LU XUN

Diary of a Madman
and Other Stories

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Kong Yiji

The layout of wineshops in Lu Town is different from that in other places.

You usually have a large counter in the shape of a carpenter’s square facing on the street. Behind the counter, hot water is always on the ready so that wine can be warmed at a moment’s notice. When working people get off at lunch or supper, they’ll head off to such places and lay down four coppers for a bowl of wine. (I’m talking about the way it was twenty-odd years ago; by now it’s probably gone up to ten.) Leaning against the counter, they’ll sip the hot wine and relax.

If a man’s willing to part with another copper, he can even buy something to down the wine with—perhaps a saucer of bamboo shoots, or maybe some fennel-flavored beans. If he’s got enough to lay down a dozen coppers or so, he can even get a meat dish. But most of the patrons at such places belong to the short-jacket crowd and aren’t as rich as all that. It’s only members of the long-gown crowd, the gentry, who can afford to saunter into the room next to the bar, order a main course, some wine to go with it, and then sit down and linger over their cups.

When I was twelve, I got a job as a waiter in the Prosperity for All over on the edge of town. The boss said I was too young and stupid-looking to wait on the long-gown crowd in the side room, but he could use me to help out behind the bar. Now the short-jacket crowd was easy to deal with, but even so there were quite a few of them who would run off at the mouth and stir up trouble there was no call for, just because they couldn’t keep things straight in their own heads when they ordered.

So I’d ladle the yellow wine out from the big earthenware crock and into a pot, and they’d watch like hawks to make sure I didn’t slip any water in. They never felt at ease until they’d seen the pot safely placed in the hot water. Under supervision like that, cutting the wine wasn’t easy. And so it wasn’t long before the boss decided I wasn’t cut out for that job either. Luckily the person who’d got-

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ten me the job had a lot of prestige, so the boss couldn’t just up
and fire me even if he’d wanted to. And so he made me into a spe-
cialist. From then on I would tend to nothing but the boring busi-
ness of warming the wine.

From one end of the day to the other there I’d be, standing
behind the bar. Though I performed my assigned task to the best
of my ability, it was downright monotonous. And what with the
stern face of the boss and the unfriendliness of the customers, I
was never able to loosen up. The only time I could relax a bit, and
even have a laugh or two, was when Kong Yiji came around. And
that’s why I still remember him even now.

Kong Yiji was the only customer in a long gown who drank his
wine standing up. A big tall fellow with a scraggly grey beard, he
had a face that was pale and wrinkled. And every so often,
sandwiched in between those wrinkles, you’d see a scar or two.
Kong wore a long gown just like the gentry, but it was so raggedy
and dirty you’d swear it hadn’t been patched or washed in at least
ten years. When he talked, he always larded whatever he had to
say with lo, forsooth, verily, nay and came out with a whole string
of such phrases, things that you could half make out, and half
couldn’t.1 Because his family name was Kong, people nicknamed
him Yiji. They got the idea from the first six words of a copybook
that was used in teaching children how to write characters: ABOVE
—GREAT—MAN—KONG—YI—JI, a string of words whose meaning
you could half make out, and half couldn’t.2

One day he came to the wineshop and all the regulars, as usual,
started to eyeball him and laugh. Somebody yelled, “Hey there,
Kong Yiji, you’ve put a few new scars on that old face of yours!”

Without responding, Kong looked straight toward the bar and
said: “Warm two bowls of wine and let me have a saucer of fennel
beans.” He set out nine coppers all in a row.

Someone else kept the fun going by shouting, “You must have
been caught stealin’ again!”

Kong Yiji opened his eyes wide in indignation and replied,

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1. Primarily a written language, classical Chinese is not easily intelligible when spoken.
   Identifying himself with the scholar-gentry class that ruled China under the imperial sys-
   tem, Kong uses the bookish language of the classics in his everyday speech.

2. Copybooks were essentially lists of characters to be learned. Some of the words
   formed phrases, some didn’t. The characters were outlined in red, and students would fill
   them in with their brushes.
“How dare you, without a shred of evidence, besmirch a man’s good name and even—”

“What good name? Wasn’t it the day before yesterday I saw you trussed up and beaten with my own eyes?”

Kong’s face flushed red and the veins stood out on his temples as he began to defend himself. “The purloining of volumes, good sir, cannot be counted as theft. The purloining of volumes is, after all, something that falls well within the purview of the scholarly life. How can it be considered mere theft?” Tacked onto that was a whole string of words that were difficult to understand, things like *The gentleman doth stand firm in his poverty,*¹ and verily this and forsooth that. Everyone roared with laughter. The space within the shop and the space surrounding the shop swelled with joy.

From what I heard folks say when he wasn’t around, it seemed that Kong really had studied the classics, but somehow or other had never managed to pass the civil service exams. Since he didn’t know how to do anything else, he got poorer and poorer as the years rolled by. It finally came to the point where begging seemed the only out, but fortunately he could write a good hand and was able to keep his ricebowl full by copying books. The only trouble with that was that while he wasn’t overly fond of work, he did like to drink. And so it wouldn’t be too long before books, paper, writing brushes, and inkstone would all disappear—right along with the copyist.

After he’d pulled that a couple of times, nobody would hire him anymore. At that point, of course, Kong Yiji was really at the end of his rope and couldn’t help but turn his hand to a little theft now and then. At our wineshop, though, he was a model customer, for he never let his tab pile up. To be sure, once in a while when he didn’t have any ready cash, we’d have to put his name on the chalkboard, but he’d always pay us back before a month was out, and we’d erase it again.

After half a bowl of wine, the indignant red left Kong’s face and his expression gradually returned to normal. But then someone else started in: “Kong Yiji, do you really know how to read and write?” Kong glanced sidewise at his interrogator with the disdainful air of one who is above getting into such a petty squabble. But the man so much

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¹. Quoted from *The Analects of Confucius* 15.1.3.
the man persisted. “How come you haven’t managed to scrape up so much as half a Budding Talent?”

There was an immediate change in Kong’s expression. Now he looked totally crestfallen and his face was shrouded in grey. He kept on talking—more or less to himself—but every last bit of what he said was of the lo-forsooth-verily-nay variety that nobody could understand. At that point everyone roared with laughter, and the space within the shop and the space surrounding the shop swelled with joy.

At times like this, even I could join in the laughter without having the boss get after me. Besides, the boss himself would often pull Kong’s leg just to get his customers into a good mood. Before too long, Kong Yiji would realize that it was impossible to carry on a conversation with the other patrons, and would be forced to turn to a mere lad like myself for companionship.

I remember one day he asked me, “Have you had any schooling?” I gave him something like a nod and then he said, “Since you’ve had some schooling, let me give you a little test. How do you write the character for ‘fennel’ in ‘fennel-flavored beans’?”

“How does somebody who’s not much more than a beggar have the right to test me?” I thought to myself and turned away, ignoring him as best I could.

Kong Yiji waited for a long time and then continued in earnest tones, “Don’t know, do you? Well, I’ll teach you. Remember it now, because later on when you’re the manager, you’ll have to write such characters on the checks.”

