Chapter 11

Strange Blessings Fall on Weilin's Head
A Brief Experience of the Seafaring Life

They reached Shanghai early in the morning of the third day. The ticket Asan had got would take them no further, so they left the train and ate breakfast at one of the restaurants near the station.

"We're going to be mailmen," chuckled Asan, when Weilin asked him how they were to proceed. This he explained: before leaving Flat All Around he had canvassed all the Shanghai people he could find in the town and surrounding countryside. They were all young people, sent to the northeast as part of the clean-up campaign following the suppression of the Red Guards. Shanghai had been a big Red Guard center, and there were Shanghai youth all over the country now. All of them were bitter and homesick. None trusted the public mails, and were glad to know someone traveling to Shanghai, to carry letters to their families and sweethearts. Asan had five of these letters to deliver.

"One of these families is bound to have enough connections to get us railroad tickets to Guangzhou," he said.

The plan did not start out very well. The first address they could not find at all, and they got hopelessly lost in a down-at-heel industrial district far from the city center. They took a bus all the way back to the railroad station; and by that time it was noon. The second address was not so far out, but the only person at home was the mother. She could barely speak Mandarin and seemed to be terrified of them, taking the letter

eagerly but not opening it in their presence, edging them towards the door even as she thanked them. Number three, out towards Sun Yatsen Park, was even worse: a sweetheart who went into peals of laughter at hearing the name of her exiled lover, and held his letter between thumb and finger away from her body, as if it had been sprinkled with Plutonium. By now it was nearly twilight, and Weilin was sick of Shanghai, of its endless dusty streets and packed buses. The weather was hot: not the heavy, humid heat of the southwest, but still oppressive and enervating after a day spent on the move.

"Where shall we sleep, Elder Brother?" he asked.

"Leave it to me," said Asan, scrutinizing a bus sign. "Let's do one more, then we'll eat."

With the fourth address their luck arrived. It was in one of the narrow old alleys off Sluice Gate Road. The alley was bounded by an eight-foot wall with rusty metal spikes on top. In the wall was a door, and by the door a bell. After Asan had pressed the bell three or four times the door was opened by a boy of Weilin's age. He was skinny and nervous looking. After the necessary introductions he led them across a bare courtyard to the house. It was large, with several rooms; but in contrast to what Weilin imagined a rich family's house would be like, this one had no decorations or ornaments at all. There was only a bare minimum of furniture, nothing hanging on the walls, no mats on the floors.

The boy, it turned out, was the younger son of the family, whose name was Fu. The elder was in the northeast, on a production brigade near Flat All Around. It was he who had given Asan a letter, addressed to his mother.

Mrs Fu was a straight-backed, handsome woman with a pale, lined face. Using flawless Mandarin, she greeted them in the main reception room of the house, took the letter from Asan, and opened and read it at once, her eyes moving hungrily over the pages. From another room somewhere further back Weilin could hear someone coughing a thin, feeble cough. It made him think of the coughing at Dewy Spring, of Auntie An's cough and the boys in the courtyard of the *yamen* there.

When Mrs Fu had finished reading the letter she sighed, folded it carefully, and put it back into its envelope.

"Forgive me," she said. "I am a poor hostess. Have you eaten? You're very welcome to join us. We shall have dinner soon. After my husband has eaten."

Mr Fu was bedridden, dying of lung cancer. That was the coughing Weilin had heard. They were taken in to be introduced to him. Weilin thought he had never seen anyone looking so ill. Mother and Father, at the time they died, had both looked more or less normal; but Mr Fu was like a ghost already, his skin deathly white, the flesh beneath it all gone. His eyes were clear, though, and he spoke steadily, if very softly, with a strong Shanghai accent. He asked them why they had come to Shanghai. Boldly, Asan took the opening.

"We're going to try to escape to Hong Kong," he said.

Weilin was shocked to hear him say this out loud, to people they had known less than half an hour. But Asan's judgment was sound. The skin of Mr Fu's face moved slightly in a smile. "Good," he said, "good, good. I hope you make it. These devils . . . "

"It's all right, Husband," Mrs Fu broke in. "Don't exert yourself. Save your strength to eat."

