

WORLDS OF MODERN CHINESE FICTION

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White Dog and the Swings

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Translated by Michael S. Duke

GAOMI Dongbei Xiang once produced a species of large gentle white dog, but now after several generations it's very difficult to find a pure breed. Today everybody raises mongrels, and even if a white one is occasionally seen, somewhere on its body will be a patch of colored fur betraying its mixed blood. But if the patch of colored fur doesn't cover too much of the dog's body and isn't located in too prominent a place, everybody will habitually refer to it as a "white dog" without being too critical about the discrepancy between the name and the reality.

I was on the stone steps under the bridge washing my face in the crisp, clean water, just as a "white dog" whose body was completely white except for two black front paws walked dejectedly over the dilapidated stone bridge across the little river near my old home. It was the seventh lunar month and the low-lying Gaomi Dongbei Xiang was unbearably hot. When I got down off the bus from the county seat to the rural townships, the sweat had already soaked through my clothes, and my face and neck were covered with thick yellow dust. After washing my face and neck I wanted to strip down to nothing and dive into the river, but when I saw people walking this way in the distance on the brown dirt road through the fields that lead up to the stone bridge, I gave up the idea, stood up, and wiped my face and neck with one of a set of matching handkerchiefs my fiancée had given me. It was already past noon, the sun was declining slightly to the west, and a few gusts of breeze wafted over from the southeast. Those gentle and refreshing southeast breezes made one feel very comfortable, made the tips of the sorghum lightly sway back and forth, made the fur ruffle up the back of the "white dog" who was coming closer and closer, wagging his tail. He came up close and I saw his two black front paws.

The black-pawed white dog walked to the end of the bridge, stopped, looked back toward the road, raised his chin, and looked over at me with turbid canine

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eyes. The dog's eyes had a look of far-off desolation that held some sort of vague intimation, and the hint of that far-off desolation called up a dim feeling of confusion from somewhere deep in my heart.

After I left home to go to school, my parents also moved to another province to live with my elder brother; I had no more relatives in my old home, so I never came back again. All of a sudden it's been ten years, neither a long nor a short time. Just before summer vacation, my father came to the college where I was teaching and couldn't help becoming very emotional when he talked about our old home. He wanted me to go back there and take a look around; I said I was busy with my work and couldn't get away, but he just shook his head disapprovingly. After my father left, I always felt uneasy. Finally I decided to put off everything I was doing and come back.

The white dog looked back again at the brown dirt road then lifted his head to look at me; his canine eyes remained turbid. Just as I was looking at his black paws, about to recall something in astonishment, he sucked in his bright red tongue and barked at me. Then he crouched near a piling at the end of the bridge, lifted one leg, and pissed in his accustomed manner. His business done, he walked slowly down the path I had taken under the bridge, stood by my side, wagged his tail between his legs, stuck out his tongue, and lapped up some water.

He seemed to be waiting for someone, displaying an air of leisureliness in his drinking as if he really wasn't thirsty. The look of indifference on the dog's face was reflected on the surface of the river while fish kept swimming by under the dog's nose. Neither the dog nor the fish were afraid of me; I distinctly smelled the stench of the dog and the fish and even had the disgusting idea of kicking him into the water after the fish, but I decided I ought to have better "canine manners." Just then the dog curled up his tail, lifted his head, glanced coldly over at me, and strode deliberately up to the end of the bridge. I watched him as he ruffled up the fur around his neck and ran with nervous excitement toward the road. On both sides of the dirt road were long fields of sorghum with gray-green tassels. A small blue sky full of pure white clouds scudding by hung over the checkerboard countryside. I walked to the top of the bridge and picked up my traveling bag, intending to cross the bridge quickly. This place was still about six miles from my village, and I hadn't let anybody there know I was coming; better hurry on in there early and make it easy for them to find a place for me to eat and sleep. Just as I was thinking about that, I saw the white dog trot out of the sorghum field beside the road, leading the way for a person carrying a big load of sorghum leaves.

I'd worked around in a village for nearly twenty years and naturally knew those sorghum leaves made first-class fodder for horses and cattle; I also knew that stripping the old leaves off the sun-ripening sorghum wouldn't hurt it's productivity. As I watched that far-off bundle of sorghum leaves hobbling over, I felt sorry for the person carrying it. I know all too well what it feels like to push

your way through those dense and windless sorghum fields cutting leaves. Needless to say, your whole body is drenched with sweat and your lungs feel like they're going to explode, but the worst thing is the way the dry little hairs on the sorghum leaves scratch against your sweat-soaked skin. I heaved a relaxed sigh that I wasn't carrying that bundle.