It seemed to me I was a long way from ever becoming manager. Besides, my boss never wrote “fennel-flavored beans” on the checks anyway. I was amused, but running out of patience too. I answered in an offhand way meant to show that I didn’t really care one way or the other. “Who needs you to teach me? Isn’t it a grass radical on top with the character ‘back,’ like in the phrase ‘back and forth,’ on the bottom?”

Tapping two long fingernails against the counter and beaming with approval, Kong nodded and said, “Right, right! But there are four different ways of writing the bottom part. Do you know what

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4. In ascending order the three civil service degrees were Budding Talent, Selectman, and Advanced Scholar.
they are?” Now I was really out of patience. I curled my lips in contempt and walked away. Kong Yiji had dipped his fingernails in the wine as he prepared to write all four of the different ways on the counter right then and there. But seeing that I wasn’t the least bit interested, he let out another sigh and began to look depressed again.5

There were a couple of times when, hearing all the laughter, the neighborhood children came over and gathered round old Kong to get in on the fun. He’d give them some of his beans, one to a child. But when they were finished with what he’d given them, they would continue to stand around, eyes glued to the ones he still had left. Old Kong would become very flustered, stretch his fingers defensively over the saucer, bend down, and tell them, “I don’t have too many left.” Then he’d straighten up, wag his head from side to side as though intoning the classics and say: “Few be my beans. Hath the gentleman many? Nay, he hath hardly any.” At this point the children would scatter in gales of laughter.

Old Kong was a delight to have around, but when he wasn’t there, we managed to get along just as well without him too.

One day, it must have been two or three days before the Mid-Autumn Festival, when the manager was making a leisurely check of his accounts, he took down the chalkboard and said with a start, “Kong Yiji’s not been by in a long, long while—still owes us nineteen coppers, too!” Until he said that, I hadn’t realized how long it had been since I had seen him.

One of the customers at the counter said, “How could he come? He’s gone and gotten his legs broken.”

“Huh?” said the manager.

“He was stealin’ as usual. But this time he really slipped his leash. Went and stole from Ding the Selectman’s house. Now how are you gonna get away with stealin’ a Selectman’s stuff?”

“What happened then?”

“What happened? Well, first off, he wrote a confession. Then came the...” and then t...”

“...And th...”

“...And th...”

“...Yeah, l...”

“What’s the ma...”

The manager continued, “After all, it’s an art.”

Winter had just started, and even I was sitting by the fire, it was so cold. Then, all of a sudden, I realized that the threshold of the store must have been cross fastened b...”

Second time the manager interrupted: “...second time the ma...”

You, Kong Lookin’ or not, I pay you if you’re good to me. As though he had smiled at me, the manager went on: “This time he said, “Dor...”

“...Make your legs...”

“...It was the manager! I gathered round and...”

I hea...
came the beatin’. They let him have it for a good part of the night and then they went and busted his legs on top of that.”

“And then?”

“And then they went and busted his legs like I just said.”

“Yeah, but what’d he do after he got his legs broke?”

“What’d he do? Who knows? Maybe he died.”

The manager didn’t ask any more questions, but went back to his accounts.

After the Mid-Autumn Festival the wind grew colder by the day.

Winter was near at hand. I stuck as close to the fire as I could, but even then I still needed to wear my padded jacket.

One afternoon when there wasn’t a single customer in the shop, I was sitting behind the counter with my eyes closed when suddenly I heard, “Warm a bowl of wine.” Although the voice was faint, it sounded quite familiar. But when I opened my eyes to look, there was no one there. I stood up and peered out over the counter. There, sitting at the bottom of the counter opposite the threshold, was Kong Yiji, his face so dark and worn I hardly recognized him. He was wearing a raggedy old jacket and his legs were crossed under him. Beneath his legs was a grass mat that was fastened by ropes to his shoulders. Catching sight of me, he said a second time, “Warm a bowl of wine.”

The manager stuck his head out over the counter too. “Is that you, Kong Yiji? You still owe us nineteen coppers!”

Looking up in despair, Kong replied, “This time . . . why don’t I pay you back next time? This time I’ve got ready cash. Make sure it’s good wine.”

As though nothing very unusual had happened, the manager smiled at Kong the way he always did and said, “So, Kong Yiji, you got caught stealin’ again?”

This time Kong didn’t try to put up any defense, but simply said, “Don’t make fun of people!”

“Make fun of people? If you hadn’t been stealin’, how would your legs’ve gotten broke?”

“It was a fall . . . a fall . . .” The look in his eyes was a plea for the manager to drop the whole thing. By now several people had gathered round, and they all joined together with the manager in a good laugh.

I heated the wine and served it to him there by the door. He
fished around inside his gown until he'd found four coppers. As he handed them to me, I noticed his palm was caked with mud. So he'd dragged himself there on his hands! Before long, he had finished his wine and then, amid the talk and laughter of the other customers, he laboriously hauled himself away on those same muddy hands.

Another long stretch of time passed without my seeing Kong Yiji. At the end of the year, the manager took down the chalkboard and said, "Kong Yiji still owes us nineteen coppers!" Around the Dragonboat Festival of the next year, the manager noticed yet another time: "Kong Yiji still owes us nineteen coppers!" But by the Mid-Autumn Festival of that year the manager said nothing. The New Year soon rolled around, but there was still no sign of Kong Yiji.

I never saw him again—guess he really did die.

MARCH 1919

7. The Dragonboat Festival (the fifteenth of the fourth month, according to the lunar calendar) and the Mid-Autumn Festival (the fifteenth of the eighth month) were traditionally times for settling accounts, in addition to the lunar New Year.
New Year's Sacrifice

When you come right down to it, the wind-up of the old Lunar Year was what the end of a year really should be. To say nothing of the hubbub in the towns and villages, the very sky itself proclaimed the imminent arrival of the New Year as flashes of light appeared now and then among the grey and heavy clouds of evening, followed by the muffled sound of distant explosions—pyrotechnic farewells to the Kitchen God.¹ The crisper cracks of fireworks being set off close at hand were much louder, and before your ears had stopped ringing, the faint fragrance of gunpowder would permeate the air. It was on just such an evening that I returned to Lu Town. I still called it home even though my immediate family was no longer there, a circumstance that forced me to put up at Fourth Old Master Lu’s place. Since he is my clansman and a generation above me, I really ought to call him “Fourth Uncle.”

An old Imperial Collegian and follower of Neo-Confucianism,² he seemed little changed, only a bit older than before, though he still had not grown a beard as one might have expected. Upon seeing me, he recited the usual social commonplaces: commonplaces concluded, he observed that I had put on weight; that observation having been made, he began to denounce the new party. I knew, however, that this was by no means intended as an indirect attack

¹ Toward the end of the twelfth lunar month, the kitchen god of each household, King Stove (Zao Wang), ascended to heaven and reported the doings of the family to the Jade Emperor. A paper image of the god was burned (the ascension) and he was given a royal firecracker farewell to ensure that he would have nothing but good news to report about the family.

