put the plastic sleeve on the desk. He read it. He did not read it slowly. He had read it before. He put it down.

"The company is prepared to make a gesture," he said. "A scholarship for your son. A good school in Taiyuan. University, if he is able. The company will pay the fees. There will be no admission of liability."

"I don't want a scholarship."

"Then a settlement. A one-time payment. You would sign a confidentiality agreement."

"I don't want a settlement."

"What do you want?"

"I want it written down."

Zhou looked at her. His face did not change. He was a man who had been trained not to change his face.

"It is written down," he said. "That's the problem."

※

The teahouse was near the hospital. Xiaoyu was already there, at a table by the window, with a pot of jasmine tea and her phone face-up on the table.

She looked tired. She had been filming for a month. She had a sunburn on her nose and a scratch on her hand and a look in her eyes that Ma Ling recognized from the hospital: the look of a person who had been carrying something too heavy for too long and had not yet put it down.

"You have the report," Xiaoyu said.

"I have the report."

"Can I see it?"

Ma Ling put the sleeve on the table. Xiaoyu read it. Her jaw tightened.

"Kang Rui," she said.

"Kang Rui."

"Did you know? Before?"

"I suspected."

"Did Gao know?"

Ma Ling looked at the teapot. The steam came up and made a small cloud.

"He knew," she said. "He has known for ten years."

"He never said anything."

"He's blind. He's alone. He plays for tourists. What was he supposed to say?"

"I don't know."

Xiaoyu put the report down. She picked up her phone. She scrolled. She found a file. She put the phone on the table between them.

"Listen," she said.

She pressed play. Ma Ling heard the erhu. It was "Seven Lamps," the song Gao had played at the kiln. Under the song there was a hum, a low steady note, like a second instrument.

"What is that?" Ma Ling said.

"I don't know. It's in the instrument. It's been getting stronger."

"Maybe it's the microphone."

"It's not the microphone. I recorded it on three different mics. It's in the box."

Ma Ling listened. The hum was not a musical note. It was a presence. It was the sound of something heavy sitting in a small room.

Then Xiaoyu told her about the courtyard. The swing. The hand's width. The three times. The tree.

Ma Ling put her cup down. It made a sound on the saucer.

"He's going to kill him," she said.

"He's going to try."

"We have to stop him."

"How?"

"Tell the police."

"Tell them what? That an old blind man is practicing with his instrument? They'll laugh. And if they don't laugh, they'll arrest him. And then what? Kang Rui will be a victim. The festival will be a tragedy. The report will be a piece of paper."

"Then tell the festival."

"The festival is Kang Rui."

"Then tell Kang."

Xiaoyu laughed. It was a short, ugly laugh.

"Tell Kang Rui that the blind musician he blinded is going to hit him with his erhu? He'll have him killed. He'll have him disappeared. He'll have him put in a hospital and tell the newspapers it was a stroke."

Ma Ling looked at the phone. The hum was still playing, a low steady note, a note that did not stop.

"Then what?" she said.

Xiaoyu did not answer.

※

Ma Ling was on nights that week.

The ward was quiet. At two in the morning an old man was brought in with chemical burns to his hands. A battery had exploded in his garage. She cleaned the burns. The skin was gray and soft and came away on the gauze. He said, "It was an old battery. I should have thrown it away." She said, "Yes." She wrapped his hands in white.

She thought about Gao. She thought about the report in her bag. She thought about the hand's width.

At four she went to the staff room and called Xiaoyu. Xiaoyu answered on the second ring.

"I can't stop him," Ma Ling said.

"I know."

"I don't know if I want to."

Xiaoyu was quiet. Ma Ling could hear the city behind her, the low hum of it, the trucks.

"If he does it," Ma Ling said, "they'll have to look. If he doesn't, they'll bury it."

"You're a nurse," Xiaoyu said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means you fix what's broken."

"I fix what's broken," Ma Ling said. "I don't know how to fix this."

"Neither do I."

Ma Ling hung up. She went back to the ward. The old man was asleep. His hands were wrapped in white. She sat by his bed until the shift changed.

INTERLUDE 3

The File

Selected documents

※

DOCUMENT 1

SAFETY INSPECTION REPORT MEIYUKOU NO. 2 COAL MINE 12 AUGUST 2005

> *The eastern gallery was inspected on 12 August 2005. The roof support was found to be within acceptable parameters. A minor crack was noted at the junction of supports 14 and 15 and scheduled for routine maintenance. No immediate risk to personnel was identified.*
> *The inspection was conducted in accordance with provincial safety regulations. No further action is required at this time.*
> *Signed: [REDACTED], Safety Supervisor*
> *Company seal affixed.*

Handwritten note in the margin, in ballpoint, in a different hand:

> *The crack is not minor. I have reported it three times. The maintenance request is in the office. Ask for it. — M.J.*

※

DOCUMENT 2

ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION REPORT MEIYUKOU NO. 2 COAL MINE 19 AUGUST 2005

At approximately 16:20 on 19 August 2005, a roof fall occurred in the eastern gallery. Three workers were killed.
The deceased are identified as:
LIU GUOQIANG, male, 47, driller. ZHANG HEPING, male, 51, fitter. LUO CHENG, male, 43, transport.
The cause of the incident was determined to be a natural geological event. The roof support system was found to be within acceptable parameters at the time of the last inspection (12 August 2005). No negligence on the part of the company has been established.
The company has paid compensation to the families of the deceased in the amount of 300,000 yuan each. The families have signed settlement agreements. The case is closed.
Signed: ［REDACTED］, Mine Manager Signed: ［REDACTED］, Safety Supervisor
Company seal affixed.

Handwritten note on the back of the last page, in ballpoint:

The maintenance request is not in the office. It was never in the office. I have a copy. — M.J.

※

DOCUMENT 3
ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION REPORT MEIYUKOU NO. 2 COAL MINE 14 AUGUST 2009

Subject: Gao Yusheng, male, 48, electrician.
Incident: On 13 August 2009, the subject was found in the charging room with injuries to the face and eyes. The subject was transported to the company clinic and then to the provincial hospital.

Cause: The subject was found to have improperly handled a lead-acid battery during a charging procedure. The battery exploded. The subject sustained chemical burns to the face and eyes.
Outcome: Permanent loss of sight in both eyes.
Compensation: The company has paid the subject's medical expenses and a compassionate allowance of 100,000 yuan. The subject has signed a settlement.
Conclusion: The case is closed.
Signed: KANG RUI, Chairman
Company seal affixed.

Stapled to the back: a settlement agreement, one page, with a thumbprint in red ink. The thumbprint is smudged. The date is 14 August 2009. The amount is 100,000 yuan. The clause reads: "The subject agrees not to pursue any further claims against the company or its officers, and agrees not to discuss the incident with any third party."

※

DOCUMENT 4
NOTICE OF MINE CLOSURE MEIYUKOU NO. 2 COAL MINE 31 DECEMBER 2016

In accordance with the provincial plan for the reduction of coal capacity, Meiyukou No. 2 will cease operations effective 31 December 2016.
Workers will receive severance in accordance with provincial regulations. Workers with pneumoconiosis or other occupational illnesses will receive additional compensation through the provincial health insurance scheme.
The site will be transferred to the Yungang Cultural Tourism Group for redevelopment as a mining heritage park. The park will include a memorial wall, a visitors' center, and an exhibition of mining equipment.

> *The company thanks the workers for their service.*
> *Signed: ［REDACTED］, General Manager*
> *Company seal affixed.*

Handwritten note at the bottom, in a different hand:

> *Which workers?*

※

DOCUMENT 5
YUNGANG INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL TOURISM FESTIVAL OPENING CEREMONY — 29 SEPTEMBER OFFICIAL PROGRAM

> *19:00 — Gates open. 19:40 — Moonrise. 20:00 — Lights. 20:30 — Choral performance: "Ode to the Stone." 20:45 — Dance: "The Miners." 21:00 — THE SOUL OF DATONG — GAO YUSHENG, ERHU. 21:15 — Fireworks. 21:20 — MAYOR FENG. 21:35 — MR. KANG RUI. 21:50 — Closing.*

Handwritten note in the margin, in pencil:

> *Four meters from the stage to the front row. — Z.*

※

DOCUMENT 6
NOTEBOOK OF MA JUN LAST PAGE

> *2 March 2009.*
> *I am going to Beijing. The notebook goes with me. If I don't come back, the notebook is in the kiln. Tell Ling I am sorry. Tell her I talked too much. Tell her I did not talk to them.*

> *The seven names are on the page before this one. If anything happens, give the notebook to Wang Yulan. She will know what to do.*
> *— Jun*

Below the note, in a different hand, in pencil, in a child's handwriting:

> *Baba, come home.*

※

DOCUMENT 7
INTERNAL MEMORANDUM YUNGANG CULTURAL TOURISM GROUP 3 SEPTEMBER

> *Re: Festival media strategy*
> *The opening film will focus on the following themes: rebirth, heritage, the soul of the city. The mine is to be presented as "heritage," not "industry." The word "accident" is to be avoided. The word "sacrifice" may be used once, in the mayor's speech.*
> *The erhu musician is a strong visual asset. His blindness should be handled with dignity. Do not film him from above. Do not use slow motion. Do not use the word "tragic."*
> *The lead sheets that have appeared in the instrument are not to be mentioned. If asked, the official position is that the instrument is "an antique with a rich history."*
> *The chairman will be seated in the front row. This is a symbolic position, not a security concern. The security team has been briefed.*
> *Signed: ZHOU*

CHAPTER 12

The Seventh Name

16 June — 640 g

The first time I went to the company office, they told me he had gone to Inner Mongolia.

The second time, they told me he had gone to Inner Mongolia and had found work at a mine near Baotou.

The third time, they told me to come back on Friday.

I went back on Friday. The security office was on the ground floor of the old mine administration building. It had a green door and a window with wire mesh in the glass. Inside there was a counter and a bench and a poster about safety. The poster said **SAFETY FIRST** in red letters. The letters were faded.

A man came out from behind the counter. He was not the man I had spoken to before. He was younger. He had a round face and a soft voice.

"You're the musician," he said.

"I'm the electrician."

"You're the one who asks questions."

"I'm the one who asks about his friend."

He smiled. It was a good smile, the smile of a man who had been trained to be pleasant. He said, "Come with me. We'll talk in the back."

※

The back room was the charging room.

There were rows of batteries on a wooden bench. The batteries were gray and square, the same kind as the one under my kang. The air smelled of acid and hot plastic and something sweet, something like rotten fruit. The fluorescent light buzzed. There was a hose coiled on the wall and a bucket of ash on the floor.

The man closed the door. He stood between me and the door.

"You want to know about Ma Jun," he said.

"Yes."

"Ma Jun talked."

"I know he talked. He talked to everyone."

"He talked to the wrong people."

"Where is he?"

"He's somewhere he can't talk."

I heard the battery before I saw it. I heard the cap come off. I heard the acid move inside the case, a sound like water in a bottle.

I did not see what he did. I felt it. I felt his hand on the back of my neck. I felt my face go down toward the bench. I felt the heat before the pain, a heat like a stove door opening.

Then the battery exploded.

※

The sound was not loud. That is the thing I remember. The sound was small, a pop, a hiss, like a match in a wet box. Then the acid was on my face.

It was warm at first. Then it was cold. Then it was fire. It went into my eyes and into my nose and into my mouth. I could not breathe. I could not see. I could not hear anything except the man's shoes on the concrete, moving away, and then the door, and then the fluorescent light buzzing.

I fell against the bench. The batteries went over. I heard them hit the floor. I heard the acid running. I heard my own voice, a voice I did not recognize, a voice that was saying a word over and over. The word was not a word. It was a sound.

The man's shoes stopped at the door.

"Tell them it was an accident," he said. "Tell them you were charging it."

The door closed.

※

I do not remember the ambulance. I remember the hospital. I remember the bed and the bandages and the smell of disinfectant and burnt meat. I remember the pain, which was not a thing that happened to me but a thing that I was inside of, a room with no windows, a room that went on and on.

A doctor came. He said, "We did what we could." He said, "The left eye is gone. The right eye is gone. There is damage to the surround tissue. We can do more surgery, but it will not bring back the sight."

I said, "What day is it?"

He said, "The fifteenth."

I said, "Of what?"

He said, "August."

Five months. Five months since the bus station. Five months since the rain. Five months since I stood in the rain and watched the red taillights go down the road and then went to the wedding and played "The Great Happiness" for four hours.

※

The company paid.

A man from the company came to the hospital with a folder and a pen. He said the company was sorry about the accident. He said the company would pay the medical expenses. He said the company would pay a compassionate allowance of one hundred thousand yuan. He said the company would give me a pension when I was well enough to be discharged. He said the company would find me a place to live. He said the company would take care of me.