Gradually I could make out the person who was trudging forward all bent over by the weight of the sorghum bundle. A blue shirt, black pants, brown plastic sandals on skinny black crow's feet; if she didn't have long hair I wouldn't have been able to tell it was a woman, even though she was quite near when she first came out of the field. She walked along with her head parallel to the ground and her neck stuck way out, probably to lessen the pain of the load on her back. She used one hand underneath to hold the carrying pole up on her back while the other hand reached back to hold it from the top. The sun beat down on the shiny beads of sweat on her neck and forehead. The sorghum leaves were fresh and green as leeks. She moved along slowly and deliberately, finally coming onto the bridge. The bridge was just about as wide as the bundle of leaves on her back, so I stepped back down to the place where the dog had just left his calling card and stood there watching them cross the bridge.

Suddenly I felt that there was an invisible cord between her and the white dog; as the white dog bumped along, one step fast and one step slow, that cord alternately pulled up tight and slacked off. Coming up in front of me, he glanced over at me again with that detached canine look. That look of vague intimation in the dog's eyes suddenly took on an extraordinary clarity: those black paws of his stripped the veil of confusion from my mind and made me remember her. The pungent smell of her sweat and the sound of her panting for breath as she struggled past me with her head bent low remains forever in my memory. Dropping the heavy sorghum leaves down off her back, she stretched her body out slowly. The big bundle of leaves behind her came almost up to the level of her breasts. I looked at the place on the bundle of leaves that came in contact with her body; it was noticeably concave, and the spot where she pulled it most forcefully was a mass of wet crumpled leaves. I knew that the places on her body that had crumpled the sorghum leaves were certainly very comfortable now; standing on the bridge with the cool moist breeze wafting over the water from the fields and caressing her body, she must have felt relaxed and satisfied. Relaxation and satisfaction are the elements that make up our happiness and well-being; in those years now past, I understood such things.

After standing up straight, she seemed temporarily to lose consciousness. The dirt on her face was streaked with lines of sweat. She exhaled in repeated bursts through her open mouth. The bridge of her nose was gracefully high and straight. Her complexion was swarthy. Her teeth were pure white. My old home produces many beautiful women, some of them being chosen as palace ladies in every dynasty. A few of them are actresses in Beijing today; I've seen them all and that's just the way they look, none of them are much better looking than she is.

"Nuan!" I called out.

She stared at me with her left eye; it was quite bloodshot and looked terrible.

"Nuan . . . Sis!" I called out as if adding a footnote.

I'm twenty-nine today and she's two years younger, but after a ten-year separation she's changed greatly; if it wasn't for the blemish left on her face from that mishap on the swing, I wouldn't dare have recognized her. The white dog was also examining me intently; he must actually be an old dog of twenty years, I thought. I'd never imagined that he would still be living, and he looked pretty healthy. That year at the Dragon Boat Festival he was only about the size of a basketball when my father carried him over from my great uncle's house in the county seat. Twenty years ago, pure bred white dogs were very nearly extinct, and even ones with slight imperfections like this one, who could still generally be called a "white dog," were very hard to come by. My great uncle raised dogs for a living, and he let my father bring this one home only because of my father's shameless pleading. His introduction into our village full of mongrels led to widespread expressions of admiration; there was even an offer to buy him for thirty dollars, but naturally it was politely refused. Even in the villages of those days, in a desolate place like our Gaomi Dongbei Xiang, there were still quite a few interesting things to do, and raising dogs was no doubt one of them. As long as there were no big natural disasters, most everybody had enough to eat and the dogs were also able to flourish.