² “Imperial Collegian” (jiānsèng) might refer to someone actually placed in the Imperial College (guxizì) at Beijing, or to someone, like Fourth Uncle, who had been proclaimed “qualified” to be there. The title could either be earned through examination or bought. Neo-Confucianism is the school of Confucianism, somewhat puritanical and heavily influenced by Buddhist metaphysics, which dominated scholar-official circles in China from 1313 onward, the year when it was declared the orthodox ideology for interpretation of the classics in the civil service examinations. Its authority went virtually unchallenged until 1905, when the examination system was officially abolished.
on me, for by "new" he had meant the reformers of twenty years back, people like Kang Youwei. Even so, as we continued to chat, my words and his never seemed to jibe and before long I found myself alone in his study.

I got up quite late the next day, and after taking lunch, went out to visit some relatives and friends. I spent the third day in exactly the same way. They did not seem much changed either—a bit older, that was all. In every household people were busily preparing for the ceremony known as the "New Year's Sacrifice." In Lung Town this was the most important of all the ceremonies conducted at the end of the year. With great reverence and punctilious observance of ritual detail, people would prepare to receive and welcome the gods of good fortune, and to ask them for prosperity during the coming year.

Chickens and geese would be killed; pork bought; and the meats washed with a diligence and care that left the arms of the women red from the soaking. Some women kept on their locally made bracelets—braided strands of silver—even as they washed. On the last day of the year, once the meats were cooked, chopsticks would be thrust at random into the various dishes prepared from them. This was the "ritual offering" which would bring down bountiful blessings during the new year. At the Fifth Watch, just before dawn on New Year's Day, the various dishes would be set out, candles lit, incense burned, and the gods of good fortune respectfully invited to descend and enjoy the feast. The actual execution of the ceremony was exclusively the province of men.

Once the ceremony was completed, then of course still more firecrackers would be set off. Year by year, family by family, so long as people could afford the expenditure, the ritual had always been performed in this manner. And this year, of course, was no exception.

The sky grew ever darker. By afternoon it had actually begun to snow. From horizon to horizon, blending together with the soft mists and general atmosphere of urgent activity, snowflakes as

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3. Kang Youwei (1858–1927) was among those reformers at the turn of the century who sought to modernize China while retaining the imperial government. At the time this story is set (somewhere between 1919 and 1924), people of the narrator's age and educational background would have considered Kang Youwei outdated and reactionary.

4. Zhu Fu, the ceremony described in this story, was unique to the area around Lu Xun's native Shaoxing.
large as plum blossoms danced through the air, catching Lu Town off balance and throwing it into a state of hopeless disarray.

By the time I got back to Fourth Uncle's study, the roof tiles were white and the study so brightened by the reflected light of snow that the red ink-rubbing hanging on the wall stood out with unusual crispness. The rubbing consisted of the single character meaning "long life" and had been written by Venerable Founder Chen Tuan. There had been a pair of scrolls flanking it, but one of these had fallen off the wall and now lay loosely rolled up on the long table under the rubbing. Its mate still hung on the wall and read: Having completely penetrated the principle of things, the mind becomes serene. Aimlessly I went over and rummaged through the pile of old-fashioned stitched books on the desk by the window: an incomplete set of the Kang Xi Dictionary, a copy of Collected Commentaries to "Reflections on Things at Hand," and a copy of A Lining to the Garment of the "Four Books." Then and there I decided to leave the next day. Furthermore, when I thought about how I had run into Sister Xianglin on the street the day before, I realized it would have simply been impossible for me to remain in Lu Town with any peace of mind.

It had happened in the afternoon, immediately after I had paid a visit to a friend of mine on the east side of town. Leaving my friend's place, I caught sight of Sister Xianglin down by the riverbank. Her eyes were intense and focused on me. I could tell she wanted to have a word.

Among the people I had run into on this visit, I can safely say that no one had changed as much as she: the grey hair of five years back was now entirely white. No one would have taken her for the

5. A historical figure of the Five Dynasties period (907–9) who lived as a mountain recluse and, according to the tradition, became a Daoist Immortal.

6. An important Neo-Confucian concept divided the universe into form, or principle (li), and substance (qi). Contemplation of "forms" led to serenity (the influence of Buddhist meditation is apparent) and would eventually result in enlightenment. The narrator, we should remember, views these ideas as outmoded claptrap.

7. The dictionary was compiled under the reign of the Kang Xi emperor (1661–1722), hence its name. Reflections on Things at Hand (Jinsi lu) is a collection of writings by four Neo-Confucians of the Northern Song (960–1126); it has been translated into English by Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967). A Lining to the Garment of the "Four Books" is a Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) commentary on the Four Books of Neo-Confucianism: The Analects of Confucius, The Mencius, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean.

8. "Sister" (sao) is a polite term of address for married women.
woman of forty or so that she was. Her face was sallow with dark circles around the eyes, and what was more, even the expression of sadness that she used to wear had now disappeared altogether. Her face seemed to be carved of wood. Only an occasional eye movement hinted that she was still an animate creature. In one hand she carried an empty bamboo basket; a broken bowl lay inside it—empty. With the other hand she supported herself on a bamboo pole that was taller than she and had started to split at the bottom. It was obvious that she had become a beggar, pure and simple. I stood still, waiting for her to accost me and ask for money.

“So, you’ve come back,” she began.

“Yes.”

“Just the man I’ve been lookin’ for. You know how to read books. You’ve been out there in the world and must’ve seen a thing or two. Now tell me . . .” A bright light suddenly glowed in her heretofore lifeless eyes. Never imagining that she would begin by saying this sort of thing, I just stood there in astonishment.

“Tell me . . .” She came a few steps closer, lowered her voice as though sharing a secret, and continued in tones of great urgency: “Is there really a soul after a body dies?”

I was aghast at the question. When I saw how her eyes were riveted upon me, I became so fidgety you would have thought that someone had thrown a handful of thorns down the back of my gown. I was even more on edge than when, back during my school days, a teacher would pop an unexpected question, look straight at me, and wait for the answer.

I had never really cared one way or the other about whether souls existed or not, but that was not my problem. My problem was what would be the best answer to give her right then and there? I hesitated for a moment to give myself time to think. I knew that people in these parts did, as a rule, believe in ghosts, but now she seemed to doubt—or perhaps “hope” would be a better word—seemed to hope that they existed, and yet, at the same time, seemed to hope that they did not. Why add to the suffering of a poor woman already at the end of her rope? For her sake it would probably be best to say that they did exist.

I hemmed and hawed: “Well, perhaps they do. Probably. The way I see it—”

“Then there’s gotta be a hell too, right?”
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"Then there's gotta be a hell too, right?"
New Year's Sacrifice

“What! A hell?” Taken off guard by the question, I became evasive. “Well, logically, I suppose there ought to be, but then not necessarily either. Who has the time to bother about that sort of thing anyway?”

“But if there is, then dead kin are all gonna meet again, right?”

“Hmmm ... Let’s see ... Your question ... your question is ... uh ... will they meet again?”