He put the pen in my hand. He guided my thumb to the paper. I made a print.

"The case is closed," he said.

I said, "What about Ma Jun?"

He said, "Ma Jun is not a company matter."

※

Kang Rui came on the last day.

I heard the good shoes in the corridor. I heard them stop at the door. I heard the fruit basket being set on the table, the cellophane, the small hard sound of an apple against a pear.

"Old friend," he said.

I did not answer.

He sat in the chair beside the bed. The chair creaked. He smelled of cologne and clean paper and the medicinal sweetness of a man who was not well.

"I am sorry about your eyes," he said.

"Are you."

"I am sorry about the accident."

"It was not an accident."

"The report says it was an accident."

"The report is a lie."

"The report is a document," Kang said. "A document is a thing that can be agreed upon. An accident is a thing that can be agreed upon. A lie is a thing that can be agreed upon. That is how the world works."

"You took my eyes."

"The battery took your eyes."

"You took my eyes."

"Old friend," he said. "You are still our musician."

I laughed. It hurt. The bandages moved. The pain went up into my skull.

"I can't see," I said.

"You don't need to see. You need to play."

"I can't play."

"You will play again. We will find you a teacher. We will find you an instrument. We will find you a stage."

"I don't want a stage."

"Everyone wants a stage," he said.

He stood. The chair creaked. The good shoes went to the door. They stopped.

"The city will take care of you," he said. "The city is grateful."

The door closed.

※

I learned to be blind in a room with a window that did not open.

I learned the walls. I learned the door. I learned the distance from the bed to the bathroom, and from the bathroom to the chair, and from the chair to the window. I learned the sound of the nurse's shoes. I learned the sound of the food

cart. I learned the sound of the man in the next bed, who coughed all night and died in October.

I learned that the world does not go away when you cannot see it. It gets louder. It gets closer. It gets into your hands.

Old Pei had been blind. He had learned it in the train station, in the winter, with a tin cup and a bottle of baijiu. He had learned it before I was born. He had told me, "The string is a thin thing. It holds." I had thought he was talking about music.

He was not talking about music.

※

The present. 16 June.

I take the erhu out of the case. I open the back. I take the battery from the tin. I melt a plate on the stove. I hammer it thin. I fit it over the other sheets. I take the nail.

I write my own name.

高玉声, Gāo Yùshēng, "jade sound."

My mother's wish. My mother wanted me to be a musician. She got half of it. She got the sound. She did not get the jade.

I write the name slowly. The lead takes the letters. When I am done, I read it with my thumb. The mountain is under the wall. The stove ticks.

The book of the seven is complete.

※

Then I practice the swing.

I tie a sack of coal in a cloth and hang it from the date tree. The sack is the size of a man's head. It is heavy. It does not move much in the wind. I stand in front of it with the erhu in my right hand.

I swing.

The erhu goes through the air and stops a hand's width from the sack. The strings ring. The air rings. I hold the position. Then I lower it.

I swing again. A hand's width. Again. A hand's width.

I count. One. Two. Three. I count to fifty. I count to a hundred. My shoulder begins to ache. I keep going. The erhu goes through the air, and the air makes its sound, and the sack hangs there, and I miss it by a hand's width every time.

I am not trying to hit the sack. I am trying to learn the arc. I am trying to learn the place where the hand's width is. I am trying to learn the difference between the place where the instrument would land and the place where I want it to stop.

I count to two hundred. My shoulder is on fire. I stop. I am breathing hard. The date tree moves in the wind. The sack turns, slowly, on its rope.

I lift the erhu. I swing at the dark. The erhu goes through the air and stops. The strings ring. The sound goes out into the courtyard and comes back off the wall.

"I'm not going to hit anyone," I say.

The stove ticks. The erhu is in my hand.

I do not know if it is true.

CHAPTER 13

The Gala

7 July — 800 g

The dinner was in a private room at the Yungang Hotel, on the eighth floor, with a window that looked at the fake city wall.

There were nine people at the table. Kang Rui sat at the head. Mayor Feng sat on his right. Director Sun sat on his left. Zhou sat at the foot, with a tablet and a pen and the expression of a man who had been to a hundred dinners and remembered none of them. There were two men from the television station, a woman from the city publicity office, a man from the festival contractor, and Xiaoyu.

The table had a lazy susan. The dishes came one after another: cold cuts, sea cucumber, abalone, a whole fish, a plate of prawns, a bowl of soup with something in it that Xiaoyu did not recognize. The maotai was in a white bottle with a red label. Zhou poured it. Xiaoyu drank it. It tasted like gasoline and honey.

"Miss Luo," Kang said. "You made the city cry."

"The city is easily moved," Xiaoyu said.

"The city is not easily moved. The city is a stone. You made a stone cry."

"It was the old man. I just pointed the camera."

"You pointed the camera," Kang said. "That is the whole thing. Anyone can point a camera. Not everyone can make a stone cry."

He raised his glass. She raised hers. They drank.

※

He asked her about the video. He asked how she had cut it, how she had chosen the take, why she had not used music. She told him. He listened with his head tilted, the way a man listens when he is genuinely interested and also wants you to know he is genuinely interested.

"The third take," she said. "The one where he forgets I'm there."

"How do you know he forgets?"

"His breathing changes. He stops performing. He starts playing."

"That is a good distinction," Kang said. "Performing and playing. Most people never learn it."

"Most people don't have a camera."

"Most people don't have an ear."

He looked at her. His eyes were tired and bright. He had the eyes of a man who had been up late for many years.

"You wrote the voiceover," he said. "The city was built on coal. For a hundred years, the coal was the city. Then the coal went away. What remains is the stone, and the people who remember."

"I wrote it."

"It's true."

"It's a voiceover."

"It's true," he said. "That is why it works."

※

After the fish, Zhou passed around a seating plan.

Kang would be in the front row. The mayor on his right. The television cameras at the back. The old man would enter from the right and walk to the center. He would play. He would bow. He would exit.

Xiaoyu looked at the plan and did not know why her hands were cold. She had looked at a hundred plans. She had never looked at one like this.

※

"The city is changing," Kang said. "You can feel it. The coal is going. The stone is coming. In ten years, Datong will be a place people come to from all over the world. They will come for the grottoes. They will come for the wall. They will come for the noodles. They will come for the soul."

"The soul," Xiaoyu said.

"The soul is a product," Kang said. "Everything is a product. The stone is a product. The coal was a product. The old man is a product. The question is whether the product is good. I want the product to be good."

"He's a person."

"He is a person and a product. So are you. So am I. The trick is not to lie about it."

"And if the product is a lie?"

"Then it is a good lie," Kang said. "A good lie is better than a bad truth. A bad truth is just a stone on the ground. A good lie is a house you can live in."

He smiled. He raised his glass.

"To the house," he said.

"To the house," everyone said.

Xiaoyu drank.

※

After the soup, Kang leaned over.

"Come to Shanghai," he said.

"What?"

"Come to Shanghai. Run my content studio. Three times your salary. A flat on the river. A car. A team. You can make whatever you want. You can make the old man a star. You can make the city a brand. You can make yourself something."

"I don't know anything about Shanghai."

"You know how to make people feel something. That's all Shanghai needs."

She laughed. The maotai was warm in her chest. The room was warm. The window was dark, and the fake wall was lit up, and the wall looked real in the dark, which was the point.

"I'll think about it," she said.

"Don't think," Kang said. "Say yes."

"I'll think about it."

"You're a stubborn girl."

"I'm a videographer."

"Same thing," he said.

※

Kang stood for the final toast.

He stood slowly. He put one hand on the table. Zhou moved to help him, and Kang waved him away.

"We are not a coal city anymore," he said. "We are a city of the soul. We are a city of the stone. We are a city that remembers. The festival is not a party. The festival is a promise. It is a promise to the past that we will not forget it, and a promise to the future that we will not be afraid of it."

He raised his glass.

"To Datong," he said.

"To Datong," everyone said.

They clapped. Xiaoyu clapped. She caught her reflection in the dark window: a woman in a good dress, clapping, with a glass in her hand and a smile on her face that she did not remember putting there.

She stopped clapping.

※

She went home at midnight.

The apartment was hot. She opened the window. The city hummed. The coal trucks were fewer now, but there were still trucks, and the road was still there, and the hum was still there.

She could not sleep. She opened her laptop. She opened the editing timeline. She watched the footage of Gao's hands. The bow. The string. The skin of the erhu. The way his fingers hovered over the string without touching the neck.

She watched the kiln footage. The song. The low hum. The way Da Yang had lowered the camera and said, "What the hell is in that thing?"

She opened the drafts folder. The documentary was there. It was twenty-two minutes long. It had the mine, the wall, the old man, the song, Wang Yulan's voice, Duan's voice, the accident report, the photograph of the lead book. It had everything. It had no ending.

She looked at the four meters. She had not put the four meters in the film. She did not know why. It was not a thing you could film. It was a thing you could measure.

Her phone lit up. A message from Ma Ling.

Did you tell anyone?

Xiaoyu looked at the message. She typed **No.** She deleted it. She typed **Not yet.** She deleted it. She put the phone face down on the table.

The city hummed. The wall was lit up. The old man was asleep in his courtyard with the erhu beside him, or he was awake, or he was practicing, or he was sitting in the dark with his hands on the instrument, learning the hand's width.

She closed the laptop. She lay down. She did not sleep.

CHAPTER 14

The New Erhu

21 July — 800 g

The new erhu arrived on a Thursday, in a silk case, with a letter.

The courier was a young man in a blue uniform who did not know what he was delivering. He put the case on the table and asked me to sign. I told him I could not see. He said, "Just a thumbprint." I made a print. He left.

The case was long and black and lined with red silk. It had a brass clasp and a small brass plate on the lid with no name on it. It smelled of new wood and oil and the inside of a good car.

I opened it. The erhu was inside, lying on the silk. It was beautiful. I knew it was beautiful because the courier had said so, and because the silk was the kind of silk that is put under beautiful things, and because I could feel the finish on the wood.

I took it out. It was light. It was lighter than the old one by half. The soundbox was rosewood, smooth, with a python skin the color of honey. The fittings were silver. The pegs were silver. The neck was straight. The strings were new and bright and had never been played.

There was a letter in the case. I could not read it. I put it on the table. Later, Xiao Liu read it to me.

> *Old friend,*
> *A gift. Not a bribe. The master is from Shanghai. He makes four instruments a year. This is the third. It has been waiting for a player.*
> *Play it at the festival. Let the city hear what you can do.*
> *— Kang Rui*

※

I played it.

The first note came out clean. It came out without effort. It came out the way a note comes out of a machine that has been adjusted to produce notes. The second note was the same. The third was the same. The fourth was the same. The instrument did exactly what I asked. It had no opinions.

I played "Erquan Yingyue." The tune came out bright and clear and sad in the way a photograph of a sad thing is sad. It was technically correct. It was beautiful. It was not mine.

I put it down.

Then I picked up the old one.

The old one fought me. The strings were stiff. The qianjin had slipped. The high register was almost gone. The low register was a room with a low ceiling. The bow had to bite. If I did not bite, the note was a whisper. If I bit too hard, the note was a scratch. I had to find the place between. I had to find it every time.

I played the same tune. It came out slow. It came out dark. It came out like a man walking up a hill with a full bucket. It was not technically correct. It was mine.

"You would have said it sounded like a cello," I said. "You always wanted me to sound like something else."

The stove ticked. The new erhu lay on the table in its silk case. The old erhu sat on my knee.

※

A woman came in the afternoon.

She was in her fifties, with short gray hair and a good coat and the kind of shoes that are made for walking in cities. She stood at a distance and listened. When I finished, she did not put money in the case. She came closer.

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

"I'm the one from the bench."

"I'm a music teacher. I teach at the conservatory in Beijing. I came to see the grottoes. I heard you were here."

"I'm here."

"May I listen?"

"You just did."

"I mean, may I listen properly?"

I played again. She listened with her head down. When I finished, she was quiet for a long time.

"It's too sad," she said.

"It's a sad song."

"It didn't used to be this sad. I watched the video. The video was sad, but it was beautiful. Now it's just heavy. It's like the instrument is carrying something."

"It's an old instrument."

"Instruments don't get old like that," she said. "Wood gets old. Skin gets old. A bridge warps. But this is not age. This is weight."

She looked at the erhu. She looked at me. She had the eyes of a person who had spent her life listening to instruments and knew when one of them was lying.

"What's inside it?" she said.

"An erhu."

"That's not what I asked."

I did not answer. She waited. The wind came off the cliff. The swifts screamed. A bus pulled in and the ticket scanner said please.

"Whatever it is," she said, "it's too heavy for the high notes. You've lost the top. You've gained the bottom. It's a trade. It's not a bad trade. But it's a trade."

"It's my instrument."

