Chapter 6

The Wood Has Been Made Into A Boat
Through the Palace of Green Porcelain to the Willow Palisade

The name of the student who had first offered to help was Liang Yi. His family name, Liang, was the same as Weilin's, but he was no relation. Weilin never knew the second student's name. By the time they got back to the Professor's compound Father was sufficiently conscious to be able to support himself, though he seemed to have lost the coordination necessary for walking or climbing stairs. However, they got him up to the apartment somehow. They sat him in a chair and Mother bathed and dressed his wounds. Father nodded and made appreciative murmuring sounds, but seemed unable to speak. When they had cleaned him up they put him to bed.

The second student left soon after this, and Father fell into a profound sleep. Liang Yi said he would go to the police station first thing in the morning and report the incident. He sat with Mother talking; but it was very late and Weilin was drowsy. He went to bed. Next morning Father was still sleeping. He slept all morning and into the afternoon. Mother was worried. She thought it was a coma. Liang Yi came at noon. He had been to the police station, but the police just laughed at him. The Red Guards were sponsored by Chairman Mao, they said. The police were not allowed to interfere with them.

Mother and Liang Yi went out, with the idea of finding a doctor willing to treat Father, or at least some medicine that his condition might

respond to. While they were gone Father woke. Weilin sat by the bed, holding Father's hand, talking to him, trying to get his attention, sometimes crying, until Mother came home alone. Mother made some soup and fed Father with it. Then she gave him medicine she had got from one of the clinics. He seemed glad, and it even seemed that he recognized them; then blood spurted from his nose and one of his ears. After the blood came a dense milky substance, mixed with blood. By the time they finished cleaning him up, Father had fallen into sleep again. This sleep was fitful, and he developed a fever, his body trembling and sweating. He voided his bowels in the bed, and moved his arms convulsively.

After cleaning his mess and sitting with him all night, Mother went out the next day to visit the local practitioners of traditional medicine, to see if any of their herbs or roots might have application. After she had left the student Liang Yi came. While he was asking Weilin about Father's condition, Father woke with staring eyes and went into spasm. His head jerked until Weilin cried out for fear he would break his neck. His limbs thrashed and his eyes popped, and a white curd formed on his lips. The milky substance came out of his ear again, but this time with no blood. Then, quite suddenly, Father opened his mouth very wide and made a dreadful gurgling, retching sound, and his spirit fled to the next world, and he fell back limp and empty. Liang Yi had backed off to the wall, his mouth a small round circle of horror, while Father was in spasm. When it was finished he went forward and looked at Father's eyes. Then he bent down to listen to Father's breathing. At last he said that Father was dead.

Mother came home soon after. She was inconsolable. She knelt by the bed, her head on Father's belly, her arms out in front of her, keening, keening. There were words in her keening, but you couldn't make sense of them. Weilin wondered if she had lost her mind, but was too numb to speculate on the consequences if she had. Liang Yi went to tell the hospital. Still no-one at the hospital would have anything to do with Father. They only notified the crematorium. The crematorium sent two young men with a rough canvas stretcher, and the young men took Father away, stumbling and cursing down the stairs with Father on the stretcher. Mother went with them, but she would not let Weilin come. He stayed with Liang Yi, playing card games with him. Liang Yi taught him a new card game

called *kebizhi*, where everything depended on getting fifteens. Mother came home long after dark. It's finished, is all she would say. It's finished, everything is finished.

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Mother changed completely after Father died. She could not play cards. Weilin tried to teach her *kebizhi*, but she couldn't pick it up at all. Even the old games she could not now play. They would start a game, but then she would get lost, forget it was her turn, make foolish plays. In the daytime she sat for hours perfectly still, looking out of the window. At night, only at night, she wept. She could not bear to sleep alone, and made Weilin come and lie in the bed with her. She did not cry at first, only lay there holding him; but late at night Weilin would wake, and she would be curled up with her back to him, sobbing.