Mr Fu, once interrupted, seemed to have disconnected from them. He was lying straight back now, staring at the ceiling. "They cheated me," he whispered. "The bastards, they cheated me. I should never have trusted them."

Mrs Fu seemed very keen to get them out of the room at this point, but Asan pressed his advantage. "Good Sir," he said, addressing Mr Fu with the old honorific, instead of *Comrade*. "We have enough money, but no way to get tickets from here to Guangzhou. Can you help us get tickets?"

Slowly, Mr Fu turned his head, engaging them again. Once more he made the waxy smile.

"I'll arrange everything. I'll tell my son what to do. Leave it to us. Stay here tonight. Tomorrow everything will be arranged."

While Mrs Fu fed her husband, Weilin and Asan sat in the reception room with the son. He told them his father had been a National Capitalist. Before Liberation he had owned and run a printing firm. He had done favors for the communists, printing some of their pamphlets free of charge;

so when they took Shanghai they had let him stay in business. He had done well and developed good connections in the local Party. Then the Cultural Revolution had arrived. The Party had been purged; the Red Guards had looted his house; and both his sons had been sent away to remote areas. Now that he was dying, the younger son had been allowed to come home to look after him. Of course the boy had no residence permit for Shanghai, so when Mr Fu died he would have to return to his unit, a poor place in Anhui Province where (Little Fu grimaced) the peasants washed their bodies only at birth, marriage and death and talked of nothing but food and money.

"The authorities here are very strict about residence permits," said Little Fu. "A Shanghai residence permit is like gold. My father still has some contacts in the government, but even he can't pull it off. I guess I will spend all my life in that place."

Weilin thought the boy was going to burst into tears. Little Fu was a year or two older than himself, but seemed, to Weilin, much younger. He felt sorry for the boy. Like himself, Little Fu had had an agreeable life and bright prospects. Then the Red Guards had smashed everything. Weilin could never think of the Red Guards without seeing in his mind's eye Yuezhu, pointing at Father in accusation, or strutting and prancing through her Loyalty Dance at the Martyrs' Monument. As soon as he thought of her, acid rose from his stomach.

"But my father can get railroad tickets, don't worry. That he can still do, I know. He's done it for other people. The head of the Railroad Bureau is an old classmate of his. Ai!" Little Fu shook his head. "Everyone says: to get ahead in life, you need a father with influence. But soon I shall have no father at all! What will happen to me?"

Now Little Fu really did cry, though without much fuss. There were just the tears, running down his pale cheeks. Weilin lowered his head in embarrassment. Asan, too, was apparently at a loss for words. Fortunately Mrs Fu came in and announced dinner.

The dinner was not much: a dish of fibrous green vegetables, some dried fish, rice. The striking thing was that before taking up their chopsticks, Mrs Fu and Little Fu said a prayer. Apparently they were religious. Weilin had only the vaguest concept of religion: a copy of the *Diamond*

Sutra at Grandmother's house in Nanjing, on their one visit there when he was seven, the book all printed in thick ugly black old-style characters . . . the temple in Flat All Around that had been wrecked by the Red Guards in '66. He felt fairly sure that religion was counter-revolutionary, and listened apprehensively to the Fus' prayer.

> We thank the Master of Heaven for the food on our table, and for his many blessings in the past, and for the hope he sets in our hearts for the future. His will be done.

Mrs Fu and Little Fu said *amen* in unison. Asan had bowed his head; but Weilin was too much taken by surprise even to do that. He just gawped. The Fus did not seem to mind. After *amen* they set to the food with a will, pointing out such choice pieces as there were to their guests.

After dinner, when Mrs Fu had retired and Little Fu was showing them their room, Weilin asked him about the prayer.

"We are Christians," said Little Fu. "We say prayers to the Master of Heaven, and to his son, Yesu. Yesu was a bodhisattva. He lived in Palestine back in the Han Dynasty. He stayed on Earth and suffered, to show us how suffering could be conquered. My mother was a Christian first. After she married my father she tried to convert him. He was very stubborn, and made fun of her. But at last she converted him. Now they read sutras together every night. But don't speak about these things to others, he added."

"I think these people are counter-revolutionaries," said Asan when the two of them were alone in their room, lying on the wood-frame bed together in the darkness.