At this point I began to see that, for all the good it did me, I might just as well have remained uneducated, for despite all my stalling, despite all my brainwracking, I had been unable to stand up to three questions posed by this simple woman. Suddenly I turned timid and searched around for a way of nullifying whatever I had said up to this point. “Well, you see ... To tell the truth, I can’t say for sure. As a matter of fact, I can’t even say for sure whether there are souls or not.” Taking advantage of a lull in her persistent questioning, I strode away and beat a hasty retreat to Fourth Uncle’s house.

Anxious at heart, I began to mull it all over in my own mind. “That may well have been a dangerous sort of answer to have given her,” I thought to myself. “To be sure, it’s probably just because everyone else is so caught up in preparations for the New Year’s Sacrifice that she’s become so keenly aware of her own isolation—but still, could there be anything more to it than that? Could it be that she has had some sort of premonition? If there is anything more to it and something regrettable happens as a result, then I shall be partially responsible because of what I said ...”

By the time I got to this point, I couldn’t help but laugh at myself. After all, what had happened was nothing more than a chance occurrence and could not possibly have any great significance. Yet, against all reason, I had insisted on analyzing it in painstaking detail. Was it any wonder that certain people in educational circles had accused me of being neurotic? What was more, I had told her in no uncertain terms that I couldn’t “say for sure,” nullifying everything I had said before. “Even if something does happen,” I thought, “it will have nothing to do with me.”

Can’t say for sure—what a wonderfully useful expression! Dauntless youngsters, wet behind the ears, will often plot a course

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3. This reflects charges that were leveled at Lu Xun himself, who, at the time he wrote this story, was working in the Ministry of Education and teaching part-time as well.
of action for an indecisive friend, or even go so far as to help someone choose a doctor. When things don’t turn out well, then of course they’ve only succeeded in making enemies.

If, on the other hand, you conclude everything you say with a can’t say for sure, you always remain comfortably free and clear no matter how things turn out. After meeting with Sister Xianglin on the street that day, I began to appreciate the necessity for some such formula. I hadn’t been able to get along without it even when talking with a simple beggar.

Nonetheless, I continued to feel uneasy. Even after a good night’s sleep I couldn’t get her out of my mind. It was as though I had a premonition of disaster. The wearisome atmosphere of my uncle’s study melded with the gloom of the snow-filled skies to intensify my anxieties. “Might as well leave and go back into the city tomorrow,” I thought to myself. “Shark’s fin cooked in clear broth costs only a dollar a bowl at the Fuxing—good food at a bargain price.10 Wonder if it’s gone up by now? The friends I used to go there with, of course, have long since scattered to the four winds, but I can’t afford to pass up that shark’s fin soup even if I do have to eat alone . . . Well, I’m definitely going to clear out of here tomorrow, come what may.”

I had often seen things that I hoped wouldn’t turn out the way I anticipated, begin, one after the other, to turn out exactly the way I was afraid they would. Now I began to worry that this business of Sister Xianglin would fit the mold. And sure enough, strange things began to happen. Toward evening, I heard people discussing something-or-other in the inner rooms. Before long, the conversation ended, and all I could make out was the sound of Fourth Uncle pacing back and forth. He began to yell. “Not a minute sooner and not a minute later, had to pick exactly this time of year! You can tell from that alone what bad stock we’re dealing with!”

At first I was merely curious as to what it was all about, but then I began to feel downright uneasy, for Fourth Uncle’s words seemed to have something to do with me. I poked my head out the door, but there was no one around whom I could question. I was on pins and needles until just before supper, when a temporary servant, taken on for the holidays, came into my room to make tea. I finally had my chance.

10. “Clear broth” means there is no soy sauce in the recipe.
“Who was Fourth Old Master so mad at just now?”
“Sister Xianglin, who else?” Brief and to the point.
“What about Sister Xianglin?” I asked apprehensively.
“She’s aged away.”
“Aged away?” My heart constricted into a tight knot and felt as though it would jump out of my body. The color probably drained out of my face too, but from beginning to end, the servant kept his head down and tended to the making of the tea, unaware of my reaction. Forcing myself to be calm, I continued with my questions.
“When did she die?”
“When? Last night, or maybe it was today. I can’t say for sure.”
“What did she die of?”
“What did she die of? Poverty, what else?” He answered in flat, unemotional tones; still not raising his head to look at me, he left the room.

Surprisingly, however, my own agitation turned out to be but a momentary thing, for right after the servant left, I felt that what was bound to happen had already come and gone. Without even having to resort to a can’t say for sure or adopting the servant’s formula for dismissing the whole thing—Poverty, what else?—I gradually began to regain my composure. And yet, I still felt an occasional pang of guilt.

With Fourth Uncle in stern attendance, dinner was served. I wanted to learn more about Sister Xianglin’s death, but I knew that although Fourth Uncle had read that ghosts and spirits do but natural transformations of the two powers be, he still harbored many superstitions and would not, under any circumstances, be willing to discuss anything related to sickness or death as the time for the New Year’s Sacrifice drew near. If such subjects had to be broached, then one would be expected to employ a substitute language of roundabout phrases in discussing them. Unfortunately, I did not know the proper phraseology and therefore, although there were several moments when I thought about asking something, in the end I didn’t. As I looked at the stern expression on my uncle’s face, it suddenly occurred to me that he might well be...

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12. It would be unlucky to pronounce a word meaning “die” during the New Year period, hence the circumlocution.
13. The two powers are yin and yang (the female and male principles in nature); the quotation is from Reflections on Things at Hand, the work whose commentary lies on Fourth Uncle’s desk (see n. 7).
thinking that I, too, “not a minute sooner and not a minute later, had to pick exactly this time of year” to come and disturb his peace of mind, and that I too was “bad stock.” Deciding that I had better set his mind at rest as soon as possible, I told him I would leave Lu Town in the morning and go back to the city. He made a very perfunctory bow in the direction of trying to dissuade me. We finished the meal in gloomy silence.

Winter days are short. Snowy skies shorten them even more, and thus by the time our meal was over, the shades of evening had long since enshrouded the entire town. By lamplight on this New Year’s Eve, people were bustling about in every home as they prepared for the following day.

Outside the windows of those same homes, however, all was lonely silence. Large snowflakes fell on a blanket of white that was already piled thick on the ground. I even seemed to hear a faint rustling sound as they touched down, a sound that made me feel the silence and loneliness all the more intensely. As I sat there in the yellowish glow of an oil lamp, my thoughts turned to Sister Xianglin.

With nothing left, with no one to turn to, she had been tossed onto a garbage heap like a worn-out toy that people are tired of seeing around. And yet, until only a short time before, Sister Xianglin had at least managed to maintain her physical form even amid the refuse. People happy in their own lives had no doubt thought it odd that she chose to continue such an existence.

Well, now at last Wuchang had swept her away without leaving the slightest trace.¹³ I didn’t know whether souls existed or not, but in the world we live in, when someone who has no way to make a living is no longer alive, when someone whom people are sick of seeing is no longer around to be seen, then one cannot say that she has done too badly, either by herself or by other people.

Sitting in silence, listening to the faint rustle of snowflakes, and thinking these thoughts, gradually and quite unexpectedly I began to feel relaxed.