Though Mother's distress was plain enough, it was some weeks before Weilin himself felt the full force of grief. What first obsessed him was guilt. It had been his fault, his fault, *his fault*. If only he had not mentioned Old Fan like that! Without thinking! Of course, since Old Fan was a counter-revolutionary, any connection with him would condemn Father. Of course! Weilin had only thought of Old Fan's being dead, so that the investigation against Father would have to stop. So naive! He went over and over in his mind the words he had said, willing them to be different, willing that he had said something different—something clever to deflect their interest from Father. Weilin willed it and willed it, to the point where he really believed that if he shut his eyes very tight, when he opened them again he would be in a different place, a place where he had never mentioned Old Fan, where Father had not been beaten, where Father was still alive, smiling and passing his sarcastic remarks, showing him again how to extract a square root. But when Weilin opened his eyes at last, he was still in the same place: Mother listless and weeping, Father dead for ever, for ever. There is an idiom in the Chinese language: *mu yi cheng zhou*—"The wood has been made into a boat." This is used to speak of the irreversibility of time's arrow; once made, the boat cannot be un-made back into logs and branches. Weilin had first heard the idiom

that summer, from a storyteller on the radio, in those last weeks before the earth had opened up to reveal the dark waters beneath, and Father had explained it to him, with a long digression about subatomic physics that Weilin hadn't been able to follow at all. Now the phrase hung dully in his thoughts all those weeks and months following Father's death: *the wood has been made into a boat.*

The first time he really felt the full pain of Father's passing was on his ninth birthday, that October. Father and Mother had always made a celebration out of Weilin's birthday. There was a gift, and some delicious food to eat—not just the food everyone tried to get for birthdays (eggs for good luck, noodles for long life), but food appropriate to the number of Weilin's age. The gift and the food always corresponded in some ingenious way to the number of the birthday. On his eighth birthday the previous year Weilin had got a storybook called Eight Heroes of Antiquity, which he had liked very much, and Mother had cooked Eight Treasures in sticky rice, and a soup with eight-pointed stars of aniseed, and *tangyuan*—small round rice-flour dumplings filled with sweet paste and served in soup. The roundness of the *tangyuan* of course corresponded to the number eight, the roundest and luckiest of all numbers, being the double of a double doubled, the Chinese character two symmetrical strokes of the pen and the western numeral having a double round form. On his seventh birthday Father had given him a tangram, which in Chinese is called the Seven Piece Puzzle—a square divided into seven parts, which could be re-assembled in all sorts of different shapes. Father had made the tangram himself, or had it made by one of the college workers, from a piece of wood cut up with a fretsaw. On Weilin's sixth birthday they had feasted on carp, on the rather flimsy pretext, put forward by Mother to mock scorn from Father, that the word for carp, *liyu*, sounded like the word for six, *liu*. The very earliest birthday Weilin could remember was his third. Father had given him a wooden doll with two other dolls inside it, each doll painted a different color—yellow, red, blue—and counted the dolls with him over and over, to impress the numbers one, two, three on his mind.

So it had always been. Now here was Weilin's ninth birthday, and there was nothing—only Mother pale and weeping, and too distraught to

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think of making sweet *tangyuan* or sticky rice. It dawned on Weilin, with a force that made his belly feel hollow and his skin cold, that his life had changed irrevocably, and for the worse. *The wood has been made into a boat.* He clung to Mother now, and wept when she wept.

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In spite of Father's being dead, Mother and Weilin were still black elements. The Red Guards all went to Beijing for a rally in September, but when they came back they were worse than ever. They made Mother do a parade, which meant that she and some other black elements had to submit to being led through the streets of the town wearing caps while people stood and jeered or spat on them. The caps were tall conical dunce's caps made of white paper with slogans written on them. Mother's slogan said WIFE OF THE CAPITALIST ROADER, TRAITOR AND SPY LIANG YUSHU. "Capitalist Roader" was an expression the Red Guards had picked up in Beijing, a new way of saying "black element". After the parade Mother got ill. Winter in Seven Kill Stele was cool and damp, and somehow this got to Mother's chest. She coughed all the time, sometimes lying in bed all day coughing. The student Liang Yi, who was now the only person who would have anything to do with them, got some medicine from somewhere and cooked it up for Mother in a soup. He cooked food for Weilin, too, when Mother was too ill to do it.