"I know," she said. "That's what worries me."

She left. She did not put money in the case. She did not ask for a photograph. She walked to the gate and did not look back.

※

Yanyan came on Sunday.

She saw the new erhu on the table. She put her schoolbag down and stood in front of it. She did not touch it. She looked at it the way a child looks at a thing that has been brought into the house for a reason she does not understand.

"It's pretty," she said.

"It's empty."

"It's not empty. It's just not full."

She picked it up. She played a note. The note was bright and clean and cheerful. She made a face.

"It sounds like a commercial," she said.

I laughed.

"Why don't you play it?" she said.

"Because it doesn't need me."

"That's a stupid reason."

"It's the only one I have."

She put the new erhu down. She picked up the old one. She held it in both hands. She was small, and the old one was heavy, and she had to hold it against her chest.

"This one needs you," she said.

"Yes."

"Then play this one."

I took it from her. I put it on my knee. I played a phrase. The note came out low and dark and stubborn. It came out like a man walking up a hill with a full bucket.

Yanyan listened. She put her hand on the soundbox.

"It's still full," she said.

"Yes."

"Of what?"

"Of people."

She nodded. She did not ask who. She was twelve. She had learned that some questions have answers that are too big for the room.

※

That night I added another sheet.

I opened the back, melted a plate, and fitted it over the others. I did not write a name. There was no name left to write. The seven were in. The three were in. The date was in. The words were in. There was only the lead itself now, the pure weight, the thing that made the instrument heavy.

I closed the back. I tuned the strings. I played a scale.

The high register was almost gone. The notes above the second octave came out thin and scratched, like a voice at the end of a long day. The low register was a room. The middle register was a corridor between the two.

I played "Seven Lamps." The song came out slow. The seven lamps went out one by one. The last lamp was my own. I held the final note until the bow ran out of hair.

Then I picked up the new erhu.

I played "Horse Racing." I played it badly on purpose. I played it too fast. I played the wrong notes. The new erhu did exactly what I asked. It made the wrong notes sound bright and clean and cheerful. It made the song sound like a commercial for a car.

I put it back in the silk case. I closed the brass clasp. I carried the case into the back room and put it on the shelf, behind the jars of pickles and the sack of rice.

I did not play it again.

CHAPTER 15

The Rain

4 August — 920 g

The storm came from the west, over the Wuzhou Shan, in the afternoon.

I heard it before I felt it. The wind changed. The coal road went quiet. The swifts stopped screaming and went into the niches. The tourists looked at the sky and then at their phones and then at the gate. The ticket scanner said please, please, please, faster and faster, as the people went through.

Then the rain came.

It came down the cliff in sheets. It hit the flagstones and bounced. It ran off the roof of the gate and made a curtain. The cliff went dark. The red-brown stone turned the color of wet clay. The great Buddha, up the stairs, in the open, got wet. He had been getting wet for a thousand years. He did not mind.

I sat under the eaves of the gate with the erhu case on my knees. The rain was loud. It was a good loud. It filled the valley. It made the cliff into a drum.

Then the case began to feel damp.

I opened it. The erhu was cold. The python skin was soft. It had gone slack in the wet air, the way a drum goes slack. I touched it with my thumb. It gave.

I closed the case and carried it home.

※

The courtyard was a lake. The date tree was dripping. The stove was out. I lit it. I put the erhu on the table and opened the back. The lead was there, gray and cold. The wood was damp. The skin was slack.

I dried the instrument by the stove. I did not put it too close. Wood and heat are enemies. I held it at the distance of a hand and turned it slowly, the way you turn a thing on a spit.

Then I re-glued the skin.

I had a pot of hide glue. I had a brush. I had a small clamp. I warmed the glue and painted the rim and pressed the skin back. The skin was stubborn. It had

been on the instrument for thirty years. It did not want to be moved. I talked to it. I said, "Come on. You've been through worse." It did not answer. I pressed it flat and clamped it and waited.

While I waited, I listened to the rain.

The rain sounded like the bus station.

That was the thing about rain. It brought the bus station back. It brought the fluorescent light, the tin roof, the plastic seats, the red taillights going down the road. It brought the wedding. It brought "The Great Happiness." It brought the phone in my pocket that did not ring.

I sat by the stove and let it come. There was no point in pushing it away. The rain was going to rain.

※

The woman came at five.

I heard her shoes on the path. They were good shoes, but they were full of water. She was breathing hard. She stopped at the courtyard gate.

"Are you open?" she said.

"I'm not a shop."

"The gate was open. I saw the light."

"The gate is always open."

She came in. She was soaked. Her hair was flat against her head. She was maybe forty, maybe fifty. She had a camera bag under her coat, and she was holding it the way you hold a thing you are afraid to lose.

"I came for the grottoes," she said. "I came all the way from Guangzhou. The gate is closed. The buses have stopped. I'm supposed to go home tomorrow."

"You can come in."

She came in. She stood by the stove. She dripped on the floor. I gave her a towel. She dried her hair. She looked at the erhu on the table, with the clamp on the skin.

"Is it broken?" she said.

"It's wet."

"Can you play it?"

"Not yet."

"I heard about you. In Guangzhou. Everyone heard about you."

"The video."

"The video."

She sat on the low stool. She held the towel in her lap. The rain went on. The stove ticked.

"I came to hear you," she said. "I know it's stupid. I came a thousand kilometers to hear a man play an erhu. My husband thinks I'm crazy. Maybe I am."

"Why did you come?"

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "My father used to play. Not well. He played in the kitchen. He played the same song over and over. I didn't know what it was. I heard it in your video. It was the same song. 'Erquan Yingyue.' I hadn't heard it in twenty years. I didn't know I remembered it."

"What was your father's name?"

"Wang. Wang Guoliang."

"Did he talk a lot?"

"He never talked. That was the problem. He played. That was his talking."

I took the clamp off the skin. I tested it with my thumb. It was tight enough. I tuned the strings. The qianjin had slipped. I moved it. I drew the bow.

The note came out low. It came out heavy. It came out with the hum under it, the hum that was always there now, the low steady note that was not the wind and was not the string. The rain was loud, but the note was louder. It went out into the courtyard and into the rain and came back with the rain in it.

I played "Erquan Yingyue."

The woman cried. She did not sob. She did not make a sound. The tears came down her face and she did not wipe them away. She sat on the stool with the towel in her lap and let them come.

When I finished, she was quiet for a long time.

"Thank you," she said.

"It's the tune."

"It's you."

"It's the tune."

She laughed. It was a wet laugh. She stood. She put the towel on the stool. She took a hundred-yuan note out of her bag and put it on the table.

"I don't need that," I said.

"I know," she said. "It's not for you. It's for the song."

She left. I heard her shoes on the path, going down to the road. The rain went on.

※

Xiao Liu had been standing at the gate.

He had his phone out. He had been filming. He did not tell me until the next day. He said, "Grandpa Gao, I got it. I got the whole thing. The rain. The woman. The song. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

He posted it. It went viral. It was called "The Soul of Datong in the Rain." It was watched eleven million times in four days. The city shared it. The tourism bureau shared it. A newspaper in Beijing wrote an article about the blind musician who played for a stranger in the rain. A television station in Shanghai called Sun. Sun called Xiaoyu. Xiaoyu called me. I did not answer.

The festival was three weeks away.

※

That night I played a single note.

I did not play a tune. I played the open D string. I drew the bow and held it. The note came out of the skin and into the room. The hum was under it, a low steady note, a note like a bell that had been buried in the ground and was ringing by itself.

I held the note until the bow ran out of hair.

The bell was there. It had been there for weeks, under the tune, under the rain, under the names. It was the sound of the weight. It was the sound of the lead. It was the sound of the seven, and the three, and the date, and the words. It was the sound of the book.

I knew the weight was enough. I did not know what enough meant.

I put the erhu in the case. I put the case by the bed. I lay down. The rain went on. The bell went on, under the rain, in the dark.

I slept.

CHAPTER 16

The Daughter

18 August — 1,000 g

Duan was drunk when she found him.

He was at the back table of Jin Family Noodles, with the shutters half down and the fan turning and a bottle of baijiu in front of him. Auntie Jin was gone. The bowls were stacked. The radio was off. The only light was the fluorescent tube over the counter, and it made his face look gray.

"You," he said.

"Me."

"Sit down."

She sat. He poured a glass of baijiu and pushed it toward her. She did not touch it. He drank his own. He made a face. He put the glass down.

"I talked," he said.

She waited.

"The meeting times. The names. I gave them the names." He looked at the table. "I gave them Ma Jun."

"Why?"

"My son." He said it quietly. "He was sixteen. He had a hole in his heart. The surgery was in Beijing. It cost eighty thousand yuan. I had six thousand. The company said they would pay. They said they would give him a job when he was better. They said all I had to do was tell them when the group met."

"Did they pay?"

"They paid. He's in Shenzhen now. He works in a phone factory. He has a daughter. He doesn't know."

"Did you know they would take Ma Jun?"

"I thought they would break up the group. I thought they would scare him. I thought they would fire him, maybe. I didn't know they would take him."

"You knew they were watching the kiln."

"I knew they were watching. I didn't know what watching meant."

"You sat by the door. You watched the road. You told him there was a car."

"I told him there was a car. He said it was nothing. I wanted it to be nothing."

"You wanted it to be nothing so you could keep your son's surgery."

He looked up. His eyes were red. He was not crying yet. He was close.

"Yes," he said. "That's what I wanted."

She did not say anything. The fan turned. The shutters made a small sound in the wind.

"Who ordered it?" she said.

"You know who."

"Say it."

"Kang Rui."

"Did he order the battery?"

"I don't know. I know the security office did it. The security office did what Kang Rui wanted. That's how it worked."

"Did you know they blinded Gao?"

"I heard. I heard the next day. I went to the hospital. They wouldn't let me in. I stood in the corridor for an hour. Then I went home."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"No."

"Did you tell Ma Jun's wife?"

"No."

"Did you tell Ma Ling?"

He looked at her. He was crying now. It was not a loud cry. It was the cry of a man who had been holding it for ten years and had run out of room.

"I'm telling you now," he said.

※

She found Gao in the courtyard with the stove lit and the erhu on the table.

He was sitting on the low stool. He had the back plate off. He was fitting a sheet of lead into the soundbox. He did not stop when she came in. He did not look up. He did not need to.

"You knew," she said.

"I knew something."

"You knew Duan talked."

"I suspected."

"Since when?"

"Since 2009. Since the car on the road. Since he stopped looking at me."

"And you let him take care of you."

"He was the only one who did."

She stood in the doorway. The stove ticked. The lead sheet caught the light.

"Show me," she said.

He put the sheet down. He turned the soundbox toward her. It was open. The inside was lined with gray metal. The metal was covered with writing: names, dates, words, scratched into the lead with a nail. The writing was crude. It was the writing of a man who could not see.

She saw her father's name.

She put her hand over her mouth. She did not know she was going to do it. She did it before she could stop herself.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"I'm writing it down."

"You're building a weapon."

"I'm building a book."

"You're building a weapon, and you're going to use it."

"I'm not going to hit anyone."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to play."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I have."

She looked at the lead. The names. The dates. The words. *They talked. We listened. No one heard.* Her father's name was in the middle. It was written larger than the others. The nail had gone deep.

"You could give this to the police," she said.

"The police had it for ten years and did nothing."

"You could give it to the newspaper."

"The newspaper is the city. The city is Kang Rui."

"You could give it to me."

He was quiet. The stove ticked. He turned his face toward her. His eyes were closed. The scars were white in the stove light.

"I am giving it to you," he said.

"Then stop."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I've been playing for ten years and no one has heard it. Because the music is the only thing I have, and the music is not enough. Because I have to make it enough."

"That's not a reason. That's a feeling."

"It's both."

She took out her phone. She photographed the lead. She photographed the names. She photographed her father's name. He did not stop her. He sat with his hands on his knees and let her do it.

"Will you tell anyone?" he said.

"I don't know."

"Good."

"Good?"

"If you knew, you'd be sure. Certainty is a trap."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Don't be wise. Be honest."

He was quiet. The stove ticked. Then he said, "I'm afraid."

She lowered the phone.

"I'm afraid I'll miss," he said. "I'm afraid I'll hit. I'm afraid it won't matter. I'm afraid it will matter and I'll be the only one who pays. I'm afraid of the dark. I'm afraid of the light. I'm afraid of the sound the instrument makes now, because it's the most beautiful sound I've ever made, and I made it out of lead and dead men."

She did not say anything.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that I'm doing this for the wrong reason."

"What's the right reason?"

"I don't know."

"Then don't do it."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because the wrong reason is the only one I have."

※

She left.

She stood at the gate and looked back. He was sitting in the dark with the erhu on his knees, the back plate off, the lead shining in the stove light. He looked like a man praying to something that was not there.