¹³. Wuchang (the name means literally “nothing is permanent”) was a deity who, despite a rollicking sense of humor, played the role of grim reaper. A local Shaoxing saying went: “When you see Wuchang arrive, you’ll not be long alive” (Wuchang yidao, xingming nan-tao). Lu Xun devoted a reminiscence to Wuchang and even included some of his own sketches of him. This is included in Zhaohua sishih (Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk). A translation appears in Selected Works of Lu Hsun (4 vols.), vol. 1, pp. 377–386. Translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1956–1960.
As I sat there, the bits and pieces of Sister Xianglin’s story that I had either witnessed or heard about secondhand came together and painted a portrait of her life.

* * *

She did not come from Lu Town.

At the beginning of winter one year they decided to change maids at Fourth Uncle’s place. And so it was that Old Lady Wei, acting as go-between, led a new servant into the house.

Hair tied back with a piece of white wool, she wore a black skirt, a blue lined jacket with long sleeves, and over that a sleeveless vest of light blue. She looked to be twenty-six or twenty-seven and was on the whole rather pale, though her cheeks were rosy. Old Lady Wei called her Sister Xianglin and said she was a neighbor of her mother’s. Because her man had died, Sister Xianglin had come out to look for a job. Fourth Uncle frowned at that, and Fourth Aunt knew the reason: he objected to hiring a widow. But at the same time she also noted that Sister Xianglin looked quite presentable, seemed sound of limb, and what was more, kept her eyes submissively averted and said nothing at all—very much the hardworking servant who knows her place. And so it was that despite Fourth Uncle’s frown, Fourth Aunt decided to give her a try.

During this trial period, from one end of the day to the other, Sister Xianglin worked so hard that one would have thought being unoccupied depressed her. Moreover, she was quite strong, easily a match for any man. And so on the third day things were finally settled: Sister Xianglin would be taken on as the new maid at five hundred coppers a month.

Everybody called her Sister Xianglin. No one asked her family name, but since the go-between was from Wei Family Hill and had said that Xianglin lived close to her mother’s place, it is safe to assume that Sister Xianglin’s name was Wei too. She did not like to talk much; when people asked questions of her she would speak, but even then she did not volunteer very much.

Back where she had come from, she had had a very strict mother-in-law, and a brother-in-law who was only ten, just big enough to gather firewood. She had lost her husband back in the spring. Ten years younger than she, he had been a fuel gatherer too. But by bit this came out over a period of two weeks or so. That was all anyone knew of her.
The days passed quickly, but Sister Xianglin's pace slackened not one whit. She was very fussy about her work, to which she gave her all, but was not in the least particular about the food she ate. People began saying that over at Fourth Old Master Lu's place they had hired a maid who was more capable than a hardworking man.

And when the end of the year came, she single-handedly cleaned the entire house, straightened up the yard, killed the geese and chickens, and worked straight through the night to prepare the ritual offering that would assure the Lu household of blessings in the year to come. That New Year, Fourth Uncle was actually able to get by without hiring any part-time help at all. Despite all these demands on her energies, Sister Xianglin seemed quite contented. Traces of a smile began to appear at the corners of her mouth, and her face began to fill out as well.

Just after the New Year, she came back from washing rice down by the river one day with all the color drained from her face. She said that she had seen a man skulking around off in the distance on the opposite bank, a man who looked a lot like an elder cousin of her husband. She was afraid he might well be looking for her. Fourth Aunt was a bit suspicious, but when she tried to get to the bottom of things, Sister Xianglin immediately clammed up. When Fourth Uncle heard about it, he frowned and said: " Doesn't look good. She's probably a runaway." Before long, Fourth Uncle's conjecture was confirmed.

A few weeks later, just as everyone was gradually beginning to forget the incident, Old Lady Wei suddenly reappeared. She had in tow a woman who looked to be somewhere in her thirties. This, she announced, was Sister Xianglin’s mother-in-law.

Although the woman looked like a hillbilly, she had a certain natural poise and was a good talker as well. After the usual formalities, she apologized for the intrusion and announced she had come to fetch her daughter-in-law back. She pointed out that it was now Beginning-of-Spring, a busy season for farmers. Since everyone back home was either too young or too old, they were shorthanded and in sore need of Sister Xianglin.

"Since it's her mother-in-law who wants her to go back, what can we say?" opined Fourth Uncle.

Sister Xianglin's wages were totalled up: one thousand seven hundred and fifty coins. When she first started to work, she had
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id seven she had told Fourth Aunt to keep the money for her and had not touched any of it. Now the entire amount was handed over to her mother-in-law, who also took care to gather up all of Sister Xianglin's clothes. By the time the mother-in-law had thanked everyone and gone on her way, it was already noon.

It was not until some time after they had left that Fourth Aunt cried out in alarm: "The rice! Wasn't Sister Xianglin preparing the meal?" Fourth Aunt was probably a little hungry by then and had remembered the lunch. Thereupon she and Fourth Uncle went to look for the rice basket. She tried the kitchen first, then the hall, and finally Sister Xianglin's bedroom—no trace anywhere. Fourth Uncle went outside to look, but didn't see it anywhere out there either. It was not until he had gone all the way down to the river that he caught sight of the rice basket, neatly placed on the bank, a head of cabbage still beside it.

According to some people who saw what happened, a white-canopied boat had moored on the river that morning, the canopy closed tightly all the way around so that no one could tell what was inside. At the time nobody had taken any particular notice of it anyway. But then later on, when Sister Xianglin had come down to wash the rice, two men had jumped out just as she was about to kneel down on the riverbank. One of them had grabbed her in his arms and, with the help of the other, dragged her into the boat. Sister Xianglin had screamed a few times, but afterwards there was no sound at all. They had probably gagged her. Soon after that, two women emerged from the boat. One of them was Old Lady Wei. No one had recognized the other. A few villagers had tried peeking through the canopy, but it was so dark inside they weren't able to see very clearly. They had, however, made out Sister Xianglin's form lying on the floor, all tied up.

"Despicable! But still..." said Fourth Uncle.

Fourth Aunt had to boil the luncheon rice herself that day. Her son, Ah-niu, made the fire. After lunch, Old Lady Wei came back again.

"Despicable!" said Fourth Uncle to her.

"What in the world do you think you're doing? You've got your nerve coming here again," said Fourth Aunt angrily as she washed the ricebowls. "You were the one who brought her here to us, and then you turn around and join up with those people to come and snatch her away! And what about all the commotion you kicked
up in the neighborhood while you were doing it? What are you trying to do, make a laughing stock of our family?"

"Aiya . . . aiya, I was really taken in. I made a point of gettin back to you today to get this cleared up. Okay then, Sister Xianglin comes to me lookin' for a place. Now how was I to know that it was behind her mother-in-law's back? Let me tell you, Fourth Old Master and the Missus, I'm just as sorry as I can be. All said and done, I slipped up and wasn't as careful as I should've been. Now I've gone and done wrong by two of the best clients I've got. Lucky for me that you've always been bighearted, understandin' folks, not the kind to get picky with ordinary folks like me. Well, never you mind. I'll get you a really good maid this time to make up for it . . ."

"But still . . ." said Fourth Uncle.

And thus ended the Sister Xianglin affair. Before long, she was entirely forgotten.