The world beyond their apartment seemed to have closed down completely. There was no teaching at the college, nor at Weilin's school. At the rally in Beijing Chairman Mao had instructed the Red Guards to roam freely all over the country. Soon they had all gone off, replaced by others from other parts of the country, who stayed at the college dormitory and held their own rallies and struggle meetings. Because they were strangers to the town, however, their activities had an ad hoc and ineffectual quality. They did another sweep of the teachers' apartments looking for Bourgeois Things, but there were very few left to confiscate. They summoned everybody to a big meeting at the town's sport stadium; but it was rained out and never re-scheduled.

With no radio and no books (except *Oliver Twist*, which he soon knew nearly by heart), with no school and Mother too dispirited to play card games, Weilin sank into a profound ennui. Some days he lay on his bed for hours, feeling empty and dead. Sometimes he walked for miles, round and about the town or out into the countryside. He came to prefer the countryside. In the town he often saw classmates from school. Like him, they were at a loose end. Some of them had reacted by forming gangs. They hung around in the streets, or in South Lake Park, or rode the town buses. They picked pockets, broke windows, stole from construction sites and started small fires. Weilin was scared of them. He had never been close to his classmates, and had always felt intimidated by the rougher ones.

Then there were the Little Red Guards. With the real Red Guards out of town, they played host to the visiting Red Guards from other regions. They liked to show off their ardor and militancy to these strangers. Weilin came across them once putting on a show at the Martyrs' Monument. They had organized a dance troupe and were dancing for the visiting Red Guards. The dance they did was the Loyalty Dance, in honor of Chairman Mao. It involved a lot of chanting and striking heroic poses, and much waving and snapping of red flags. Yuezhu was one of the dancers, wielding a big red flag. Rebellion is justified! she shrilled. Make revolution to the end! Her voice could be heard above all the others, though she was physically one of the smallest of the Little Red Guards. She did not see Weilin, who was standing in a small crowd of townspeople and visiting Red Guards.

Watching her—her sturdy, nimble body, her round expressive face—Weilin felt an odd reprise of that electric thrill he had experienced when first she touched him, in the pool more than a year before. But now the thrill was cold and bitter, like a dagger of ice piercing his belly. As she strutted and posed up on the plinth of the Martyrs' Monument he saw her again at Father's struggle meeting—pointing, accusing. Weilin was gripped with a dull, helpless rage. He wanted to push forward up to the plinth, pull her down and tear at her with his hands. Of course, he did nothing of the sort. The crowd would have stopped him, and in any case he thought Yuezhu was probably strong enough to resist him.

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In the spring another blow fell. Capitalist Roaders—this was now the official designation—were no longer to be allowed to occupy high-quality accommodation. A woman from the college's administrative office came to tell Mother. She would have to move into the single teachers' dormitory. They made the move that weekend. Weilin was so bored at this point he didn't mind at all. Any change, anything new, would be interesting. But the new accommodation was awful. Because all teaching at the college had stopped, most of the single teachers, who came from all over the province, had gone home to their families. The dormitory was full of visiting Red Guards. They were very noisy and dirty. To go to the toilet Weilin had to use the common facility at the end of the corridor. The Red Guards had fouled it up, so that you couldn't relieve yourself without stepping in excrement. Weilin took to scraping his feet on the door-sill as he came out, but he knew he was still treading excrement up the corridor. The common wash-rooms were just as bad. The Red Guards threw everything into the big stone sinks so they were all blocked up and full of scummy, stinking water.

Mother and Weilin had the top and bottom of a bunk bed in one of the dormitory rooms. On the other side of the room was another bunk bed. Since the teachers it belonged to had both gone back to their families, it was let out to visiting female Red Guards. None stayed more than a few days. Some were decent and treated Mother with respect; most just paid no attention to her at all, but came and went on their own whim, at all hours of the day and night, shouting, laughing, arguing.