She drove back to Taiyuan. The road was dark. The coal trucks went by. She thought about her father. She thought about the photograph of him smiling at Gao. She thought about Xiaobao, asleep in his bed, with his shoes by the door.

She pulled over at a rest stop and looked at the photographs on her phone. The lead. The names. Her father's name. The words. *They talked. We listened. No one heard.*

She opened her messages. She typed a message to Xiaoyu.

I have a photograph of the inside of the erhu.

She deleted it.

She typed it again.

She deleted it.

She put the phone in the cup holder and drove the rest of the way home.

※

CHAPTER 17

The Rehearsal

PART THREE

The Music

1 September — 1,000 g

The stage was built below Cave Twenty, on the new plaza, with the cliff behind it and the sky above it.

It was a rectangle of black boards, raised a meter off the ground, with a lip of stone along the front edge. There were lights on trusses, cables taped to the boards, a sound desk at the back, two monitors, four microphones on stands, and a row of plastic chairs where the front row would be. The chairs were empty. The Buddha was behind them, lit from below, his face the color of warm stone.

I walked the stage with my cane. I counted the steps from the wing to the center: fourteen. I counted the steps from the center to the front edge: four. I counted the steps from the front edge to the first chair: one. The distance from the center to the first chair was four meters. Zhou had been precise.

I stood at the center. The boards were cold. The lights were off. The cliff was above me. The cave was behind the Buddha. The wind came over the top of the cliff and went into the cave and came out through the Buddha's chest.

I could hear the mountain.

※

Xiao Zhao was the sound engineer. He was thirty, with a shaved head and a silver ring in his ear and a way of talking to machines as if they were people who had disappointed him.

"Mr. Gao," he said. "We're going to do a line check. I'll put a mic on the erhu. Play a scale. Then play the piece. Then we'll adjust."

"All right."

He clipped a small microphone to the erhu, near the bridge. He ran the cable to a pack on my belt. He put headphones on. He said, "Play."

I played a scale. The notes came out of the erhu and into the microphone and into the sound desk and out of the monitors. The monitors made the notes sound thin and bright and far away.

"Again," Xiao Zhao said.

I played the scale again.

"Stop."

I stopped.

He took his headphones off. He looked at the sound desk. He looked at the erhu. He looked at me.

"There's a thump," he said.

"What?"

"When you lift the instrument. There's a low thump. It's not in the strings. It's in the body. It sounds like something is moving inside."

"It's an old instrument."

"Old instruments don't thump."

"This one does."

He put his headphones back on. He played back the recording. I could hear it through the monitors: the note, and under the note, a low thump, a sound like a stone turning over in a sack.

"That's not wood," he said.

"It's an old instrument."

"Mr. Gao."

"Xiao Zhao."

He was quiet. He looked at the erhu. He looked at the stage. He looked at the empty chairs.

"I'm not going to tell anyone," he said. "I'm just saying. If it thumps on the night, the broadcast will pick it up. The whole country will hear it."

"Let them hear it."

He looked at me. He had the eyes of a man who had spent his life making things sound clean and had just been told that clean was not the point.

"Okay," he said. "It's your instrument."

"Yes," I said. "It is."

※

Kang Rui came at six, with Zhou and two bodyguards and a doctor.

The doctor was a small man with a soft voice and a black bag. He took Kang's pulse. He listened to his chest. He said something in a low voice. Kang laughed and waved him away. His left hand was shaking. He put it in his pocket.

"Old men," Kang said. "We are all old men. The doctor wants me to sit down. I want to stand up. It's a negotiation."

He stood at the edge of the stage. He looked at the lights. He looked at the Buddha. He looked at me.

"Play," he said.

I played "Seven Lamps."

The stage was different from the courtyard. The sound did not come back off the date tree. It went out into the plaza and into the cliff and came back from a long way away. The low register was huge. The high register was thin. The thump was there, under the first note, a sound like a door closing in a big house.

Kang listened with his eyes closed. The bodyguards stood behind him. Zhou held the tablet. The doctor held the black bag. The lights were on. The Buddha was lit. The mountain was above us.

When I finished, Kang was quiet for a long time.

"You've never played better," he said.

"I've never been heavier."

He laughed. He thought it was a joke. He clapped. The clap went out into the plaza and came back off the cliff. The sound was small and sharp, and then it was gone.

"Again," he said.

I played it again.

※

After the rehearsal, I walked home.

The road was dark. The stage was behind me. The Buddha was behind me. The lights were off. The cliff was a black shape against a black sky. The coal trucks went by. The dust came off them in a wave. I turned my face away.

I counted the steps. One thousand two hundred and forty. The number was wrong. I started again. One thousand two hundred and forty. The number was wrong again.

I stopped. I stood on the road with the case in my hand and the dust in my teeth.

I had lost count. I had been counting that road for ten years, and I had lost count.

I did not know why. I knew the road. I knew the stones. I knew the place where the pavement broke and the place where the dogs barked and the place where the noodle shop light fell across the path.

I started walking again. I did not count. I let the road come to me. The road came. The gate came. The courtyard came. The date tree came.

I put the erhu on the table. I sat down. The stove was out. I did not light it. I sat in the dark with the case in front of me and the mountain under the floor.

Four meters. The center to the first chair. The same distance I had counted a hundred times in the courtyard, from the center to the tree, from the tree to the wall.

The hand's width was in there somewhere. I had practiced it two hundred times. I had practiced it until my shoulder was on fire. I had practiced it until the swing was not a swing but a breath.

I put my hand on the case. The case was heavy. The case was warm. The case was the only thing in the room that was awake.

"Four meters," I said.

The date tree moved in the wind. The stage was behind me.

I went to bed.

CHAPTER 18

The Witness

8 September — 1,120 g

Xiaoyu laid the evidence on her bed.

She had four things. She had the audio of the hum, recorded on three microphones, in three rooms, over five months. She had the accident report, a scan of the carbon copy, with Kang Rui's signature at the bottom. She had Duan's voice on tape: *We all did what we had to do.* She had the photograph Ma Ling had sent her the morning after the courtyard, with no message, no caption, no explanation: the inside of the erhu, the lead, the names, the words.

She looked at them for a long time. They were not a story. They were a case.

A story had a beginning and an end. A case had a file. A file had a number. A number had a court date. A court date had a judge. A judge had a relationship with the city. The city had a relationship with Kang Rui.

She closed the laptop. She opened it again.

※

The dinner was at the Yungang Hotel, in the same private room, with the same lazy susan and the same maotai. There were fewer people this time: Kang, the mayor, Sun, Zhou, and Xiaoyu. The mayor was in a good mood. He had been to the site that afternoon. He had stood on the stage and looked at the Buddha and said, "This will be on television."

"The mine's little problem is a museum now," Kang said. "People pay to look at the hole."

The mayor laughed. He had a laugh like a door slamming.

"We should have done it years ago," he said. "The mine was a liability. Now it's an asset. The wall, the park, the festival. It's a story."

"Every city needs a story," Kang said. "Ours was coal. Now it's stone. Stone is better. Stone doesn't burn."

"It doesn't employ anyone either," the mayor said.

"It employs the story," Kang said. "The story employs the tour guides, the hotels, the restaurants, the camera crews, the girl with the video. The story is the industry now."

He looked at Xiaoyu. He smiled.

"The old man is the soul of the city," he said. "We must take care of him."

"How?" Xiaoyu said.

"His pension. His housing. His medical care. The festival fee. A documentary. A book. A statue, maybe." Kang laughed. "Not a statue. He would hate a statue. He would say, 'A statue cannot play.'"

"A statue can't talk either," the mayor said. "That's the advantage."

Everyone laughed. Xiaoyu laughed. Her phone was in her bag, face down, recording.

※

Sun followed her out to the parking lot.

He was smoking. He had not smoked in years. He stood under the hotel lights with the cigarette in his hand and the smoke going up into the dark.

"You're not going to do anything stupid," he said.

"What does stupid mean?"

"It means the film."

"The film is the film."

"The film is the city's film. The city paid for it."

"The city paid for a commercial. I made a documentary."

"There's no difference."

"There's a difference."

"Not to the city."

He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. He looked at her. He was fifty. He had a wife and a daughter and a mortgage and a mother in a nursing home. He had been a good man once, or he had wanted to be.

"I have a daughter your age," he said.

"I know."

"She thinks I'm a good person."

"I don't know if you are."

"Neither do I."

He looked at the hotel. The windows were lit. The fake wall was lit. The city was lit.

"The festival is in three weeks," he said. "Don't ruin it."

"I'm not going to ruin it."

"I know," he said. "That's why I'm asking."

He walked back into the hotel. She stood in the parking lot with the smell of the cigarette and the sound of the city.

※

She went home and listened to the recording.

Kang's voice was smooth. The mayor's voice was loud. Sun's voice was nervous. Zhou's voice was almost absent, a few words, a glass being set down, a tablet clicking. The clink of the maotai bottle. The laugh.

She listened to it three times. Then she called Ma Ling.

"I have it," she said.

"Have what?"

"The dinner. Kang. The mayor. The mine's little problem. The old man is the soul of the city. All of it."

"Will you publish it?"

"I'm going to release the documentary after the festival."

There was a silence on the line. Xiaoyu could hear the hospital in the background: a cart, a door, a voice on a loudspeaker.

"After," Ma Ling said.

"After. If I release it before, they'll cancel the performance. They'll pull the broadcast. They'll bury it. If I release it after, the whole country will have seen him play. They'll have heard the sound. They'll want to know what the sound is."

"You're still making content."

"I'm making a record."

"A record is content with better lighting."

"Ma Ling."

"You're waiting for the audience," Ma Ling said. "You're waiting for the numbers. You're waiting for the perfect moment to press publish. That's not witnessing. That's producing."

"What do you want me to do? Post it now? Ruin the festival? Get him arrested before he plays? Get Kang Rui's lawyers on the phone before the investigation starts?"

"I want you to stop pretending that you're doing this for him."

"I'm not doing it for him. I'm doing it for the truth."

"The truth doesn't need a release date."

Xiaoyu was quiet. The hospital sounds went on. A woman said something in the background, and Ma Ling said, "I have to go."

"Ma Ling."

"After the festival," Ma Ling said. "Fine. After the festival. But don't call it courage."

She hung up.

※

Xiaoyu sat on the floor of her apartment with her back against the bed and the laptop on her knees. The documentary was open. Twenty-two minutes. The mine, the wall, the old man, the song, Wang Yulan's voice, Duan's voice, the report, the lead. It had everything. It had no ending. The ending was the festival. The ending was the sound.

She opened her social media app. She had drafted a post three weeks ago. It said: **I have something to show you. It is not the video you are expecting.** She had never posted it.

She looked at the post. She looked at the cursor.

She deleted it.

Then she went into the drafts folder and restored it.

She looked at the cursor again. It blinked. It was a small thing, a vertical line, a heartbeat. She did not press publish.

She closed the laptop. She lay down on the floor. The city hummed. The wall was lit up. The old man was asleep, or awake, or practicing, or sitting in the dark with his hands on the instrument.

She thought about the four meters. She thought about the hand's width. She thought about the photograph of the lead, the names, the words. She thought about the sound of the erhu in the courtyard, the sound of a door opening in a room you did not know was there.

She did not sleep.

CHAPTER 19

The Emperor

15 September — 1,120 g

The car came at four.

It was a black car with a driver in a black suit and a bottle of water in the door pocket. Zhou was in the front seat. I was in the back with the erhu case on my knees.

We drove east, out of the city, into the hills. The road climbed. The engine changed. The air changed: it got cooler, and it smelled of pine and dust and, once, of water. A reservoir, maybe. The driver did not talk. Zhou did not talk. The radio was off. The only sound was the tires on the road and the erhu in the case, a low, patient weight.

"Where are we going?" I said.

"Mr. Kang's house," Zhou said.

"I know that. Where is it?"

"To the east. In the hills. He bought the land in 2005. He built the house in 2008. He planted the pines himself."

"Can he plant pines?"

"He can pay people to plant pines."

※

The house was a courtyard house, modern, with a stone wall and a wooden gate and a fish pond in the middle. The pond had a stone lantern and three koi, orange and white. The water made a sound, a small sound, a sound like a person turning over in bed.

Kang was in the courtyard, sitting in a wicker chair with a blanket over his knees. He was thinner than he had been in April. His hands were on the arms of the chair. The silver case was on the table beside him.

"Old friend," he said. "You came."

"You sent a car."

"I send cars. People don't always come."

He waved at the chair beside him. I sat. The wicker creaked. The koi moved in the pond. The pines moved in the wind.

"I have six months," he said. "Maybe a year. The doctors are optimistic. Doctors are always optimistic. It's their job."

"I'm sorry."

"Are you?"

"No."