Only Fourth Aunt ever mentioned her again, and that was only because she was not happy with any of the maids she hired afterwards. Most were either lazy or the kind who would try to eat you out of house and home—and some were both. When exasperated with one of them over this or that, she would often say to herself: "I wonder how she's doing now?" What she really meant was that she hoped Sister Xianglin would somehow come back. By Newstep of the following year, however, she had given up all hopes of that.¹⁴

Toward the end of Newstep a comfortably tipsy Old Lady Wei showed up at Fourth Uncle's place to wish everyone a belated Happy New Year. She said she had gone back to Wei Family Hill to spend a few days with her parents, and this was why she was late in coming to pay her respects. In the course of the conversation, of course, the subject of Sister Xianglin came up.

"Sister Xianglin?" began Old Lady Wei expansively. "Her turn for good luck's rolled round again. Long before that mother-in-law of hers ever came over here to snatch her away, she'd fixed it up to marry her off to the sixth son of the He family over in He Family Hollow."

¹⁴. Newstep (xinzheng) is the period that includes the first fifteen days of the lunar year.
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"Aiya! What kind of mother-in-law would do a thing like that?" asked Fourth Aunt in shock.

"Would you listen to that! Dear, dear lady, you really do sound like a rich-family wife! Up there in the hills, for poor families like us, it's no big deal. Sister Xianglin had a younger brother-in-law up there, you know. Well, he needed a wife too, right? If they hadn't married Sister Xianglin off, where would they have come up with the money to get him a bride? That mother-in-law of hers is one sharp cookie. A real planner too, that one. That's how come she married Sister Xianglin off to somebody way back in the hills. Now if she'd sold her to somebody right there in the village, how much money would that bring? But you're not gonna find too many girls willin' to marry way back into the hills. That's why she came out of the deal with eighty strings of cash in hand! Just think, the wife she got for her younger son only cost her fifty. Take out the cost of the weddin' and stuff, and she still had more'n ten strings to the good. Now that's what I'd call plannin', wouldn't you?"

"And did Sister Xianglin actually go along with it?"

"What's that got to do with it? Fuss? Sure, anybody'd put up some sort of fuss. But in the end they just get hog-tied, stuffed into a bridal chair, and carted off to the man's house.¹⁵ As a rule, all you've gotta do then is slap on a weddin' cap, force 'em through the ceremony, then lock 'em up in a room with the new man, and that's that.

"But Sister Xianglin was somethin' else—kicked up a rumpus the likes of which nobody'd ever seen. Folks said it was more than likely 'cause she'd worked in a family that had book learnin' and wasn't just your run-of-the-mill widow bein' remarried. Let me tell you, Missus, us go-betweens have seen a lotta this kind of stuff. When second-timers marry, some'll scream and holler; some'll try to do themselves in; some'll raise such a ruckus after they get to the groom's place that you can't even get 'em through the ceremony; you'll even find some who'll bust up the weddin' candles.

"But Sister Xianglin topped 'em all. Hear tell she wailed and cursed every step of the way. By the time they got her there, she'd shouted herself so hoarse she couldn't even talk. They had to drag her out of the bridal chair. But even with two strong men and her

¹⁵ A bride would be sent to her new home in a sedan chair supported between long poles that were carried on the shoulders of two bearers.
brother-in-law thrown in, all holdin’ onto her for all they were worth, they still couldn’t get her through the ceremony. Then when they let their guard down for just a split second—Aiyah, may Buddha preserve us!—before anyone knew what was up, she slammed her head on the corner of the incense table. Made a hole so big the blood just gushed out. They slapped a couple handfuls of incense ash on the hole and wrapped her head in some red cloth. But even with all that they still couldn’t stop the blood. Clear up to the time when they got her—and they had everybody fallin’ over everybody else tryin’ to do it—got her and the groom into the bride-room and locked it from the outside, she kept cursin’ for all she was worth. Aiyah! That was really, really . . .
She shook her head, looked down, and stopped there.
“And then what happened?” Fourth Aunt went on with her questions.
“The way I heard it, she didn’t get up the next day,” answered Old Lady Wei, raising her eyes.
“And then?”
“Then? Well, then she got up. Toward the end of the year she had a kid, a boy. He was two this New Year’s.16 Past few days when I was at my folks’ house, someone went out to He Family Hollow and saw the two of ’em. The kid was nice and chubby and the mom was all filled out too. Better yet, now she’s got no mother-in-law over her. She’s got a good strong man who knows how to work, and the house is theirs free and clear. Her turn for good luck has rolled around again for sure!”

After that, Fourth Aunt never mentioned Sister Xianglin again.

* * *

But one year in the fall—it must have been a New Year or so after Sister Xianglin’s “turn for good luck rolled round again”—to everyone’s complete surprise, there she stood once again in the main hall of Fourth Uncle’s house. Her bamboo basket, shaped like a water chestnut, lay on the table, and her small bedroll was under the eaves outside. She was much the same as she had been the first time: hair tied back with a piece of white wool; black skirt

16. His age would be counted as “one” immediately at birth and “two” at the following New Year.
and blue lined jacket with long sleeves; and sleeveless vest of light blue. But her cheeks had lost the slightly rosy touch that had once relieved her general pallor. She kept her eyes averted; the spirited gleam that once had lit them was now gone, and traces of tears showed in their corners. Just as the first time, too, it was Old Lady Wei who led her in. Assuming an exaggerated air of compassion, the old woman prattled on and on.

"Like a bolt out of the blue—there really is somethin' to those words. That man of hers was a husky young guy. Who would've ever expected a young horse like that would lose his life to typhoid. As a matter of fact, he did get over it, but then later on he went and ate a bowl of cold rice, and it came onto 'im again. Luckily he left a son behind and Sister Xianglin's someone who knows how to put in a good day's work. Gatherin' firewood, pickin' tea, raisin' silkworms—no problem. She should've been able to hold things together. Who would've even thought that with spring almost over there'd still be wolves comin' round the village. Well, with no rhyme or reason one did come along, and dragged her son right off.

"Now she's got nothin' left but herself. Her brother-in-law came and took the house back. Drove Sister Xianglin out. She's really at the end of her rope now. Nothin' left for it but to come here and see if her old employers can help out. The good part is that she's got nothin' to tie her down now. As luck would have it, the Missus is lookin' for a maid right now, and so I decided to bring her over. I thought since Sister Xianglin knows her way around the place, it'd be much better for the Missus to get her back than to have to break in someone new . . ."

"I was real dumb, real dumb," began Sister Xianglin as she raised her expressionless eyes. "All I knew was that when it snows and the wild animals can't find anything to eat up there in the hills, sometimes they'll come into the villages. But I didn't know they could show up in springtime, too. I got up bright and early, opened the door, filled a little basket with beans, and told our Ah-mao to go outside, sit by the door, and shell 'em. He always minded, did everything I told him. Well, he went out and I went to the back of the room to split firewood and wash the rice. I

\[\text{Volunteer's note:}\]

17. Sister Xianglin was not driven out so long as her son, a blood heir to her dead husband's family, was still alive.
put the rice in the pot and was gettin' ready to steam the beans on top. 'Ah-mao!' No answer. I went out and all I saw was beans scattered all over the ground, but our Ah-mao was nowhere to be seen.