Lying there in his bunk trying to sleep, negotiating a path between pools of ordure in the toilets, standing on line for the rough, tasteless food at the teachers' refectory, Weilin thought with aching, hopeless longing of the third-floor apartment with Mother's "Night in the Pavilion" on the wall, where everything was theirs and the window looked out over the bamboo groves to Mount Tan, and Father seated in his chair with head back and eyes closed, listening to Mr Mozart. *The wood has been made into a boat.*

In the summer the fighting started. The first Weilin knew of it was, one day when walking in the town he was almost run down by Half Brother. Half Brother came racing very fast round a corner into Red Flag Street, where Weilin was walking. Weilin froze with terror when he saw Half Brother bearing down on him, and only at the last moment had the presence of mind to step back into a doorway. But Half Brother didn't see him. He was running at full stretch, his mouth wide open and eyes staring; and right behind him were half a dozen other Red Guards in the same condition. They seemed to be running for their lives. The last of them was no more than twenty yards past Weilin when another crowd of Red Guards came round the corner, also at full tilt. It was clear that they were pursuing Half Brother's group; and their numbers were far greater. Soon the whole street was full of them, eighty or a hundred, running and shouting: "Stop the Rebels! Death to the Rebels!"

Some days after this there was a gunfight. It happened in the evening before dark, just as Weilin was eating with Mother in the teachers' refectory. There was a crackling sound, distant but very sharp. Weilin thought at first it was firecrackers, but Mother had frozen to attention like a startled animal. She sat bolt upright, listening. There was a string of isolated *crack . . . crack . . .* sounds, then another general outburst. Some of the college staff jumped up and ran out.

"What is it, Mother?"

"Guns, Weilin." Mother never called him "Pangolin" now. "The Red Guards are fighting each other. You must not go into the town."

Weilin didn't mind this. The college grounds let out on to open countryside, so he could walk as far as he liked without going into the town. Since his school was closed, his only reason for going into town had been to do food shopping, for such fruit and fresh vegetables as could be found to supplement the awful refectory meals. He had begun this during Mother's illness the previous winter, and been proud of the responsibility. Now Mother took care of it again, waiting for days when there seemed to be no fighting. Weilin filled his time by walking out into the countryside. Soon he knew all the nearby villages. One of the village headmen took a liking to him, and let him buy fresh produce from the village stocks, at a price much below the town price.

Weilin never understood the reason for the fighting. From hearing the talk in the teachers' refectory, and of occasional visitors in their dormitory room, he gathered that it was between Rebels and Revolutionaries. This made no sense to him. The main Red Guard slogans, which you still heard shouted at rallies and meetings, were: "To Rebel Is Justified!" and: "Make Revolution To The End!" So it seemed to Weilin that rebellion and revolution were both part of the Red Guard creed—in which case it ought not be possible for them to be in conflict. When he tried to ask Mother about this she just shook her head and put her hands over her face. Any talk about politics or Red Guards now sent her into a fit of distraction.

The fighting sputtered on through the summer and into the fall. Once there was fighting on the college campus itself: endless running feet and shouting voices outside the dormitory window, while Weilin cowered with Mother under the lower bunk bed. Now the food situation was bad. Mother came back from town with only a handful of moldy cabbage leaves, or a bunch of thin gray scallions. When Weilin trekked out to the village of the friendly headman, there was a crowd of townspeople there already, negotiating with him. The headman sold Weilin some bruised, over-ripe persimmon and the head, legs and feet of a duck, but said all his green vegetable had been bought up.

By the fall of that long year, the year 1967, Weilin had fallen into a stupor of boredom and fatalism. He slept twelve hours a day, and lay on his bed inert another two or three. He knew now, with conviction that had sunk roots deep into his childish soul, that Father was gone for ever, that Mother would never again be the Mother who had played word games with him, who had cooked eight treasures in sticky rice for him, who had made the "Night in the Pavilion" scroll. Since all that was gone, it seemed impossible that there could be anything in the future. It remained only to live out his fate, whatever it might be.