That year, when I was nineteen, Nuan was seventeen, and White Dog was four months old, troop after troop of Liberation Army soldiers with their military vehicles crossed over this stone bridge in an endless line from the north. Our high school set up sheds at the end of the bridge and prepared tea for the Liberation Army while the student propaganda brigade stood by beating drums and cymbals, dancing and singing. The bridge is very narrow, and the first big truck went across very carefully with the wheels half over the sides. The back wheels of the second truck broke off a piece of the masonry and toppled over into the river; many pots and pans and cookery of all sorts were smashed up, and the whole river was speckled with gobs of oil. A bunch of soldiers jumped into the river, pulled the driver out of the cab, and dragged him dripping wet up onto the bank. A group of soldiers in long white coats gathered around him. One of them, wearing white gloves with a set of earphones in his hand, began shouting loudly. Nuan and I were stalwarts of the propaganda brigade, but we forgot our drumming and singing for gawking at all the excitement. Later on a number of high-ranking leaders came over, shook hands with our school's poor and lower middle peasant representative, Pockmarked Uncle Guo, and Chairman Liu of the school's Revolutionary Committee, then put on their white gloves and waved to all of us. We just stood there watching the troops cross the river.

Uncle Guo asked me to play the flute, and Chairman Liu asked Nuan to sing. "Sing what?" asked Nuan. Chairman Liu said, "Sing *We Feel So Close to*

You." Thus I played and she sang. Row by row the troops stepped onto the bridge and crossed the river while the trucks drove one by one into and across the water. ("The river water's clear and clean, our crops cover the banks.") The fronts of the trucks whipped up white froth while leaving a trail of roiling mud in their wake. ("The People's Liberation Army enters the mountains, to help us carry out the autumn harvest.") After the big trucks had crossed, two small jeeps slipped dully into the river. One of them went rapidly across the river with frothy waves splashing up five or six meters on both sides; the other one knifed into the water, sputtered a couple of times, died out, and just sat there in the middle of the river belching black smoke. ("We start shooting the breeze, and so many past experiences rush into mind.") "Damn!" said one of the officers. Another said, "The silly sonovabitch! Get Monkey Wang to send some men and pull that jeep out." ("We eat from the same bowl, and share the same oil lamp.") Very quickly a number of soldiers waded into the river to push the stalled jeep out; the soldiers all wore their uniforms into the water, which only came up to their knees, but they were wet up to their chests; after becoming soaked their uniforms grew darker and clung tightly to their bodies, showing their fat or skinny legs and buttocks. ("You are our own flesh and blood, you are our closest friends.") The fellow in the long white coat carried the driver dripping wet into a truck with a red cross painted on the side. ("The party's kindness is beyond expression, we always feel so close to you.")

The officers turned around and looked like they were preparing to cross the bridge; I raised my flute, Nuan opened her mouth, and we stared at the officers in terror. An officer wearing black rimmed glasses nodded his head toward us and said, "You sang pretty well and you played pretty well too." Uncle Guo said to the officers, "You're all working so hard, but these kids can only make a lot of wild noises; please don't laugh too much." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, opened it, and very respectfully offered them to the officers, but they politely refused. A truck with a lot of wheels pulled up on the other side of the river; several soldiers jumped aboard and threw down a few spools of thick steel cable and some white wooden sticks. The officer with the black rimmed glasses turned to a handsome young officer at his side, "Brigade Leader Cai, have your Propaganda Brigade give them a few musical instruments and so on."

The troops crossed the river and fanned out into the various villages. Division Headquarters was stationed in our village. Those days were just like lunar New Years, everyone in the village was so excited. Dozens of telephone wires stretched out in all directions from the side room of our house. Handsome Brigade Leader Cai took a troop of soldiers who specialized in literary and artistic performances to live in Nuan's house. I went there to fool around every day and became very familiar with Brigade Leader Cai. He let Nuan sing for him. He was a tall, lanky youth with fluffy hair and high, arching eyebrows. As Nuan sang, he hung his head and smoked for all he was worth; I could see his ears twitch slightly. He said that Nuan had a pretty good voice, really very good; too bad she

didn't have a famous master to teach her. He said I also had a good future in store for me. He liked our black-pawed white dog very much. Once my father found out, he immediately offered to give it to him, but he declined to take it. The day the troops moved out my father and Nuan's father both turned out and begged Brigade Leader Cai to take me and Nuan with him. Brigade Leader Cai said that he would report back to his commander and come to recruit us both during the end-of-the-year recruiting drive. Just before he left, Brigade Leader Cai gave me a book called *Methods of Playing the Flute* and Nuan one called *How to Sing Revolutionary Songs*.

"Sis," I said with great embarrassment, "Don't you recognize me?"