"You shouldn't say that. They're being very kind to us. Even though they have nothing to hope for from us."

Asan considered this. "Maybe they're going to shop us. And in return, the authorities will give the kid a residence permit."

"Shop us? For what? We haven't done anything wrong."

"We're trying to escape to Hong Kong, aren't we? It's against the law, I'm sure."

Weilin wondered if this was right. "No," he said. "Even if it's against the law, we're not such big criminals. They wouldn't get a residence permit just for shopping us. Little Fu said they're like gold."

Neither of them said anything else about it. Lying there in the dark, Weilin wondered if what Asan said might be true. He lay awake a long time wondering about it. Very faintly he could hear Mr and Mrs Fu talking in another room: the woman's voice strong and insistent, the man's barely audible, lapsing into long spells of coughing.

The next day they had to themselves. Little Fu went off to do whatever his father had instructed him to do by way of getting railroad tickets. Mrs Fu ate breakfast with them, then retired to her husband's room. The two companions set off for a day's sightseeing. They strolled the Bund, looking at the ships on the Yellowbank River. They explored the stores in Nanjing Road. Now Weilin found the city awesome and intimidating. The great buildings—mountains of stone—glowering down at them along the Bund: the mighty ships moored at the waterside, impossible complications of halyard and hawser, sheer metal sides streaked with rust, superstructures all embroidered with railings, funnels, companionways, davits: an enormous hotel, towering up into the sky layer upon layer, twelve foot high glass doors guarded by two PLA men. Now, with no purpose but to observe, he watched the people themselves, moving briskly about their wide, clean-swept streets, the men wearing short-sleeved white shirts, the women in pretty blouses—so different from the sluggish inmates of Flat All Around moping listlessly in their patched khaki jackets and mud-colored T-shirts. Asan, however, seemed not impressed at all by the great city, though it must have been as strange to him as it was to Weilin. His main comments concerned the girls they saw. "What a cutie!" he would exclaim, or: "Check out the pretty face over there!"

Back at Sluice Gate Road that evening, they found that everything had been arranged. More, indeed, than they had anticipated, for the number of tickets was three. Little Fu was to come with them.

"My father said it's best. He said there is no future for me here. I must make my way in the outside world."

"You must look after him," said Mrs Fu. "He is not very strong. Please, please look after him."

Asan was scrutinizing the tickets. “Are these the right characters for Guangzhou?” he asked.

Weilin looked. The tickets were not for Guangzhou at all but for Shantou, a different city—also, he knew, in the far south.

Little Fu explained. “My father says we must get a boat to take us to Hong Kong. You can’t get across the border, it’s guarded. So you either have to swim across the sea, or get a boat. And I can’t swim, you see. He says it will be easier to get a boat from Shantou. There are a lot of fishing people there. They will take you on their boat for a consideration.”

He showed them the consideration: a wad of bank notes wrapped in brown oil-paper. The notes were all for ten yuan, the highest denomination in China at that time. There were two hundred and forty of them. Weilin’s salary at Love Socialism! brigade had been four and a half yuan a month. Probably nobody in Flat All Around earned more than fifty.

Mrs Fu made bundles of food for them to take to Shantou. The train was to leave the following afternoon. That morning, when everything was ready, she took them in to see Mr Fu again. He reached out for his son, resting one wasted hand on the boy’s cheek, which was already wet with tears again. The papery skin of his own face trembled with emotion. He looked past his son, addressing himself to Asan.

“Go to Shantou. Say nothing to anybody about why you’re going. I’ve given my son an address in the city. Old associate of mine. He’ll give you directions, tell you how to find the fishing people. If you have no luck with them, steal a boat. Hong Kong is along the coast, west from Shantou about three hundred kilometers. Keep the coast in sight. Do what you must do! Don’t be afraid of anything!”

He fell back, exhausted, and Mrs Fu led them out. Before seeing them off she made them all kneel in the reception room while she prayed to her Christian gods. Now Weilin and Asan knew enough to temple their hands and bow their heads.

> Master of Heaven, look down on these young people and bless their journey. Guide them with your strong hand. Let the love of the Lord Yesu be with them in all their dealings with those they meet. And let the Holy Spirit be their companion and

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> strength. If they succeed, fill them with humility and gratitude for the gift of success, which can come only from You. If they fail, take them up to live with You in Your Hall of Joy and Peace for ever. In all things let Your will, not ours, be done.