Yet still he could not help working over in his mind the events of Father's struggle and death. Still in his mind's eye he could see Half Brother, towering over him implacable; and Yuezhu, feet apart and pointing, her face all set in grim accusation. He nursed fantasies of revenge. He would climb over the wall into the barracks compound where they lived.

Watching from a hiding-place, he would discover their apartment. Then: overpower one of the guards! steal his gun! go to the apartment! kill anyone who stood in his way! shoot them! shoot the whole family! leaving Yuezhu till last, so she could beg for the lives of her family! in vain! Under the muggy skies of September he lay on his bunk bed, dreaming. The dreams got worse. Something about Yuezhu's body, something to do with the smoothness and wiry strength of it, seemed to demand pain and dismemberment. He tortured her with knives, blinded her with fire, opened her belly and pulled out her five entrails, as Yang Xiong had done to the witch Pan Qiaoyun in the old novel *Water Margin*, that for so long had sat cozy and secure in a green and yellow colored binding on Father's bookshelf, now cast out into the world helpless, like Mother and himself.

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He thought Mother would forget his tenth birthday altogether, as she had his ninth. Two weeks before, however, she sat with him on the bottom bunk bed, took his hand, and told him she had a special birthday gift for him.

"The gift is this: a great change in our lives. Weilin, we are going back to the northeast."

Weilin was delighted. Strictly speaking it was only Mother, of course, who was going *back;* he himself knew the northeast only from her stories. But how was it possible?

"It's an exchange. If you want to go live in another place, you can sometimes find someone in that place who wants to come to your place. Then, if your work units both agree, you can exchange."

It was difficult, of course (Mother went on), if you wanted to move from a poor place to a prosperous one, or from a bad climate to a good one. She had tried to get a transfer to Nanjing, where Father's sister and mother lived, but it was hopeless. Auntie Shi was scared to help, and Grandmother had become senile and understood nothing. But then she had contacted one of her own relatives in the northeast, Auntie An. It was a country district; and being in the northeast, winters were harsh. Auntie An had easily found someone willing to move to a cozy little market

town in the lush southwest. It had taken months to get the units to agree, but now everything was all arranged. Mother was to be an office clerk in a town called Dewy Spring, far in the northeast.

"It will be a poor life," Mother continued. "Poorer than we were used to when . . . before. But no poorer than this, I believe. And we will be in my homeland, where my relatives will help us. And . . . away from these memories."

From Seven Kill Stele to Dewy Spring was five days by train. It was a miserable journey. The trains were all packed, of course, so there was no guarantee of a seat; and even when you got a seat, it was hard wooden slats whose edges eventually penetrated through anything you tried to put between them and your flesh. Everybody was uncomfortable and ill-tempered, and of course the railroad staff, who had authority, took every possible opportunity to inconvenience or insult the passengers, as people invariably did when they had authority.

Even Beijing, the nation's capital, the place where Chairman Mao himself and all the nation's leaders lived, was a disappointment. They had to change trains there; but to get in position for a good seat on the connecting train they had to wait for eleven hours on line with a mass of other people and their bags and quilts and blankets and bundles, all crammed together fidgeting and grumbling and snoring on the wooden benches and hard stone floors. There was no opportunity to go out sightseeing. It was in fact perilous to move at all as you might lose your place, thereby condemning yourself to another half day, or half week, of waiting.

Beijing railroad station itself was by far the biggest building Weilin had ever seen. The waiting hall stretched away to infinity on all sides, countless ramps, passages, stairways and galleries running off into nested interiorities as complex and mysterious as those of the Palace of Green Porcelain in *The Time Machine,* leading away (for all Weilin knew) into darkness and menace, into the haunts of the Morlocks. He huddled beneath his quilt trying to hold off the moment when he would have to go to the toilet and face the chill fear, coming back, of not being able to locate Mother.