He laughed. It was a good laugh, low and real, and it turned into a cough. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and coughed into it. When he took it away, there was a spot of blood on it. He folded it and put it back in his pocket.

"Good," he said. "I would have been disappointed if you were sorry."

※

He showed me the collection.

It was in a room off the courtyard, a long room with a stone floor and a low ceiling and lights set into the walls. The statues stood on plinths. There were Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and arhats and a small stone horse. There were heads without bodies and bodies without heads. There was a Tang dynasty Bodhisattva head with a calm face and a broken nose and traces of blue paint in the hair.

I could not see them. I could feel them. The room was cold. The stone was cold. The air was dry. Kang walked beside me and described them. He knew the dates. He knew the dynasties. He knew the provenance, or the story of the provenance, which is not the same thing.

"This one is from a private collection in Hong Kong," he said. "This one is from a temple in Shanxi. This one is from a tomb. This one I bought at auction. This one I bought from a man who bought it from a man who bought it from a farmer."

"Was it looted?"

"Some of it."

"From the grottoes?"

"Not from the grottoes. The grottoes are protected. The grottoes are a UNESCO site. You cannot loot a UNESCO site. You can loot a temple, a tomb, a village. The grottoes are safe."

"Are they?"

He stopped. I heard his hand on the stone. He was touching the Bodhisattva head, the broken nose, the blue paint.

"They are safe from me," he said. "I am the one who is protecting them. I paid for the digital archive. I paid for the restoration. I paid for the lights. I paid for the festival. Without me, the cliff would be a quarry."

"Without you, the cliff would be a cliff."

He laughed. It turned into a cough. He put the handkerchief to his mouth. When he took it away, he did not look at it.

"You are a difficult man," he said.

"I'm a blind man."

"Same thing."

※

We went back to the courtyard. The sun was going down. The koi were still. A woman brought tea and a plate of small cakes. Kang poured the tea. His hand shook. He did not spill.

"I play the guqin," he said. "Badly. Would you like to hear?"

"No."

"I'll play anyway."

He played. The guqin was on a table by the pond. He sat down and put his hands on the strings. He played a piece called "Flowing Water." It was not flowing water. It was a man pushing a heavy object across a floor. He stopped in the middle and laughed.

"I have no talent," he said. "I have money. It's not the same."

"No," I said. "It's not."

"My father was a teacher. He played the flute. He played it badly too. But he played it for himself. I play for the room. That's the difference."

"What's the room?"

"The people who are listening. The people who will remember. The people who will say, 'Kang Rui was a man of culture.'" He put his hands on the strings. "It's a small thing to want. To be remembered as a man of culture."

"It's not small."

"No," he said. "It's not."

※

He told the Gao Jianli story after dinner.

He told it as a joke. He did the voices. He made the emperor a pompous fool and Gao Jianli a stubborn artist. He said, "The man hid lead in his instrument and tried to hit the emperor. He missed. Of course he missed. He was blind. The emperor had him blinded. What did he expect?"

"He expected to hit him," I said.

"He expected to be a hero. He expected the story to remember him. And it did. That's the joke. He missed, and the story remembers him. If he had hit, the story would remember the emperor. The miss is the whole thing."

"The miss is not the whole thing."

"What is?"

"The music."

Kang looked at me. The candle on the table moved. The koi turned in the pond.

"The man was an artist," he said. "He should have stuck to music."

"He was a musician."

"Same thing."

"No."

"You're a purist."

"I'm a blind man."

"Same thing," he said. "A blind man is a purist about what he can hear."

※

He touched my face.

We were alone. The woman had taken the tea things. Zhou was in the house. The bodyguards were at the gate. The pond made its small sound. The pines moved.

Kang stood up. He came around the table. He stood in front of me. I could smell the cologne and the medicine and the tea.

He put his hand on my face. His fingers were dry and warm. He traced the scars around my eyes. He traced them slowly, the way a man traces a map of a country he has never visited.

"You've been well, old friend," he said.

I did not move.

"I have always admired you," he said. "You have something I do not have. You have the thing itself. I have the room around it. I have the lights and the walls and the people who come to look. You have the thing."

"What thing?"

"The sound."

"You took my eyes."

"I gave you a stage."

"You took my eyes."

"I gave you a stage."

"You took my eyes."

He took his hand away. The air was cold where his fingers had been.

"We are both old," he said. "Let's not."

"Let's not what?"

"Let's not do this. We are two old men in a garden. The moon is coming up. The koi are hungry. Let's not do this."

"All right," I said.

He sat down. He poured more tea. His hand shook. He did not spill.

※

He gave me the pendant at the gate.

It was white jade, small, round, with a hole in the middle and a carving of a cloud. It was warm from his pocket. He put it in my hand and closed my fingers around it.

"It's a gift," he said.

"I know."

"Not a bribe."

"I know."

"You can refuse it."

"I can."

"But it will be in your house."

"It's already in my hand."

He laughed. He coughed. He put the handkerchief to his mouth. The bodyguards opened the car door. Zhou stood by the car with the tablet.

"Play well," Kang said. "The city is listening."

"I know," I said.

I got into the car. The door closed. The car went down the hill. The villa got smaller. The pines got smaller. The lights of the city came up, a long orange smear on the dark.

I put the pendant on the seat beside me. I did not want it in my pocket. I did not want it in my house. I would leave it in the car. The driver would find it. He would give it back to Zhou. Zhou would give it back to Kang. Kang would put it in a drawer with the other gifts he had given to people who did not want them.

I put my hand on the erhu case. The weight was there. One thousand two hundred and forty grams. The names were there. The date was there. The words were there.

I thought about the emperor's hands. They were dry and warm. They had traced the scars around my eyes. They had signed the report. They had given me a stage.

The car went down the hill. The city came up. I could not see it.

I could hear it.

CHAPTER 20

The Last Layer

22 September — 1,240 g

The last layer is the date and the words.

I take the battery from the tin. It is light now. It is almost empty. I have been taking plates out of it for six months, one at a time, and now there is only one left, thin and gray and bent at the corner. I take it out with the pliers. I hold it in my hand. It weighs almost nothing.

I melt it on the stove. I hammer it thin. I fit it over the other sheets, the last sheet, the top sheet, the one that will be closest to the skin. I take the nail.

I write the date: **29 September**.

I write the words: **They talked. We listened. No one heard.**

The nail goes into the lead. The lead is soft. It takes the letters. I read them with my thumb. The date is a row of small dents. The words are a longer row, a sentence in the dark.

I put the back plate on. I tap the nails in. I tune the strings. The instrument is finished. It weighs one thousand three hundred and sixty grams. It is a book with strings. It is a bell with a bow. It is the heaviest thing I have ever carried.

※

Then I write the letters.

I cannot write. I have not written since 2009. But Ma Jun taught me a trick, a long time ago, when we were making copies of the notebook: carbon paper. You put the carbon paper under the page, and you write with a hard pencil, and the pencil presses through the page and the carbon makes a copy. The copy is faint. The original is dark. You can write two letters at once, or one letter and one copy, and no one knows which is which.

I have a sheet of carbon paper in the drawer. I have a pencil. I have two sheets of paper.

I write to Ma Ling.

> *Ma Ling,*
> *Your father didn't talk. Not the way they mean. He talked to me. He talked to the men. He talked to the newspaper. He didn't talk to them. Duan talked. Duan was scared. He had a son. I don't know if that makes it better. It doesn't make it better for you.*
> *I didn't go with your father. I had a wedding. I played "The Great Happiness" for four hours. I have been playing it ever since.*
> *The book is yours. The names are yours. I am sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I am sorry I didn't tell you at all.*
> *— Gao*

I write to Xiaoyu.

> *Xiaoyu,*
> *You made the city hear me. That is not nothing. Don't let them make it a video.*
> *The instrument is heavy. It has been heavy for a long time. If something happens, the book is in it. The book is the names. The names are the proof.*
> *Thank you for the rain.*
> *— Gao*

I fold the letters. I leave them on the table. I do not put them in envelopes. I do not address them. I do not know if I will send them. I do not know if I will come back.

※

Then I play the song.

I sit on the low stool. I put the erhu on my knee. The instrument is heavy. The bow is light. The stove is lit. The date tree moves in the wind. The mountain is under the floor.

I play "Seven Lamps."

I play it slowly. I play it the way I played it in the kiln, the first night, when Ma Jun taught us the words line by line and sang them wrong on purpose. I play the seven lamps. I play the seven men with black faces. I play the one who went out in the spring wind. I play the six lamps. I play the one who went out in the summer rain. I play the five. I play the four. I play the three. I play the two. I play the one.

The bell is under every note. The bell is the lead. The bell is the names. The bell is the date and the words. The bell is the sound of the instrument becoming what it was always going to be.

I play the last verse. One lamp in the old kiln. One man with a black face. The lamp goes out. The man is still there. The man is in the dark. The man is the dark.

I hold the last note until the bow runs out of hair.

The erhu is in my arms. The stove ticks.

"That was the best I ever played," I say.

The room does not answer. The room is full of the note. The note is still going out, into the walls, into the floor, into the mountain, into the stone.

※

I sleep with the erhu in my arms.

I do not put it in the case. I do not put it by the bed. I lie down on the kang with the instrument against my chest, the way a man lies down with a dog or a child or a woman. The soundbox is cold. The strings are cold. The lead is cold. I put my hand on the skin. I can feel the note in it, a faint vibration, a memory of the bow.

I sleep.

I dream of the mine.

The mine is not the heritage park. It is the mine as it was: the shaft head, the wheel, the blue tower, the coal road, the gangue hill smoking. It is dark. It is always dark in the mine. The lamps are the only light. Seven lamps. Seven men with black faces. Ma Jun is standing on a coal bucket. He is not the shortest man in the room. He is the tallest. He is laughing. He is singing the song wrong on purpose. Old Hou is shouting, "What? What?" Wang Yulan is writing in her

notebook. Zhao Deshun is pouring tea. Li Xiaobo is looking at the door. Duan is by the door, watching the road.

I am playing the erhu. The chamber is round. The sound goes around it. It comes back to me a half-beat late.

Ma Jun looks at me. He says, "Again."

I play it again.

He laughs. The laugh goes out into the mine and comes back changed. It is the best sound I have ever heard. It is better than the erhu. It is better than the bell. It is the sound of a man who is alive.

Then the lamps go out. One by one. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

The last lamp is mine. It goes out.

In the dark, Ma Jun says, "You always have a gig."

I wake up.

The erhu is in my arms. The stove is out. The date tree is still. The first light is coming through the window, a gray light, a light I cannot see.

It is the morning of the festival.

CHAPTER 21

The Festival

29 September — 1,360 g

I wake with the erhu in my arms and the letters on the table.

The letters are still there. I did not send them. I did not burn them. They are folded twice, with the carbon copies underneath, and they sit on the table like two small white animals.

I get up. I put water on the stove. I wash my face. I put on the shirt Xiao Liu brought me, a dark shirt, good cotton, with a collar that does not scratch. I put on the jacket. It is new. It fits. Xiao Liu has good taste. I did not know he had good taste.

I do not eat. I am not hungry. I sit at the table with the erhu case in front of me. I put my hand on the case. The case is warm. The case is heavy.

At noon, a car comes.

※

The roads were closed. The driver took a back route, through the village, past the noodle shop, past the old kiln parking lot, past the place where the mine road turned off. The village was empty. Everyone was at the festival. The shutters were down. A dog barked at the car and then stopped.

The site was a city. There were tents and barriers and generators and cables and a hundred people in yellow vests. The stage was a rectangle of black boards with the cliff behind it. The Buddha was lit from below. The lights were still off. The sun was going down behind the cliff, and the sky was the color of weak tea, and the moon was coming up over the ridge, full and white.

The car stopped behind the stage. Xiao Liu opened the door. He was wearing a suit. He looked like a boy at a wedding.

"Grandpa Gao," he said. "You look good."

"I can't see."

"You look good anyway."

He took my arm. I let him. He led me to the tent. The tent smelled of canvas and coffee and hairspray. A woman with a makeup brush came at me. I said no. She said, "Just a little powder." I said no. She said, "The lights are very bright." I said, "I'm blind." She laughed, nervously, and went away.

Xiao Liu sat me in a folding chair. He gave me a bottle of water. He talked. He talked about the crowd, the television, the mayor, the fireworks. He talked about the video, the rain, the woman from Guangzhou. He talked about the sound check, the monitors, the microphones. He talked until I said, "Xiao Liu."

"Yes?"

"Stop talking."

"Sorry."

"It's all right. Just stop."

He stopped. The tent was quiet. Outside, the crowd made a sound like the sea.

※

Xiaoyu came at seven.

She was wearing a black dress and a press pass and a look on her face that I had seen before, on Ma Ling, in the hospital, when she was a girl in a school uniform holding a bag of oranges.