"Now it wasn't like him to go and play at other kids' houses, but I asked all over anyway. Sure enough, nobody'd seen him. That's when I got good and worried, begged folks to go out and make a search. Right down till the bottom half of the day, they looked everywhere. Finally, they came to a holler and found one of his little shoes hangin' on some brambles. They thought he was a goner then for sure, that most likely he'd met up with a wolf. They kept on goin' and sure enough, there he was, lyin' in the den of a wolf. His belly was open and his insides all eaten out. Still had that little basket clutched tight in his hand." She kept on talking, but now she was sobbing so that she could no longer get an entire sentence out.

At first, Fourth Aunt had been somewhat hesitant, but after hearing out Sister Xianglin's own telling of what had happened, she too became a bit red-eyed. She thought for a moment and then told Sister Xianglin to take her blanket and bedroll to the servant's room. As though just relieved of a heavy burden, Old Lady Wei heaved a sigh of relief. Sister Xianglin also looked more relaxed than when they had first arrived. Without waiting to be shown the way, she took the basket and bedding to her room and once again Sister Xianglin worked as a maid in Lu Town.

To be sure, the family still called her Sister Xianglin, just as they had before, but her situation was far different this time. She had not been back more than a few days or so when her employers noticed that she was not so quick on her feet as she had once been and that her memory had gone downhill too. Furthermore, from one end of the day to the other, there was never so much as the trace of a smile on her corpse-like face. When talking to her now, Fourth Aunt revealed considerable dissatisfaction in her tone of voice.

When she first came back, Fourth Uncle frowned as might well have been expected, but in view of the difficulties he and his wife had endured in finding a good replacement, he did not seriously oppose her return. However, he did warn Fourth Aunt privately: "People like her may seem quite pitiable, to be sure, but one must remember that they do have a deleterious influence on the morals
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New Year's Sacrifice

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housework, she must have absolutely nothing to do with

of society. While it may be permissible to let her help out with

the family sacrifices. You will have to prepare all the sacrificial offer-
ings yourself; otherwise they will be tainted and our ancestors will

not accept them.”

In Fourth Uncle’s house, the family sacrifices had always been

the most important event of the year by far, and always in the past

Sister Xianglin had been busiest during the period when they were

conducted. This year, however, she had not been given a thing to do.

Of her own volition, she took a table and placed it in the cen-
ter of the room, tied the tableskirt around the edge, and even

remembered to arrange the chopsticks and wine cups just as she

had done before.

“Sister Xianglin, leave those alone! I’ll set the table!” Fourth

Aunt cried out in alarm. Completely at a loss, Sister Xianglin drew

her hands back, and then went to fetch the candlesticks.

“Sister Xianglin, put those down! I’ll get them.” Again the tone

of voice was one of alarm.

Aimlessly she walked around the room for a bit, but since there

was nothing for her to do, she finally walked out the door in a

state of utter bewilderment. The only thing she was allowed to do
during this entire day was to sit by the stove and tend the fire.

The people in the village still talked with her and called her Si-

ter Xianglin, just as they had before, but their tone of voice had

changed and the smiles on their faces had turned cold. When she

met up with them, she paid no heed to any of this but simply

stared off into space and recited that same story, which she could

not put out of mind either by day or by night.

“I was real dumb, real dumb. All I knew was that when it snows

and the wild animals can’t find anything to eat up there in the hills,
sometimes they’ll come into the villages. But I didn’t know they
could show up in springtime, too. I got up bright and early,
opened the door, filled a bamboo basket with beans, and told our

Ah-mao to go outside, sit by the door, and shell ’em. He always

minded, did everything I told him. Well, he went out and I went to
the back of the room to split the firewood and wash the rice. I put
the rice in the pot and was gettin’ ready to steam the beans on top.

38 Fourth Uncle is a hidebound traditionalist: a widow would be bad enough, but a

remarried widow is simply beyond the pale of decency.
I yelled, 'Ah-mao!' No answer. I went out and all I saw was beans scattered all over the ground, but our Ah-mao was nowhere around. Then I got really worried. I begged people to go out and make a search. By the bottom half of the day, some of 'em came to a holler and found one of his little shoes hangin' on some brambles. They thought he was a goner then for sure, that most likely he'd met up with a wolf. They kept on goin' and sure enough, there he was, lyin' in the den of a wolf. His belly was open and his insides all eaten out. Still had that little basket clutched tight in his hand." At this point tears would be streaming down her face and her voice broken with sobs.

Her story was actually quite effective, for by the time she got to this point, even the men would put aside their smiles and wander off in embarrassed silence, while the women would immediately shed their disdainful looks and, seeming to forgive her somewhat, would join their tears with hers.

The few old ladies who had not heard Sister Xianglin tell her sad tale in the streets and alleyways would make a special point of running her down so that they, too, might have a chance to hear her heartrending recitation. When Sister Xianglin reached the point where she began to sob, then they too would release tears that had been welling up in the corners of their eyes, sigh for a bit, and then walk away, contentedly evaluating the details of her story in a great flurry of chatter.

Sister Xianglin told her tragic tale over and over again. Before long everyone in town knew it down to the finest detail. Even in the eyes of the most pious old Buddhist ladies, not so much as the trace of a tear was anymore to be seen. Later on, it even got to the point where everyone could recite it word for word. And so it was that people eventually grew so sick of hearing her story that their heads ached at the mere mention of it.

"I was real dumb, real dumb," she would begin.

"Right, all you knew is that when it snows and the wild animals can't find anything to eat up there in the hills, they'll come to the village." They would cut her off immediately and get away as quickly as possible.

Stunned, she would stand there, mouth agape, and stare after their retreating forms. And then she would walk away as though she too felt there wasn't any point to it. And yet, against all reason, she still wanted to tell people the story of her Ah-mao. She began
searching out opportunities to bring it up: whenever anyone mentioned a small basket, or beans, or someone's child, she would try to fit her story into the conversation. Whenever she saw a two- or three-year-old, she would look at the child and say, "Oh, if only our Ah-mao was still alive, he'd be just about that big too . . ." The child, in turn, would usually be frightened by the look in her eyes, grab its mother's clothing, and pull her away. At this point, Sister Xianglin would again be left standing alone, and finally she too would sense the awkwardness of the situation and wander away.

After a while, everyone became aware of this quirk of hers, and whenever there was a child in the immediate vicinity, someone would look at her with a smile that was not really a smile and ask, "Sister Xianglin, if your Ah-mao was still livin' he'd be just about that big too, wouldn't he?" By now everyone had long since chewed and savored the taste of her tragedy, had long since worked it into pulp, flavorless and ready to be spit out. She may not have been aware of this herself, but she did sense something cold and sharp in their smiles and knew there was no point in speaking. She would simply glance at them, but utter not one word in reply.