For all Mother had said, and all the trouble she must have gone through to effect the transfer, Weilin knew that she was in low spirits at

leaving Seven Kill Stele. He tried his best to support her, to be a good boy, to be cheerful and enthusiastic. He was in fact, for all the discomfort and fear, quite looking forward to the northeast. Mother had told him so many stories about it, it seemed to him like a place of romance and adventure. He knew nothing about Dewy Spring—Mother herself knew nothing about it, other than that Auntie An lived there—but in his young imagination Weilin developed pictures from the name of the place: neat wooden houses set along the banks of a bubbling mountain spring.

Late in the evening of the second day, as they rode north to Sea-and-Mountain Pass, where the Great Wall meets the eastern ocean, Weilin managed to coax Mother to tell some of her stories about the northeast. She told him about Nurhachi the conqueror, who had united the northeastern peoples in a great confederacy and made war on the Ming dynasty, and about his son and grandson, who overthrew the dynasty and seized the Empire.

After the Manchu people seized the Empire (mother told him) they worried that their native vigor would be sapped by the luxurious life of the court. So they fenced off their old homeland in the far northeast, preserving it in its original condition as the raw mountains and forests from which their race had sprung. The Manchu emperors of China used to retreat there from Peking, to hunt and fish, and to mix with their own people. To keep out the Chinese, whom they despised, they built a palisade of willow trees, as long as the Great Wall, and stretching north from the Wall to the Black Dragon River on the Siberian border.

Weilin thought the northeast sounded more and more fascinating. A wall of willow trees, as long as the Great Wall itself! What a wonderful thing to see! He wondered at what point they would cross through the Willow Palisade into the homeland of the Manchus, with its bears and wolves, its mysterious forests and mountain-top lakes.

Of course (Mother continued) the Chinese could not be kept out. Human beings are a kind of infestation of the earth (she said): they will seep through any barrier, occupy any empty place at last, teeming and squabbling, trampling everything down. So the northeast filled up with Chinese at last, and the Manchu people lost their aboriginal vitality, and their dynasty fell.

"But what about the Willow Palisade?" asked Weilin anxiously, thinking now that he might have been born too late to see this wonder.

"All gone." Mother made a careless motion with her hand. Her spirit seemed to have deflated suddenly, as it did so often now. She leaned her head against the window of the train, against the darkness fleeing past outside. "There is only a sort of ditch in places to show where it was," she continued. "The willows were all burned for firewood by the people, the people, swarming and trampling everywhere like locusts."

The train passed through the Wall at Sea-and-Mountain Pass while Weilin was sleeping that night, the night of his tenth birthday, and he woke in the northeast. It did not look magical at all. In fact, from the train window it looked just like the countryside south of the Wall. After Mother and he had eaten the last two of the steamed buns she had bought in Beijing he spent a long time pressed against the window, looking out at the dull flat fields and brown villages. The northeast looked just like everywhere else after all. So disappointing! Perhaps the place where Auntie An lived was also dull, flat and brown. He stood at the window for hours, vaguely hoping to see some sign of the Willow Palisade—even if only the ditch Mother had spoken of. But there was no sign at all.

They traveled north through a great industrial city called Shenyang, where they had to change trains again. Mother picked up more food from the vendors in the station. This train was older and dirtier than the one that had brought them from the south, but less crowded. It passed through a myriad tiny station stops, more people getting off than on each time, so that by nightfall Weilin had the luxury of stretching out at length on the seat, his head on Mother's lap. For all the hardness of the wooden seat he slept soundly, and when he woke the land had folded up all around them, and they were moving among forested mountain slopes.

"Oh, Mother, it's the real northeast at last! Look, the forest! Are there really bears and wolves in the forest?"

Mother smiled and ruffled his hair, which made him feel very happy. "Don't worry, Little Pangolin. I won't let them eat you."

It was the first time she had called him by his pet name since Father's death. And although he was glad to see her smile, hearing himself called "Pangolin" set something cold moving deep inside himself.