"Are you okay?" she said.

"I'm ready."

"For what?"

"For the song."

She looked at the case. The case was on the table. The case was closed. She put her hand on it. She did not open it.

"Ma Ling is here," she said. "In the third row."

"Good."

"Duan is here. In the back."

"Good."

"Kang Rui is in the front row. Four meters away."

"I know."

"Mr. Gao."

"Xiaoyu."

"Don't do it."

I did not answer.

"Please."

"I'm going to play," I said.

"That's not what I asked."

"I know."

She took her hand off the case. She stood there for a moment. Then she said, "I'm going to film it."

"Good."

"Not for the city. For me."

"Good."

She left. The tent flap moved. The crowd made its sound. The lights came on outside, one bank at a time, and the tent went from gray to white.

※

The host came at eight forty.

He was a television host from Beijing, with a voice like a warm knife. He stood on the stage and said the festival was a celebration of the city's past and future. He said the city had been built on coal and was now built on stone. He said the stone had been carved by the Northern Wei, a thousand five hundred years ago, and the music had been played in the valley for a thousand five hundred years. He said the man who was about to play had been playing in the valley for ten years. He said his name was Gao Yusheng. He said he was the soul of Datong.

The crowd applauded.

Ma Ling was in the third row.

I could not see her. I knew she was there because Xiaoyu had told me, and because I could hear her breathing. She breathed like a nurse: even, controlled, with a small pause at the end. She was sitting beside a man who smelled of cigarettes and a woman who was filming. She did not say anything. She did not need to.

Xiaoyu was at the left of the stage with her camera. I could hear the camera's fan. She had it on a tripod. She was not filming the crowd. She was filming me.

Kang Rui was in the front row. I could hear him breathing, shallow, with the catch at the end. I could hear him say something to the mayor. The mayor laughed. The laugh was short and nervous. Kang said something else. The mayor stopped laughing.

The crowd was a dark sea with a thousand small lights in it. The phones. The screens. The cameras. The old miners at the back, in their blue jackets. The children on their fathers' shoulders. The women in good coats. The man who sold roasted sweet potatoes by the gate, who had closed his cart for the night and come to watch.

Xiao Liu took my arm. He led me to the wing. The stage was bright. The boards were cold. The lights were hot.

"Fourteen steps," Xiao Liu said. "Then the center. Then I'll go."

"Fourteen," I said.

"Fourteen."

I counted. One. Two. Three. I walked. The boards were cold. The crowd was silent. I could hear the front row: Kang Rui's breathing, the mayor's phone, Zhou's tablet, the provincial delegation's shoes.

I reached the center. Xiao Liu let go of my arm. He stepped back. The lights were on my face. The moon was above the Buddha. The cliff was behind me. The crowd was in front of me.

I took two steps forward. The front edge of the stage was at my feet. The first chair was one meter away. Kang Rui was in it. I could hear his breathing.

I put the case on the stage. I opened it. I took out the erhu.

The weight was there. One thousand three hundred and sixty grams. The names were there. The date was there. The words were there. The bell was there, under the strings, waiting.

I set the box on my knee. I checked the qianjin. I tuned the strings. I drew the bow.

I played "Seven Lamps."

※

The song went out into the crowd and into the cliff and came back changed.

It was slow. It was dark. It was the sound of seven men in a brick kiln, singing badly, drinking tea from a chipped cup. It was the sound of a bus pulling away in the rain. It was the sound of a woman crying in a courtyard. It was the sound of a bell buried in the ground.

The crowd was silent. The phones were up. The cameras were rolling. The moon was over the Buddha. The Buddha was looking at something that was not us.

I played the seven lamps. I played the six. I played the five. I played the four. I played the three. I played the two. I played the one.

The last lamp was mine. I held the note. The bell was under it. The bell was the lead. The bell was the names. The bell was the date and the words.

I held the note until the bow ran out of hair.

Then I lifted the erhu.

CHAPTER 22

The Swing

29 September — 1,360 g

The last note is still in the air when I lift the erhu.

It is the open D string. It goes out over the crowd and into the cliff and comes back changed. The crowd is silent. They think the song is over. They are waiting for me to lower the instrument and bow. They are waiting for the applause. They are waiting for the fireworks.

I do not lower the instrument.

The murmur starts at the back and comes forward. A phone goes up. Then another. The screens are small cold lights in the dark. A child says, "Mama, why is he standing like that?" The mother says, "Shh." A man laughs, nervously, the way men laugh when they do not know what is happening and want to be the first to understand it.

I can hear the front row. Kang Rui is breathing. He breathes through his nose, shallow, with a small catch at the end, the way old men breathe when they are trying not to show that they are old. One meter away. I had taken two steps to the front edge. I could hear the seam of his jacket.

Zhou is beside him. His tablet is off. I can hear the difference. The mayor is on the other side, farther away, his phone buzzing against a metal chair. The security men are at the corners of the stage. Their radios hiss. The cameras are on me. The moon is somewhere above the Buddha. I cannot see it. I can feel it on the back of my neck, a cold light.

The erhu is in my right hand. The bow is in my left. I let the bow go. It falls on the stage. The horsehair makes a small sound, a sound like a brush being put down.

The crowd murmurs. Someone says, "What is he doing?"

I take the neck of the erhu in my right hand. The wood is warm. The lead is inside it. One thousand three hundred and sixty grams. It is not a heavy thing for a man to lift. It is a heavy thing for a man to lift and swing.

I think about the date tree. I think about the hand's width. I have practiced it two hundred times. The arc. The stop. The air. The point was never to hit the tree. The point was to learn the hand's width.

I hear Kang Rui breathe.

I swing.

※

The air is the first thing. The air makes a sound when a heavy thing moves through it. It is not a whoosh. It is lower than that. It is a sound like a door opening in a room you did not know was there. It is a sound I have heard in the courtyard, at night, with the stove ticking and the date tree moving. It is the sound of the instrument becoming something else.

The erhu goes out from my shoulder. The weight pulls. My wrist holds. The string rings, once, a note with no bow, a note that comes from the movement itself. The note is high and thin and it goes out over the crowd and comes back off the cliff. For a moment there are two notes: the one the string makes and the one the cliff gives back. Then there is only the cliff.

I feel the arc. I feel the place where the hand's width is. I feel Kang Rui's breath at the end of the arc. I feel the exact point where the instrument would hit him: the side of the head, the temple, the soft place above the ear. I have felt it in the courtyard. I have felt it in the dark. I have felt it for six months. The weight has been teaching me where it would land.

I move my wrist.

A hand's width.

The erhu passes Kang Rui's head. I feel the air change as it passes. I feel the heat of his face on the wood. I feel him flinch. He makes a sound, a small sound, a sound like a man who has been touched on the shoulder in a dark room. The instrument goes past him and comes down.

It hits the stone lip at the front of the stage.

※

The sound is not a musical sound. It is a sound like a plate breaking, and then a sound like a book falling, and then a sound like a box of coins being dropped on a floor.

The soundbox splits. The back plate comes off. The lead sheets come out. They do not fall like metal. They fall like paper. They slide across the stone and stop. One of them lands against Kang Rui's shoe. One of them lands in the lap of the woman beside him. One of them goes over the edge of the stage and into the dark. One of them spins, slowly, and lies flat, and the moon makes a small white line along its edge.

The strings are still on the neck. One of them is broken. The other is still attached. It is singing. It is a thin, high, impossible note, the note of a string that has lost its box and does not know it.

The crowd is silent.

Then the front row stands up.

※

I am on my knees. I do not remember going down. The stone is cold. The broken erhu is in my lap. The neck is still in my hand. The soundbox is in pieces. The python skin is torn. The lead is on the ground around me.

I reach out. My hand finds a sheet. It is thin and soft and cold. I turn it over. I read it with my thumb.

马军, Mǎ Jūn, "horse soldier." The horse. The soldier. The spear is too long. I made it too long. I made it the first night.

Wang Yulan. The jade orchid. The one who kept the original.

Hou Deshan. The virtuous mountain. The deaf man who heard the rock.

Li Xiaobo. The young one. The one who wanted to go to college.

Zhao Deshun. The cook. The tea. The lung.

Duan Cheng. The one by the door. The one who watched the road.

高玉声, Gāo Yùshēng, "jade sound." My mother's wish. My own name.

Luo Cheng. The singer. The father. The one who died in 2005.

Liu Guoqiang. The laugh.

Zhang Heping. The hands.

The sheets are all around me. I cannot see them. I can feel them. They are the pages of a book that has no spine, a book I have been writing for six months, a book I have been writing for ten years. The crowd is picking them up. I hear the paper. I hear a woman say, "There are names on them." I hear a man say, "What the fuck." I hear a camera shutter, and another, and another, a sound like rain on a tin roof.

※

Kang Rui has not moved.

I can hear him breathing. The catch at the end of the breath is louder now. He is looking at the sheet at his feet. I know he is looking at it because the woman beside him says his name, and he does not answer. He is reading. He is reading the names. He is reading the name of the man he had killed, or the man he had disappeared, or the man he had let disappear. He is reading the name of the man who talked.

He bends down. I hear his knees. He picks up the sheet. The lead makes a small sound in his hand. He holds it for a long time.

"Gao," he says.

His voice is small. It is the voice of an old man in a front row with a piece of lead in his hand.

"Gao," he says again.

I do not answer.

He says, "You."

I do not answer.

He says, "All of it. All these years. You were writing it."

I say, "I was playing it."

He says, "You could have killed me."

I say, "I could have."

He says, "Why didn't you?"

I say, "Because you were listening."

He does not say anything. I hear the paper in his hand. I hear his breath. I hear the crowd behind him, the phones, the radios, the mayor saying something

to Zhou, the woman beside him crying. I hear the moon. I cannot see it. I can feel it.

Then he says, "I gave you a stage."

I say, "You took my eyes."

He says, "I gave you a stage."

I say, "You took my eyes."

He says, "We are both old."

I say, "You took my eyes."

He says nothing. The paper falls. I hear it land. The bodyguards reach him. They take his arms. He does not resist. They lead him away. His shoes make a sound on the stone, and then the sound is gone.

※

The security men reach me. One of them takes my arm. Another takes the neck of the erhu out of my hand. I let them. I am holding a sheet of lead. I do not let go of that. A man tries to take it. I hold it. He pulls. The lead bends. He stops.

"Let him keep it," someone says. It is Zhou. His voice is flat. "Let him keep it."

The crowd is standing. The cameras are rolling. The mayor is on his feet, his phone at his ear, his free hand making a small chopping motion at the air. A woman in the second row is crying. A man is filming her crying. A child is asking, "Why did he break his violin?" The mother says, "Don't look." The child looks.

The moon is over the Buddha. The Buddha is looking at something that is not us.

※

I am on my knees. The stage is under me. The lead is around me. The broken string is still singing, a thin note, a note that will not stop.

I find the bow. It is on the stage, two hands away. I pick it up. The horsehair is still rosined. I fit it between the string and the neck — one string, one bow, no box. I draw.

The note comes out. It is not a good note. It is a thin, scratched, impossible note. It goes out over the crowd and into the cliff and comes back changed. It is the sound of a string that has nothing left to lose.

The crowd is silent. Kang Rui is silent. The Buddha is silent.

The note holds.

I hold it until the bow runs out of hair.

Then I let it go.

The string is a thin thing. It holds.

CHAPTER 23

The Comments

6 October — 0 g

The documentary went live at 9:06 p.m.

Xiaoyu was at the left of the stage, behind the camera, with her phone in her hand and the laptop open on a folding table beside her. The old man was at the center of the stage. The crowd was a dark sea. The moon was over the Buddha. She had been holding the post in drafts for three weeks. The cursor had blinked at her. She had deleted it and restored it and deleted it again.

At 9:06, while the old man was lifting the erhu, she pressed publish.

She did not know why she chose that moment. She told herself afterward that it was because the film needed the performance, because the performance was the ending, because the film had no ending without the sound. That was true. It was not the whole truth. The whole truth was that she wanted the whole country to be watching when the old man did whatever he was going to do.

Then she looked up.

The erhu passed the chairman's head by a hand's width and hit the stone lip and broke. The lead sheets came out. The crowd stood. The cameras turned.

She kept filming. She did not stop filming until the security men took the old man by the arms and led him off the stage. Then she lowered the camera and looked at her phone. The post had eleven thousand views. By morning it had four million.

※

The video of the swing was nine seconds long.

It was shot from the third row by a woman from Taiyuan who had kept her phone up because her daughter had told her to film everything. It showed the lift, the swing, the miss, the break, the lead sheets sliding across the boards. By morning it had forty million views.

The comments came in faster than anyone could read them. Xiaoyu read them anyway.