In our village there are a great variety of surnames from all over the place, including Zhang, Wang, Li, Du, and so on. And the various kinds of generational ranks are all mixed up, too. There have actually been cases where a paternal aunt (*gugu*) married her nephew (*zhizi*) or a nephew ran off with his aunt (*shenshen*), but as long as their ages were about the same nobody sneered at them. I had become accustomed to calling Nuan Sis (*xiaogu*) ever since we were kids, but there wasn't the slightest trace of blood relationship between us.* Ten years ago when I began ambiguously to combine Nuan and Sis together, the term had a very special flavor, but now, after a ten-year separation, when we've both grown up so, even though I still called her that none of the old flavor remained.

"Sis, you mean you really don't recognize me?" As soon as I said that, I immediately regretted my stupidity. She already had a sad expression on her face. Sweat continued to soak through, matting a strand of her dried out hair against the side of her cheek. Her swarthy complexion turned ashen gray. Her left eye was perceptibly moist and shiny. She had no right eye. No tears there, only a jagged line of black eye lashes grew there in the deeply sunken eye socket. My heart grew tight as a knot. I just couldn't stand to look at that hollow socket, so I deliberately diverted my gaze and looked instead at her lovely eyebrows and her wet hair shimmering brightly in the sunlight. The muscles of her left cheek twitched slightly, moving her eye and her eyebrow together into a strangely miserable expression. If anyone else saw her they wouldn't be moved, but I couldn't help being moved by the sight of her. . . .

That night over ten years ago I ran over to your house and said, "Sis, nobody's swinging now, let's go over and really swing." You said, "I'm taking a nap." I said, "Come on! The Cold Food Festival's been over for eight days now; the work team is going to take the swings down and use the wood. The carter was complaining to the team leader this morning about using the cart rope for the swings; said it was about to be worn through." You yawned and said, "O.K.

*It is common practice in China to call unrelated people of different generations by kinship terms.

let's go." White Dog was half grown up then and, with skinny muscles and thin bones, didn't look as good as when he was little. He walked along behind us, and the moonlight shining on his fur made it glow like silver. The swings were set up on the threshing grounds: two wooden posts up and down, one horizontal cross-beam, two metal rings hanging down, two thick ropes, one flat board to sit on. The swing frame stood there silently in the moonlight, dark and eerie like the gate of hell. Not far behind the swings was the threshing ground ditch and a clump of locust trees with unbroken rows of needles sticking out. The ends of the stiff and sharply pointed needles glowed in the steely gray moonlight.

"I'll sit and you push me," you said.

"I'll push you up to the sky."

"Let White Dog on too."

"Don't try to be too fancy."

You called White Dog over, "White Dog, come on and have some fun too."

You grabbed the rope with one hand and held White Dog in the other while he whimpered worriedly. I stood on the crossboard, squeezed you and White Dog between my legs, and repeatedly exerted a downward force while the swing slowly gained momentum. As we went gradually higher, the moonlight shimmered like water, the wind blew in our ears, and I felt a little dizzy. You just giggled and White Dog barked. Finally we swung even with the crossbeam. The fields, the river, the houses, and the cemetery alternately flashed before my eyes while the cool breeze blew back and forth on my face. I looked down into your eyes and asked, "How do you like it, Sis?"

You replied, "It's great, we're up in the sky."

The rope broke. I fell under the swings; you and White Dog flew into the clump of locust trees and a spike of needles pierced your right eye. White Dog crawled out of the trees and staggered around the base of the swings like a drunkard; the swings had knocked him dizzy. . . .

"You've done all right . . . these past years?" I stammered.

I watched as her shrugged-up shoulders slumped down and her taut facial muscles relaxed as well. Her left eye, which seemed to have grown extremely large due perhaps to hard work or a kind of physiological overcompensation, suddenly fixed me with a hard, cold stare that made me uncomfortable all over.

"How could I go wrong? I've got food, clothes, a man, children; except for missing one eye, nothing else is lacking; isn't that 'pretty good'?" she said heatedly.

I was speechless, thought to myself for some time, and unexpectedly blurted out, "I got a teaching job at my school; they may even make me a lecturer. . . . I felt very homesick, not only for the people here, but I missed the old river, the stone bridge, the fields, the red sorghum in the fields, the clean fresh air, the lovely sound of the birds singing. . . . Since it's summer vacation, I came back."