Auntie An was waiting for them at Dewy Spring station stop. She was a rough woman with a sallow, unhealthy face, and wearing a peasant's padded winter jacket, though it was only October and the air, though of course colder than in the south, was not uncomfortable. Weilin thought she did not look very happy to see them. She greeted Mother by her full name, and only nodded to Weilin without any spoken greeting at all.

Dewy Spring was a settlement of two hundred or so low buildings in a valley, with fields of sorghum and millet all around. Its purpose was to service a mine, whose excavations had stripped bare most of the nearer mountainside. Auntie An's unit was a mile from the station in the direction of the mine, so they shouldered their bundles and trudged behind her along the road. From the railroad station to her unit Auntie An talked with Mother; and in her talk the words *trouble* and *difficulty* occurred a great deal. From time to time her flow of talk was interrupted by a soft, repetitive cough.

It was on this road that the dust first caught Weilin's attention. It seemed to lie everywhere: on the road, on the grass and stones at the roadside, on the leaves of the trees, on the roofs of the houses. It was a fine dust, and each step on the road puffed up a tiny cloud of it, which seemed to just hang there without re-settling. It was not unpleasant to look at—a sort of pale creamy color, like the flesh of a banana. Now, glancing at Auntie An, he saw that she, too, was covered in the banana-colored dust. He could see it in her hair, on her clothes.

The dust was worse nearer the mine; a visible layer of banana-white, covering everything. There were some donkeys tethered outside one of the buildings: their coats were thick with the dust. At Auntie An's unit Mother went into an office with Auntie An and stayed there for a long time. Weilin was left in the corridor outside. After a while he got bored waiting in the corridor and walked out into the walled courtyard that fronted the place. Three young men were loafing there, squatting on the ground, smoking and talking. They all had the same pale, sickly look as Auntie An; and one was coughing the same soft, dry cough that Auntie An had. The youths stopped talking when Weilin came out. One of them stood up and accosted him. He was an ugly character, about eighteen

probably (Weilin thought), with a weedy black mustache. He addressed Weilin without taking the cigarette out of his mouth.

"You from Baiyong?"

"What? No. I've never even heard of Baiyong."

The youth squinted, apparently unable to credit that there might be human beings so benighted as never to have heard of Baiyong. "From where, then?"

"From the south. My mother's been assigned to work in this unit."

The youth's eyes widened. "You've come here from the *south*? Wa!" He turned and spat on the ground. Then he coughed—the same cough everyone else in this place seemed to have, the dry, gentle and oddly deferential cough. When he was through coughing, he addressed the others. "Hey, this kid's come here from the south."

They got to their feet and came over, kicking up little clouds of the creamy dust. "What, from Shenyang?"

Weilin smiled at their ignorance. "No, the southern part of our country. Sichuan Province."

They stared at him for a while, absorbing this. Then one of them laughed.

"You're crazy, coming here from the south."

"I'd cut off my arm if I could go live in the south," said the third youth, chopping violently with his hand to act out the wish. He went into a fit of coughing.

"But it seems very nice here," said Weilin. "Mountains, forests."

They all laughed. "Ha!" said the first youth. "You should see it in the winter!"

"Forty below, and the snow twelve feet deep!" said number two.

"You'll find out," said number three; and he and number two coughed together in unison

But Weilin did not find out. Mother came out of the office at last red-eyed from weeping. There was no place for her in the unit after all. There had been some change in the administration of the place, some faction overthrown by some other as was continually happening in those times, and the person she was supposed to exchange with was having her case re-examined, and nobody had thought to tell Mother.

"Then . . . shall we have to go all the way back to Seven Kill Stele?" Suddenly the thought of five more days on the train going back seemed unbearable.

Mother was silent. It seemed that that, in fact, was exactly what they would have to do.

"No, we won't go back to that place. We'll go to Uncle Zhou. Uncle Zhou will remember me, Uncle Zhou will help us."

Auntie An came out of the office while Mother was saying this. To her credit, she looked embarrassed. "Uncle Zhou," she said. "Yes, Flat All Around."

"But now how can I get a ticket?" asked Mother.

"We'll fix you up," mumbled Auntie An. "We should do that, at least."

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