> *@datong_girl: he tried to kill him. you can see it. he aimed.*
> *@li_wei_88: he missed. it was performance art. the lead was the art.*
> *@truth_hunter_88: it was a hoax. the lead was planted. the old man is a paid actor.*
> *@mountain_goat: my grandfather is on one of those sheets. i saw the name. i saw it.*
> *@sophie_in_shanghai: i watched it fifty times. the sound of the air. you can hear the air.*
> *@erhu_student: the lead was in the instrument. that's why the low frequency was wrong. i told you in april.*
> *@north_west_wind: he's a hero.*
> *@laokuang_2: he's a terrorist.*
> *@little_sun: the old man was blind. how could he aim?*
> *@coaldust: he practiced for six months. there are videos of him in the courtyard. he knew exactly where the chairman was sitting.*
> *@wang_laoshi: the city is covering it up.*
> *@datong_chamber: the city is selling it. there is already a tour.*
> *@kang_rui_official: Mr. Gao is a treasure of our city. We will take care of him.*
> *@maling_1989: You took his eyes.*
> *@truth_hunter_88: ok. i saw the forensic photos. the names are real. i was wrong. i'm sorry.*
> *@laoyao_1961: i know what is inside it. i have known since the first sunday. i am not going to tell you. i am going to play.*

The exchange between the company account and Ma Ling was deleted within an hour. Xiaoyu had screenshots. The reversal from **@truth_hunter_88** stayed up. The comment from **@laoyao_1961** stayed up, because no one knew who he was, and because it was the only comment that sounded like the old man.

Xiaoyu knew who he was. Xiao Liu had made him an account in the spring. The handle was his birth year. Xiao Liu typed; the old man dictated. She had never told anyone. She did not tell anyone now.

※

She watched her own film that night, on the laptop, with the sound off and the captions on, while the city shouted outside.

> *[00:00] Aerial shot of the Yungang Grottoes at dawn. The cliff. The caves. The great Buddha.*
> *[00:12] XIAOYU (voiceover): The city was built on coal. For a hundred years, the coal was the city. Then the coal went away. What remains is the stone, and the people who remember.*
> *[00:41] XIAOYU (voiceover): This is a story about a man who remembered too much.*
> *[01:10] GAO: I'm not going to hit anyone.*
> *[01:13] XIAOYU (off camera): Then what are you going to do?*
> *[01:16] GAO: I'm going to play.*
> *[02:14] WANG YULAN: He talked to everyone. That was his problem.*
> *[03:20] MA LING: They told me he talked. He didn't talk. He talked to the newspaper. He talked to the men. He didn't talk to them.*
> *[04:17] DUAN: It means what it means.*
> *[05:30] XIAOYU (voiceover): The report is a document. A document is a thing that can be agreed upon.*
> *[06:20] XIAOYU (voiceover): They talked. We listened. No one heard.*
> *[07:30] The swing. The miss. The break. The lead sheets.*
> *[08:15] A single note. It holds.*
> *[08:30] Black.*

She watched it to the end. Then she closed the laptop. Then she opened it again and watched it to the end again.

※

The city banned the film on the third of October. The statement said it contained "unverified material that could disrupt social order." Xiaoyu read the statement on her phone, in her apartment, with the laptop on the bed. She had already posted the film. The city could ban a film that was already on four million phones. It could not unpost it.

The investigation was fast and then it was slow.

Kang Rui had a stroke at six the next morning. He was in his villa, in the bathroom, when it happened. Zhou found him on the floor. He was taken to the provincial hospital in Taiyuan. He survived. He could not speak. The right side of his body was dead. He could move his left hand. He could blink. He could not write.

The lead book was confiscated as evidence. The forensic team photographed every sheet. There were twelve. Ten names, a date, and a sentence. The names were checked against the mine's records, the city's records, the old safety reports. Seven of the names were men who had been in a reading group at Meiyukou No. 2. Three were men who had died in the 2005 roof fall. One was a man who had disappeared in 2009.

Ma Jun.

The case was reopened. The security office at Meiyukou No. 2 had been dissolved in 2011. Its records had been moved to a warehouse in the industrial zone. The warehouse had burned down in 2014. The fire was ruled accidental. The files that survived were in cardboard boxes with water damage. The signature on the 2009 accident report was Kang Rui's. The signature was not enough.

Duan gave a statement to the police. He said he had informed on the group.

※

Xiaoyu visited Gao on the sixth.

He was in a room on the fourth floor of the provincial hospital, with a window that looked at a courtyard and a tree. He was sitting up in bed. His hands were on the blanket. He looked smaller than he had on the stage. The blanket was too big for him.

"Xiaoyu," he said.

"How did you know?"

"You breathe like a camera."

She laughed. It came out wrong, a wet sound. She sat in the chair beside the bed.

"They took the erhu," she said.

"I know."

"They took the lead. The book. Everything."

"I know."

"Kang Rui had a stroke. He can't speak."

"I heard."

"Ma Jun's name is on the wall."

He was quiet. His hands moved on the blanket. He turned his face toward the window, toward the light he could not see.

"Did you bring your phone?" he said.

"Yes."

"Play me the video."

"Which video?"

"The swing."

She looked at him. He was calm. His face was calm. The scars were white in the light from the window.

"Why?" she said.

"I want to hear the air."

She took out her phone. She found the video. She held the phone between them. She pressed play.

The nine seconds. The lift. The swing. The air. The impact. The break. The lead sheets. The crowd. The silence.

He listened with his head tilted. When it was over, he did not ask her to play it again. He sat for a moment.

"The air," he said. "You can hear the air."

"Yes."

"Good."

"Good?"

"I wanted the air to be in it," he said. "The air is the part that is not the weapon. The air is the part that is the music."

She put the phone down. She did not understand. She put her hand on the bed rail.

"Will you play again?" she said.

"I don't know."

"They took the erhu."

"There are other erhus."

"The new one?"

"The new one is in the back room. Behind the pickles."

She laughed. It came out right this time.

※

She left the hospital at dusk.

The city was outside. The billboards were still up. The festival posters were still on the poles: the Buddha, the moon, the erhu, the words **THE SOUL OF DATONG**. Someone had spray-painted a line across one of them, a line she could not read from the car. Someone had ripped another one down and left the paper on the pavement.

She walked past the billboards. She did not film them. She did not take out her phone. She walked to the car and got in and sat in the driver's seat with her hands on the wheel.

The city hummed. The wall was lit up. The old man was in the hospital with his hands on the blanket and the light on his face.

She started the car. She drove home. She did not post anything.

CHAPTER 24

The Memorial

20 October — 0 g

The interview was in a teahouse near the hospital, two days before the wall was rededicated.

The reporter was from Beijing. She was thirty, with a good coat and a recorder and a way of leaning forward that made Ma Ling feel like a specimen. She had read the notebook. She had seen the photograph. She had come to Taiyuan on the train.

"Tell me about your father," she said.

"He was a safety inspector," Ma Ling said. "He talked."

"Talked to whom?"

"To the men. To the newspaper. To me."

"Not to the company."

"No."

"The rumor was that he informed."

"The rumor was spread by the company."

"Do you have proof?"

"I have his notebook. I have the date of the report. I have the report itself."

"The report is a carbon copy."

"It is."

The reporter looked at her recorder. It turned. The teahouse was quiet. A man at the next table was reading a newspaper.

"What do you want?" the reporter said.

"I want his name on the wall."

"That's not a story."

"It's the only story I have."

The reporter wrote something. She asked about Gao. She asked about the erhu. She asked about the lead. Ma Ling told her. She showed her the photograph. The reporter looked at it for a long time.

"Can I use this?" she said.

"Yes."

"Can I use your name?"

"Yes."

"Are you afraid?"

Ma Ling thought about Xiaobao. She thought about his shoes by the door, the school, the bus. She thought about the watch on her wrist.

"Yes," she said.

The reporter turned off the recorder. She said, "I'll write it. I don't know if they'll run it. It's not the kind of story they run."

"Then put it somewhere else."

"I'll try."

She put the recorder in her bag. She stood. She said, "Your father sounds like a good man."

"He was a man who talked," Ma Ling said.

"Same thing," the reporter said.

She left.

※

The wall was black stone, polished, with the names in columns.

Ma Ling stood in front of it with her hands in her coat pockets. The wind came across the plaza and made her eyes water. The visitors' center was open behind her. A school group was going through it, a teacher with a flag, a line of children in red scarves.

She found the 2005 cluster first. Liu Guoqiang. Zhang Heping. Luo Cheng. She touched Luo Cheng's name. It was cold. She had touched it before.

Then she walked to the end of the row.

Ma Jun.

The name was small. The same size as the others. It was cut into the black stone at the end of the row, after the men who had died in the roof fall, after the

men who had died in the flood, after the men who had died in the gas. The last name on the wall, and it looked like an afterthought.

She put her fingers on it. She read it the way Gao had taught her, with the pads of her fingers, the way a blind man reads a face.

"Ma Jun," she said.

The wind took the words. The school group went past. A child said, "Look, a wall." The teacher said, "It's a memorial."

※

Duan was standing at the edge of the plaza.

He was in his security uniform. He had his hands in his pockets. He looked older than he had in August. He had lost weight. His jacket hung on him.

"Ma Ling," he said.

"Uncle Duan."

"I didn't know you were coming."

"I didn't know either."

They stood there. The school group went into the visitors' center. The wind moved the flag.

"I gave a statement," he said. "They didn't prosecute me. The statute of limitations. The evidence. The company."

"I heard."

He looked at the wall. He looked at Ma Jun's name. He looked at her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I know."

"That's not enough."

"No."

"What can I do?"

"Nothing."

He nodded. He looked at the wall again. Then he turned and walked across the plaza, past the visitors' center, past the school group, toward the gate. His shoes made a sound on the concrete. The sound got smaller and then it was gone.

※

Kang Rui was in a private room on the sixth floor of the provincial hospital.

The room had a window and a vase of flowers and a television that was off. He was in a wheelchair by the window. He was wearing a gray sweater and a blanket over his knees. His left hand was on the arm of the chair. His right hand was in his lap, curled. His face was slack on one side. His eyes were open.

Zhou was in the corridor. He did not stop her. He looked at her, and then at the door, and then at the floor.

She went in.

Kang looked at her. His eyes moved. He knew her. She did not know how. His left hand moved on the arm of the chair.

There was a pad of paper on the table beside him and a pen. He reached for it with his left hand. The hand shook. He picked up the pen. He put it to the paper. He made a line. He made another line. The pen slipped. He tried again. The lines did not make a letter. They did not make anything.

He looked at her. His mouth moved. A sound came out, a sound without words, a sound like a man trying to clear his throat and failing.

She took her father's watch off her wrist.

It was a plain watch, steel, with a leather strap that had been replaced twice. Her mother had given it to him on their tenth anniversary. He had worn it every day. It had stopped in 2009, when he disappeared, and she had had it repaired in 2012, and it had run ever since.

She put it on the table beside the pad.

"I don't want it," she said. "I want you to have it."

He looked at the watch. He looked at her. His mouth moved.

She left.

In the corridor, Zhou said, "Miss Ma."

She did not stop.

※

Gao was in a small room in a rehabilitation center in the hills, with a courtyard and a tree and a chair by the window.

The center was for old people with strokes and old people with broken hips and old people with no family. The city paid for his room. The city paid for his meals. The city paid for the new erhu, a cheap one, light, with a soundbox painted red. He had not asked for any of it. He had not refused it.

He was sitting in the courtyard when she came. He had the erhu on his knees. He was not playing. He was holding it the way a man holds a hat.

"Ma Ling," he said.

"How did you know?"

"You walk like your father. You take the steps too fast."

She sat in the chair beside him. The courtyard had a tree with yellow leaves. The leaves made a sound in the wind.

"They put his name on the wall," she said.

"I heard."

"It's at the end."

"That's where they put the ones who don't fit."

"They didn't apologize."

"They never apologize. They add a name. That's their apology."

She looked at the erhu. It was light. It was cheap. It had no lead in it.

"How are you?" she said.

"I'm lighter."

"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes. The shoulder. The doctors say I should not lift things."

"Do you listen?"

"No."

She laughed. It came out tired.

He reached into his pocket. He took out a piece of gray metal, folded twice. He put it in her hand.

It was a sheet of lead. It was thin. It was cold. It had writing on it: a name, scratched with a nail.

Ma Jun.

"It's yours," he said.

She held it. It was heavier than it looked. She put her thumb on the name and read it, the way he had taught her, the way she had read the wall.

"Thank you," she said.

"He was my zhiyin," Gao said. "He heard me."

"Did you hear him?"

"Yes."

She put the lead in her coat pocket. It was cold against her side. She sat with him for a while. The leaves made their sound. The erhu sat on his knees.

※

She drove back to Taiyuan with Xiaobao in the back seat.