Amen, said everybody. They rose and went outside, across the courtyard to the door in the wall. Mrs Fu opened the door for them. At this point Little Fu began weeping without restraint, shaking his head from side to side in distress, the tears flying away from him. Mrs Fu, however, showed no emotion. Her eyes were clear and her voice strong.

"Master of Heaven bless you all," she said as they stepped out. "Lord Yesu bless you."

When they were all outside she closed the door quickly. Little Fu sobbed all the way to the railroad station.

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Shantou was further south than Weilin had ever been. Here the people spoke a dialect so thick and strange he couldn't understand them at all. Little Fu's mother had written out a letter of introduction for them to Mr Fu's old business associate. They spent half a day trying to find this man, asking directions from all the people they met until they hit on one who spoke Mandarin. Then they would get lost and have to repeat the process. It was evening before they found the man, whose name was Zhang. He was suffering from some illness that had swollen his feet up with edema so that he could not walk. He was friendly enough, much more so when he knew that they were well supplied with cash. He insisted on knowing how much, and also on seeing it, which was embarrassing as Asan had told him they had only four hundred, while the oil-paper bundle, if produced, would show six times that amount. Asan, with great presence of mind, said that Little Fu was carrying the money fixed to his underwear, and would need to detach it in private.

"My health is poor," sighed Mr Zhang. "I need medicine. But it is so difficult to obtain now."

"I am sure Little Fu's father intended us to help you in this respect," replied Asan.

They paid him a hundred yuan for his assistance, and stayed three days and nights while Mr Zhang made inquiries on their behalf.

"There is a village along the coast," he told them at last. "Forty kilometers. You can take a bus. The headman is a distant relative of mine. He can arrange everything. You should pay him sixty."

It took them all the next day to reach the village, riding a bus from the Shantou station to a dozing country town called Baodan, then hitching a ride in a truck that stank of fish, until they reached the coast. Here China fell away in steep rocky cliffs to the Pacific, lusterless under solid cloud cover. The village headman read Mr Zhang's letter with some difficulty, tracking the characters across the page with a long curving brown fingernail, mouthing them as he read. Finished, without further ado he said *gei qian!*—pay up—quite possibly the only words of Mandarin he knew.

When they had paid the headman he took them down to the waterfront, which was surprisingly well-appointed: concrete dock, typhoon bar two hundred meters out, half a dozen large shed-like buildings—fish-drying or -canning plants, perhaps. There were an astonishing number of ships in the typhoon shelter, all of them ancient-looking high-prowed junks in dark wood. The headman strolled along the dock, calling out to the ships. Some yielded a response; most did not. He entered at last into long negotiations with a man on one of the smaller ships. The man looked about ninety years old, burnt by the sun to the color of his vessel's timbers.

THIS ONE HIMSELF, OLDER BROTHER, OLDER BROTHER'S TWO SONS, THEY GO EARLY MORNING TOMORROW, YOU PAY 40 EACH. The headman frowned and grimaced as he wrote, making the characters very slowly, holding the paper away from himself after each one, to make sure it looked right. Weilin marveled that anyone who looked as old as the man on the boat could yet have an older brother.

The three adventurers slept that night on the boat with the old man, whose name they never discovered—with whom, indeed, they had no means of communication, he being perfectly illiterate and speaking a

dialect none of them understood. The old man's brother and nephews were on shore. Little Fu paid him up front, the bills ready in his pants pocket, he having followed Asan's instructions and fixed the main part of their cash into his underwear. They bought salted eggs and dried fish from the headman, at a price that left Asan grumbling the entire evening, and the fisherman shared some delicious white rice gruel with them, and they slept out on deck in the heavy heat. Weilin was almost too excited to sleep. So easy! And soon they would be in Hong Kong! Fourth Outside Uncle would take care of him, and he would have a life of prosperity and peace. So easy, after all!