"What's there to miss in this beat-up place? You missed this broken down

bridge? It's like a goddamn rice steamer in the sorghum fields, about to steam me to death." As she spoke she walked down the path from the bridge, stood up and took off her blue men's work shirt which was mottled with white patches of brine, tossed it down on a rock, and bent over to wash her face and neck. On her upper body she wore only an oversized round necked tee-shirt that was already so worn out it had little pinholes all over. It used to be white but now it was gray. The tee-shirt was tucked in at the waist, and a strip of rolled-up white cloth cinched up her pants. She didn't look at me again but went on scooping up water and washing her face, neck, and arms. Finally, just as if no one were there, she pulled the ends of her shirt out of her pants and used it to scoop up some water and wash her breasts. The shirt was soon soaked through and clung tightly to her large drooping breasts. Looking at them I thought dryly to myself, well, yes, that's about all there is to that. Just like the song the village kids sing: "Unmarried she's got golden breasts, married she's got silver breasts, having children she's got bitch's teats." So I asked her:

"How many children?"

"Three." She brushed back her hair, pulled out her shirt and shook it, then tucked it back in at her waist.

"Aren't we only allowed to have one child?"

"I didn't have two children." Seeing my puzzlement, she explained coldly, "I had three at once, plunk, plunk, plunk, just like having pups."

I laughed without conviction. She picked up her blue work shirt, dusted it on her knees a few times, put it on, and buttoned it up from bottom to top. White Dog also got up from where he'd been lying next to the bundle of leaves, shook himself all over, and stretched out.

I said, "You're really something."

"If I wasn't something, what could I do? All our misfortunes are predestined and there's no way we can avoid them."

"You have both boys and girls?"

"They're all males."

"Then you're really lucky: with many sons comes much good fortune."

"Baloney!"

"Is this the same old dog?"

"He's not long for this world."

"Ten years went by in a flash."

"In another flash it'll be time to die."

"Yes," I was gradually becoming annoyed, turned to White Dog sitting next to the bundle of leaves and said, "This old dog sure knows how to keep on living!"

"Oh, you mean it's all right for *you* to live but not all right for us to live? Those who eat rice want to live and so do those who eat chaff; the big shots want to live and so do the little people."

"What're you talking about?" I said, "Who's a big shot? And who're the little people?"

"Aren't you high and mighty? A lecturer in a big university!"

I grew red in the face and speechless; for a minute I felt like I couldn't take such abuse and tried to think of something mean to come back with, but I thought better of it and stopped. I picked up my traveling bag and said dryly, "I may be staying at my eighth uncle's house, come on over if you have time."

"Didn't you know I married into Wang's Family Village?"

"If you didn't tell me I wouldn't have known."

"It doesn't make much difference whether you know or not," she said flatly. "If you don't think your little sister lives like an old bitch, then save a little time to come see us; when you get to the village just ask for the home of 'One-eyed Nuan,' everybody knows it."

"Sis, I really didn't imagine things would turn out this way. . . ."

"It was just fate, a person's fate, fixed by Heaven, and it doesn't do any good to worry about it." She walked up slowly from under the bridge, stood in front of the bundle of leaves, and said, "Do me a favor, help me lift these leaves onto my shoulders."

I had a sudden feeling of warmth and spoke up bravely, "Let me help you carry them home!"

"I wouldn't dare!" As she said this, she knelt down in front of the bundle of leaves, put the carrying pole on her shoulders and said, "Lift it up."

I went behind her, grabbed the rope holding the bundle, lifted it up forcefully just as she managed to stand up. Her body bent over once again; in order to make it a little more comfortable, she bounced the bundle up and down on her back a couple of times while the sorghum leaves rustled loudly. A softly muffled voice came up from her deeply stooped position:

"Come over and see us."

White Dog barked at me a few times and ran up in front of her. I stood there on the bridge for a long time watching that bundle of sorghum leaves slowly make its way north. I didn't turn around and head south again until White Dog had become a small white speck and the woman and her bundle had become a black speck a little bigger than the white speck.

It was over three miles from the bridge to Wang's Family Village, and it was six miles from the bridge to our village.