He was five. He had a plastic dinosaur in his hand and a question in his mouth. He had been asking questions all the way from the rehabilitation center: why the trees were yellow, why the road was bumpy, why the old man had no eyes.

"Ma," he said.

"Yes."

"Who was your father?"

She looked at him in the rearview mirror. He had her father's chin. He had her mother's eyes. He was five, and the world was still made of simple categories.

"He was a man who talked," she said.

"What did he say?"

"He said the truth."

"Did anyone listen?"

She thought about the wall. She thought about the lead sheet in her pocket. She thought about Gao in the courtyard with the cheap erhu on his knees.

"Yes," she said.

She was not sure it was true. She said it anyway.

INTERLUDE 4

The Letter

Found in the back cover of Ma Jun's notebook. Dated 2 March 2009. Postmarked Beijing, 14 April 2009. Read aloud by Luo Xiaoyu at the rehabilitation center, 21 October.

※

Gao,

I am on the bus. It is dark. The man in front of me is eating sunflower seeds and spitting the shells on the floor. The driver is playing a tape of Shanxi opera. The woman behind me is asleep with her mouth open. It smells of oranges and diesel and wet wool. I am writing this on my knee. The handwriting is bad. You will have to read it with your thumb.

I know you are at the wedding. I know you are playing "The Great Happiness" for the deputy manager's daughter. I know it is three hundred yuan. I am not angry. I want you to know that. I am not angry.

I asked you to come because I was afraid. That is the truth. I am afraid. I have been afraid since the journalist's article died. I have been afraid since the car on the road. I have been afraid since 2005, when the roof came down and the company said it was a natural geological event. I am afraid now, on the bus, with the sunflower seeds and the opera and the woman with her mouth open.

You are not afraid. That is why I asked you. You are the bravest man I know, and you are also the most stubborn, and you are also the only person who listens to me without trying to fix me. That is a rare

thing. Most people listen and then they start talking. You listen and then you play. That is better.

The notebook is in the kiln. Under the loose brick. The third one from the door. If I don't come back, take it to Wang Yulan. She will know what to do. She is smarter than both of us.

If I don't come back, don't let them say I talked. You know what I mean. They will say I talked to them. They will say I gave them names. They will say it to break the group, and to make my daughter ashamed, and to make my wife's life easier to ignore. Don't let them. Tell Ling. Tell her I talked to the newspaper. Tell her I talked to the men. Tell her I did not talk to them.

I am sorry I am leaving this to you. You have your own life. You have your music. You have your mother's wish. I am sorry I am the kind of man who makes other people carry things.

You are my zhiyin. I know you don't like the word. You say it is a word for old poems. But it is the only word I have. It means the one who knows the sound. You know the sound. You have always known the sound. When I talk, you hear what I mean. When I am quiet, you hear what I don't say. That is not nothing. That is the whole thing.

Play the song. Play it wrong. Play it the way I sing it. Play it for the ones who are still here.

If I come back, I will buy you a bottle of baijiu and we will sit in the kiln and you will play and I will sing it wrong and Wang Yulan will tell us to stop.

If I don't come back, don't wait for me. Keep playing. The city will try to make you a statue. Don't let them. A statue cannot play.

— Jun

※

Xiaoyu read it aloud in the courtyard of the rehabilitation center.

It was October. The leaves were yellow. Gao was in the chair with the cheap erhu on his knees. Xiaoyu sat on the bench beside him with the notebook open on her lap. The letter was folded into the back cover, between the cardboard and the cloth. She had found it when she was packing his things.

She read it slowly. She stumbled on the handwriting. She had to stop twice.

When she finished, Gao was quiet for a long time. The leaves made their sound.

"He always wrote like he talked," he said. "Too much."

"He was afraid," Xiaoyu said.

"He was brave."

"He said he was afraid."

"That's what brave means." He put his hand on the erhu. "He was afraid and he went anyway. I was not afraid and I stayed. That is the difference between us."

"You were afraid."

"I was afraid of losing the gig."

"That's not the same thing."

"No," he said. "It's not."

She folded the letter. She put it back in the notebook. She put the notebook on the bench between them.

"Can I ask you something?" she said.

"Yes."

"Did you love him?"

Gao was quiet. The leaves moved. The erhu sat on his knees.

"He was my friend," he said.

"That's not what I asked."

"I know."

He turned his face toward the tree. The light came through the leaves and made a pattern on his face.

"When my mother died," he said, "he sat with me for three days. He did not talk. He did not bring food. He sat. On the third day, he said, 'Play.' I said, 'I can't.' He said, 'Play badly.' I played badly. He listened. That was the whole thing. He listened."

"That's love," Xiaoyu said.

"That's friendship."

"Same thing."

He laughed. It was a small laugh, a dry laugh, the laugh of a man who had been carrying something for a long time and had just put it down.

"Same thing," he said.

※

She left him at dusk.

She walked to the gate of the rehabilitation center. The city was below, a long orange smear on the dark. The wall was lit up. The festival posters were gone. The bench at the grottoes was empty.

She took out her phone. She had not posted anything in three weeks. She opened the app. She looked at the drafts folder. The documentary was there. The post was there. **I have something to show you. It is not the video you are expecting.**

She looked at the cursor. It blinked.

She put the phone in her pocket.

She drove home. The road was dark. The coal trucks were fewer. The city hummed. The old man was in the rehabilitation center with the cheap erhu on his knees and the letter in the notebook and the leaves coming down.

She did not post anything. She did not film anything. She drove.

CHAPTER 25

The Sound

The Next Spring — 0 g

The spring came late that year.

The cliff was warm by ten. The sun came over the ridge and moved down the stone, and the stone gave the heat back slowly, the way old stone does. The swifts came back. They went into the niches and made their small dry sounds. The coal road was quieter. The trucks were fewer. The heritage park was open, and the visitors' center had a coffee machine, and the wall was still black and polished and full of names.

The bench was still there. The plaque was gone. Someone had unscrewed it, or the city had taken it away, or it had fallen off in the wind. There was a small rectangle of lighter concrete where it had been.

I sat on the bench. I had a new erhu. It was cheap and light and the soundbox was painted red. It had no lead in it. It had no names in it. It was a piece of wood with two strings and a python skin, and it weighed almost nothing.

Yanyan came at eleven with her schoolbag and her glasses and a runny nose. She was thirteen now. She was taller. She had a new coat. She still had perfect pitch.

"Grandpa Gao," she said.

"Yanyan."

"I learned the song."

"Which song?"

"Seven Lamps." 七盏灯 (Qī Zhǎn Dēng, "Seven Lamps"). "I learned it from the video. The one from the festival. I listened to it a hundred times. I wrote down the notes. I think I have it."

"Play it."

She sat on the bench beside me. She put the erhu on her knee. She checked the qianjin, the way I had taught her. She tuned the strings. She drew the bow.

She played "Seven Lamps."

It was bad. It was enthusiastic. She got the bow tangled in the strings once. She played the fast part too fast and the slow part too fast. She forgot the fourth verse and made it up. She finished with a flourish that was not in the song and looked at me.

"Well?" she said.

"Your elbow," I said.

"What about my elbow?"

"Your elbow is doing the work. It should be your wrist."

"You said the elbow last week."

"I said the elbow for the long bow. This is the short bow. The short bow is the wrist."

"That's not what you said."

"It's what I meant."

She made a sound with her mouth, the sound she had made when she was twelve, the sound that meant she did not believe me but was willing to continue. She played it again. It was still bad. It was a little better. The bow caught the string and the note came out clean, and she smiled, and the smile was the best thing I had heard all week.

※

The tourists came at noon.

They came off the bus in a cloud of sunscreen and phone light. They stopped at the gate and took photographs of the gate. They took photographs of the wall. They took photographs of each other in front of the wall. The wall was new. The wall was seven hundred years old. Both of these things were true.

A woman in a red jacket came over. She had a phone in her hand and a child on her hip. She said, "Are you the one from the video?"

"Which video?"

"The one with the rain. The one with the swing."

"I'm the one from the bench."

She laughed. She did not know what else to do. She took a photograph of me and Yanyan. Yanyan made a face. The woman said, "Thank you," and went back to the bus.

A man in a blue jacket came over. He was older. He had a walking stick and a bad knee. He stood in front of the bench and looked at me for a long time.

"I knew your friend," he said.

"Which friend?"

"Ma Jun. I was at the mine. I was in the reading group for a while. Before."

"What's your name?"

"Li Xiaobo."

I stood up. I put out my hand. He took it. His hand was dry and hard. He had been a young man in the kiln, the youngest, the one who asked if they could be arrested. He was forty-three now. He drove a taxi in Taiyuan. He had a wife and a son. He had come to the grottoes on a Sunday because he had heard about the festival, and because he had heard about the swing, and because he had not been able to sleep.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?"

"For not coming back. For not writing. For leaving."

"Everyone left," I said. "I stayed."

"That's not better."

"No," I said. "It's not."

He sat with us for a while. Yanyan played "Seven Lamps" again. He listened. When she finished, he said, "That's not how Ma Jun sang it."

"How did he sing it?"

"Wrong," he said. "He sang it wrong. On purpose."

Yanyan laughed. Li Xiaobo laughed. I laughed. The three of us sat on the bench and laughed at a song that a dead man had sung wrong on purpose in a brick kiln twenty years ago.

※

In the afternoon, the light changed. The cliff turned the color of weak tea. The swifts went quiet. The tourists went back to the bus. The bus pulled away. The ticket scanner said please, please, please, and then it was gone.

Yanyan packed up her erhu. She put it in her case. She put the case on her back. She stood in front of me.

"Grandpa Gao," she said.

"Yes."

"Are you going to play at the festival this year?"

"There is no festival this year."

"There will be. They're already planning it. The new chairman. He wants to call it 'The Sound of Datong.'"

I laughed. The city always found a new name.

"Are you going to play?" she said.

"I don't know."

"You should."

"Why?"

"Because you're good," she said. "And because the stone likes it."

I did not know what to say. She was thirteen. She had perfect pitch. She could see shapes and light. She had heard the song a hundred times on a video and had written down the notes. She was the future, and the future was standing in front of me with a schoolbag and a runny nose and a case on her back.

"Go home," I said. "Practice your elbow."

"It's my wrist."

"It's your elbow."

She laughed. She walked to the gate. She did not stop. She went straight through, the way a girl walks when she has homework and a mother and a whole life in front of her.

※

I sat on the bench. The cliff was warm. The wind came over the top and went into the cave and came out through the Buddha's chest. The stone was doing what stone does: it was holding the heat of the day and letting it go slowly.

I took out the new erhu. It was light. I put it on my knee. I checked the qianjin. I tuned the strings. I drew the bow.

I played "Seven Lamps."

The song came out of the cheap instrument and into the cliff and came back changed. It was not the song from the festival. It was not the song from the kiln. It was a lighter song, a song with air in it, a song that had been carried up a hill and put down.

The seven lamps went out one by one. The last lamp was mine. I held the note until the bow ran out of hair.

The stone listened.

I put the erhu down. The cliff was warm. The swifts were quiet. The bus was gone.

I thought about Ma Jun. I thought about the kiln, and the tea, and the song sung wrong on purpose. I thought about the bus station, and the rain, and the red taillights going down the road. I thought about the lead, and the names, and the book with strings. I thought about the hand's width.

I did not think about the miss. The miss was not the thing. The miss was never the thing.

The thing was the sound. The sound was the only thing that had ever been mine. The sound was the room behind the note. The sound was the stone. The sound was the seven, and the three, and the one. The sound was the thin string, holding.

I sat on the bench. The sun moved. The cliff gave its heat back slowly. The mountain was under the wall, under the road, under my feet.

I played again.

Colophon

风萧萧兮易水寒，壮士一去兮不复还。

Feng xiao xiao xi Yi shui han; zhuang shi yi qu xi bu fu huan.

The wind sighs cold over the Yi River; the hero goes and does not return. — the farewell song of Jing Ke, sung while Gao Jianli played the zhu · 史记 · 刺客列传 — the book answers it with seven lamps, and with the lead taken out

Gao Jianli played the zhu for the First Emperor who had blinded him because he loved the music and could not trust the man who made it. One day he hid lead inside the instrument, and when he was close enough he struck at the emperor with it. He missed. He was blind. He was executed. Sima Qian keeps the miss; this novel keeps the before — the moment when the emperor was still listening, the musician still playing, and the lead still hidden, and the whole thing was still music. Its Gao Yusheng, blinded by a battery accident at the Meiyukou No. 2 mine, plays at the east gate of the Yungang Grottoes while a coal city reinvents itself as a cultural destination, and pours lead into his own instrument — one plate for each name of the dead, engraved and read by thumb. The weight grows from nothing to 1,360 grams, chapter by chapter, and comes back to nothing, which is not the same as light.

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 SOUND · 29 sections · 49,967 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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