They were out at sea when he woke next morning, China a smudge on the horizon, the sun already high behind the heavy tropical clouds. The ship was under sail, presumably to save fuel. The sail was of oiled brown cloth, lifted up the ship's mast by a boom. Three men, none of them the old ship-owner, were sitting on piles of netting at the rear of the boat, eating rice from bowls and talking cheerfully with Asan. Little Fu was squatting on his haunches by the railing that ran along the side of the boat, looking over at the shore with a glum expression. As Weilin stirred himself upright, Little Fu lost his balance from the movement of the ship, and clutched at the wooden railing to keep from falling over.

"I don't think you can squat on board a ship," said Weilin. "Look, the sailors are all sitting."

"I feel sick," replied Little Fu. "I want to throw up."

Weilin went over to where Asan was talking to the three fishermen. They were talking in their own dialect, but explaining with sign language as they went.

"Can you understand them?" asked Weilin.

"Yeah, more or less. I think they're telling me, if we see a boat to go downstairs. He means the coast guard, I guess. They don't want the sticks to know they have passengers. We should investigate downstairs, try to find some hiding places."

Which is what Asan was doing when the boat arrived, late the next day. It was not a coast guard boat, though, but a motorized sailing junk very much like their own, except for the machine gun mounted in its prow. Weilin and Little Fu were up on deck, thinking the new arrival was

another fishing boat until they saw the machine-gun, by which point it was too late to go below. No sooner had they seen it than it fired, stitching a neat line of holes across the junk's sail. Their hosts brought down the sail. They did not seem afraid, only subdued. Weilin caught the eye of one of the nephews. His expression was unmistakable: *Your luck just ran out. Nothing I can do.*

The visitors came right alongside, cutting their engine, grappling to the boat's railing with poles and jumping up on to the deck. Four of them came aboard, all with the burnt, ageless look of these sea people. They were barefoot and wore shorts, like the fishermen. Two of them wore nothing else at all. Of the others, one was wearing a white T-shirt of surprising cleanliness, brilliant white against his burnt umber skin, with a picture printed on it somehow—the head of a cow, with unnaturally long horns—and some English words Weilin could not understand: **UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS**. This character also had a lurid red-and-white bandanna wrapped round his head, and sported a machete in a leather holster at his waist. The fourth man wore a rather smart maroon vest, unbuttoned, over his bare torso.

Red Bandanna seemed to be the leader. He went to the older brother and began yelling at him. Maroon Vest stood behind him, eyes scanning the deck. The two others went below, shinnying expertly down the hatch.

Red Bandanna went on yelling at the three fishermen for some time. The fishermen shrugged, spread their arms and shook their heads, invulnerable in their poverty. Nothing worth stealing.

The two who had gone below reappeared, the old man between them, but no Asan. There was more yelling, with all the visitors joining in; but the yelling had a quality of ritual display about it, and the visitors' eyes were already wandering from the fishermen, looking around at the boat, at the fittings, at Weilin and Little Fu standing by the netting at the stern. Weilin wished he could disappear.

Now Red Bandanna was asking the old man about them, pointing at them, barking short interrogatives. The old man shrugged, mumbling, pointing at Little Fu. Red Bandanna came over to Little Fu. He took the machete from its sheath and held it with the point against Little Fu's

breastbone. Little Fu fainted, actually falling against Red Bandanna, who pushed him back on to the netting.

They stripped Little Fu, tearing his clothes apart by the seams, until he was naked. They found the oil-paper bundle in his shorts. Red Bandanna opened it up, the others clustered round to see. They all whooped at the sight of the bank notes. Little Fu was face-down on the nets, either still unconscious or just prudently feigning it. Red Bandanna looked down at him, said something, and they all laughed. He lay down on top of Little Fu, fiddling with the front of his own shorts; then went into a kind of rhythmic pushing motion—up and down, up and down. Little Fu seemed to come up and down part of the way with him on each motion, but showed no other sign of life.