Lu Town had always celebrated the New Year, and this year was no exception. Things began to pick up after the twentieth day of the twelfth lunar month. But this year, even after they had taken on a temporary male servant, there was still too much to do at Fourth Uncle's place and too little time to do it in. And so it was that Mother Liu was hired to lend a helping hand. As a pious Buddhist who kept to a vegetarian diet, however, she believed in preserving life and refused to butcher the chickens and geese. She was willing to help only with the washing of the sacrificial utensils. At this, the busiest time of the year, not being allowed to do anything except tend the fire, Sister Xianglin found herself almost completely idle.

And so it was that she was sitting by the stove one day, watching Mother Liu work. A light snow was beginning to fall. As though talking to herself, she sighed and said, "I was real dumb, real dumb . . ."

"There you go again, Sister Xianglin," said Mother Liu, looking at her impatiently. "Okay, then, let me put it to you this way. Wasn't it at that second wedding that you bashed in your head and got yourself that scar there?"
“Uhh, uh . . .” Sister Xianglin became evasive.

“Okay, then let me try another one on you. Since you went to all that trouble, how come you finally gave in?”

“Who, me?”

“Yeah, you. I think way down deep you must’ve wanted to, or else—”

“Now wait just a minute, you don’t know how strong he was.”

“Don’t believe a word of it. I just can’t see how a woman as strong as you are couldn’t hold him off if you wanted to. Down deep you wanted to give in, and then you turn around and lay it on his bein’ strong.”

“Well, I’d . . . I’d just like to see you try and hold him off.” Sister Xianglin smiled.

Mother Liu roared with laughter, making the corners of her mouth go back so far that her deep wrinkles shrunk together and transformed her face into a walnut. Her wizened little eyes glanced at the scar and then fixed Sister Xianglin with such a stare that she became quite ill-at-ease, stopped smiling, turned away, and gazed at the snow.

“Sister Xianglin, you really came out on the short end of the stick on that one,” said Mother Liu enigmatically. “If you’d only put up more of a fight, or just bashed your brains out and been done with it, you’d have been all right. But now? Without even gettin’ to spend two years with that second man, you’ve ended up committin’ a big sin. Just think, later on when you die and go to the underworld, the ghosts of those two men are gonna fight over you. Which one will you give yourself to then? Yama, Great King of the Underworld, will have only one choice—saw you in half and give each of ‘em his piece. The way I see it, you’ve really gotta . . . Well, I think you’ve gotta find some way of guardin’ against that as soon as you can. Why not go to the temple and donate money for a doorsill. Then that doorsill will be your body. Thousands’ll step on it and tens of thousands’ll walk over it. That way you’ll make up for all your sins and you won’t have to suffer after you die.”

At the time, Sister Xianglin said nothing in reply, but in all likelihood she was extremely depressed, for the dark circles around her eyes when she got up the next morning bespoke a sleepless night. After breakfast, she made her way to the temple at the west end of town and asked if she could donate a doorsill. At first, the
priest in charge was adamant in his refusal. It was only when Sister Xianglin became emotional and was on the verge of tears that he reluctantly agreed. The price was set at twelve strings of cash, a thousand to the string.

Since everybody had long since become bored with the story of Ah-mao, she had not been able to find anyone to talk to in a long time. But now, once word of her conversation with Mother Liu spread abroad, people began to take new interest. Once again, they would stop her on the street and inveigle her into a chat. Now of course, in view of the new wrinkle that had been added, people's interest focused entirely on the scar.

“Sister Xianglin, how come you finally gave in?” one of them would ask.

“What a shame you had to bash your head in for nothin',” another would chime in while staring at her scar.

Aware of their smiles and tone of voice, she probably realized they were making fun of her, and so she would just stare at them without saying a word. Later on, she got so that she would not even turn her head when people called her.

Bearing that scar, which everyone now considered a mark of shame, tight-lipped and silent from morning to night, Sister Xianglin ran the errands, swept the floor, prepared the vegetables, and washed the rice. It was not until a year was almost out that she took from the hands of Fourth Aunt all the wages she had let accumulate and exchanged them for twelve Mexican silver dollars. She asked for time off to go to the west end of town. Then, within the space of time it takes to eat a meal, she was back. She appeared relaxed and happy, and there was even an unaccustomed spark of life in her gaze. She seemed in very high spirits as she told Fourth Aunt how she had just donated a doorsill at the Earth God's temple.

When the winter solstice came and it was time to carry out the ancestral sacrifices, she became particularly energetic. Seeing that Fourth Aunt had already set out the sacrificial foods, Sister Xianglin got Ah-niu to help her move the table to the center of the hall. Then, with complete self-assurance, she went to get the wine cups and the chopsticks.

“A Sister Xianglin, leave those alone!” shouted Fourth Aunt frantically.

Sister Xianglin jerked back her hand as though it had been
scorched. Her face began to darken. Nor did she go and fetch the candlesticks. She just stood there, utterly lost. It was only when Fourth Uncle came with the incense and told her to get out of the way that she finally left the room. The change in her this time was immense. The next day there were again deep circles around her eyes and she was more listless than she had ever been before. What was more, she became very timid: she was afraid of the night; she was afraid of dark shadows; she was afraid of people, even her own employers. In everything she did, she was as skittish as a mouse away from its nest in daylight. Often she would just sit motionless and blank, lifeless as a wood-carved doll. Before half a year was out, her hair began to turn grey and her memory slipped dramatically, even to the point where she often forgot to wash the rice.

Sometimes, with Sister Xianglin right there in the room, Fourth Aunt would say, as though issuing a warning: “Wonder what’s come over Sister Xianglin? It really would have been better not to keep her when Old Lady Wei brought her back.”

But such warnings had no effect. She stayed the same, and it was painfully obvious that there was no hope she would ever again become the alert and nimble Sister Xianglin of old. They thought of getting rid of her at this point, of sending her back to Old Lady Wei, but while I was still in Lu Town, at any rate, this remained just talk. Looking back, though, it is apparent that they must have let her go sometime later on. (But was it right after leaving Fourth Uncle’s place that she became a beggar, or had she gone back to Old Lady Wei first? There was no way to tell.)

* * *

Startled into wakefulness by the loud roar of fireworks going off close by, I focused my eyes on a yellow patch of light the size of a human head—the glow of the oil lamp. I heard the sharp and rapid pow-pow pow-pow pow-pow of entire strings being set off. Fourth Uncle’s family was indeed in the midst of celebrating the New Year and I realized it must have been close to the Fifth Watch. In my drowsiness I was also vaguely aware of the faint but continuous sounds of various other kinds of explosions going off all around me in the distance, sounds that wove together into a skyful of dense and resounding clouds. Thickened by flakes of
and forth, they held all of Lu Town in their enfolding arms. Wrapped in this comforting symphonic embrace, Coo was filled with a deep sense of well-being and felt wholly free of worldly cares. All the worries and concerns that had plagued me from morning till night, even the various gods of heaven and earth were enjoying the ritual offerings and incense that burned in their honor. Comfortably tipsy, I washed the day away by the happy atmosphere of the New Year. I was conscious of nothing except that the sky was filled with incense and the people of Lu Town with infinite blessings.

FEBRUARY 7, 1924

The comic photo of the town landlord was accidentally sent out in the water.