After a certain amount of this Red Bandanna got up, and the others one by one repeated his actions. Little Fu made no sound during all this. When the last of the four had got up, Red Bandanna lifted his machete very high then brought it down fast, making a *tsokk* sound. Little Fu's bare legs, which were all Weilin could see of him from his position, jerked out straight in spasm. Red Bandanna lifted the machete a second time, inky droplets flying from the blade as it rose, and *tsokk* again. Now Little Fu's head was rolling along the deck, over and over, passing not six inches from where Weilin was standing petrified. As the head rolled it left a splash of color on the deck, like a footprint, after each revolution, until it came to rest at last against the far railing, to dribble the last of its liquid contents into the scuppers. Two of the men lifted Little Fu's body, blood still pumping from the neck in braided shafts of vivid crimson, and threw it over the stern. The fishermen were watching the whole thing with, so far as Weilin could make out, perfect lack of interest. Still he dared not move. He felt his bladder go, then his bowels.

Now Red Bandanna came over to inspect Weilin. He looked him up and down without expression for a moment, then his face split in a grin. His teeth were the same dark brown as his skin, his eyes pitiless, the eyes of a demon. Weilin was paralyzed with terror, the gazelle in the jaws of the lion. In the heat of the day he had left off his pants, was wearing only the shorts and T-shirt he used as underwear in the north. Of course the visitors could see that he had voided himself. They thought it a great joke, point-

ing and laughing. One of them leaned past Red Bandanna to pinch the flesh of Weilin's arm.

Weilin stepped back from sheer reflex. Red Bandanna frowned, and reached out to grab him; but slipped on the waste that had dropped from Weilin's shorts, and lost his balance. He grabbed at his companion instead, to prevent himself falling, and Weilin, woken now from catalepsy, turned, ran four long paces, and dived clean over the rail.

When he came up he was twenty meters from the ship. Red Bandanna was at the rail, looking down at him, then turning to call instructions to someone. Weilin was at the rear of the ship, on the opposite side from the other vessel. It took them some time to get the machine-gun to their stern. By the time they could fire at him he was a hundred meters away. The bullets made a cheerful *bok-bok-bok* as they hit the water.

After three or four bursts the machine-gun stopped. Weilin could hear them shouting, but he did not look back now, only swam, as hard as he could. When he felt sufficiently safe to roll over and look back, the two ships were a very great distance away, and had separated. The one on the right, the pirate vessel, had hoisted its sail. Weilin wondered if they meant to come after him, but they sailed away without turning, disappearing at last in the evening haze. The fishing-boat stayed in view longer, but finally she too slipped from sight, and Weilin was alone in the ocean.

Weilin felt no fear, his capacity for fear having perhaps been exhausted. He recalled that the fishing-boat had been sailing parallel to the coast, their occasional glimpses of land always to the right of their line of travel; so he turned ninety degrees to his right and began to swim.

Darkness came down quickly, sweeping across the water from the east. The moon rose; a full moon, or nearly so, but visible only as a smear of rich silver on the clouds. Weilin swam on. When his arms got tired he paused to float on his back, as he had floated on the river in the far northeast, the river whose name he had never bothered to discover, the current then always taking him back past the laughter of small children to his starting-point on the road home to Mother at Flat All Around. He wondered briefly what currents were active here, out on the great heaving ocean, far from any human sound—but firmly pushed down the thought

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and its trailing tendrils of terror, turning instead to regret at the recollection of his few scanty possessions left in the fishing boat, especially that last photograph of Mother and Father . . . but then remembering, with quite disproportionate joy, that he had been carrying Mother's red plastic hair clip in the pocket of his shorts as a sentimental talisman, and had it still, and could feel it there with his hand if he paused to tread water.

Weilin swam on, without fear or hope. The very motion of swimming seemed inconsequential in the vast movements of the sea, in the slow swell that lifted him up high then lowered him down according to its own immemorial rhythms; and yet there was nothing to do, after all, but swim, for as long as he was able to. At the top of the swell he sometimes saw lights far off. Whether they were the lights of ships, or of the shore, he could not tell. Each light would glimmer for a while at the utmost edge of vision, then disappear. Phosphorescence danced in meaningless patterns on the dark surface of the water. The moon crossed the sky and began to descend. The beginnings of exhaustion tugged at his will; but he would not accept them, still swam on.

And so he swam, all through the long night, under the veiled moon. And as the clouds hid the face of the moon (thus Weilin reflected, in his diminishing spells of clear thought), so they hid Weilin himself from the eyes of Heaven, so that the Immortals above, unable to see him, were indifferent to his fate, whatever it might be, wearily swimming alone out there on the infinite warm dark ocean.