Eighth Uncle told me to ride his bike the nine miles from our village to Wang's Family Village. I said forget it, I could walk the nine miles easy. Eighth Uncle said, "We're well-off now and everybody has a bicycle, not like a few years back when there were only a couple of bikes in the whole village and it wasn't easy to borrow one because nobody wanted to loan out such a scarce commodity." I said, "I know you're well-off, I've seen the bikes tooling around all over the streets, but I don't want to ride a bike. I've been an intellectual so many years

I've got hemorrhoids and it'll be better if I walk." Eighth Uncle said, "I can see that studying's not such a great thing after all; besides all sorts of illnesses and troubles, a person also ends up acting like a lunatic. What'd you say you were going out there to see her for? Out there with the blind and the dumb, aren't you afraid people here will laugh at you? Fish are fish and fowl are fowl; you shouldn't stoop below your station!" I said, "Eighth Uncle, I'm not going to argue with you; I'm way past twenty going on thirty, and I know what I'm doing." Eighth Uncle went angrily about his own business and didn't bother me again.

I very much wished that I could run into her and White Dog again at the bridge; if she had another big bundle of sorghum leaves, I would carry them home for her if it broke my back. She and White Dog could both act as guides and lead me right up to her house. In the city everybody pays close attention to their clothes, everybody wants to keep up with the latest fads, but the people in my old home kept casting contemptible glances at my blue jeans and making me feel damned awkward. So I explained to them: they're secondhand goods, three dollars and sixty cents a pair—actually I spent twenty-five dollars on them—since they were so cheap, the villagers forgave me. The people of Wang's Family Village didn't know that my pants were cheap, and if I didn't run into her and White Dog all I could do was go on into the village and let them stare at me. Imagining that prospect only redoubled my desire to run into her or even just White Dog, but in the end I didn't. As I crossed over the stone bridge, I saw the bright red sunlight bursting out through the sorghum stalks and a big wide streak of red stretching out over the river, so bright that the whole river seemed to be dyed red. The sun was an unusual shade of red and seemed to be surrounded by darkness; it was probably about to rain.

I held up a collapsible umbrella and entered the village as a light rain came slanting down. A stoop-shouldered old woman was just crossing the street with the wind ruffling up her jacket and making her totter back and forth. I folded my umbrella, held it in my hand, and went up to ask for directions. "Grandma, where's Nuan's house?" She stood there at an angle and rolled her dull eyes in confusion. The wind blew through her graying hair, ruffled her clothing, and accented the softness of her body; the rain fell in widely spaced drops as big as copper coins; once in a while a drop hit her in the face. "Where does Nuan live?" I asked her again. "Which Nuan?" she asked. I had to say it, "One-eyed Nuan." The old woman cast a somber glance at me, raised her arm, and pointed toward a row of blue-tiled houses.

Standing on the path I shouted, "Is Miss Nuan home?"

The first one to answer my call was that black-pawed white dog. He was not at all like those vicious dogs that jump around you barking and carrying on like they're either going to eat you up or at least scare you to death. He just lay there under the eaves on his bed of straw, squinting his eyes and barking rather symbolically, thoroughly expressing the kindly gentility of a pure-bred white dog.

I called out again and Nuan answered in a crisp clear voice from inside, but it was a fierce-looking fellow with a face full of brown whiskers and a pair of brown eyes who came out to meet me. He looked me up and down ferociously with his muddy brown eyes; his gaze coming to rest on my blue jeans, his mouth twitched crookedly to one side with an expression of madness on his face. He took a step forward—I hurriedly stepped back one—he stuck out the little finger of his right hand, waved it around excitedly in front of my face, and uttered a long, unbroken string of indecipherable sounds. Although I'd heard from my eighth uncle that Nuan's husband was a mute, when confronted with the genuinely crazed aspect of the man, I couldn't help feeling immediately depressed. A one-eye marrying a mute—a crooked knife just right for slicing vegetables in a bowl—in principle no one was actually being wronged, but I still couldn't help feeling immediately depressed.

Nuan, we had such high hopes in those days. When Brigade Leader Cai went away he left such high hopes behind with us. The day he left you looked straight at him, and all your tears were shed just for him. Brigade Leader Cai's face was pale when he took out an ox-horn comb and gave it to you. I cried too and said, "Brigade Leader Cai, we'll be waiting for you to come and get us." And he said, "Right, you wait."

In the late autumn when the sorghum was completely red and we heard that the Liberation Army was in the county seat recruiting soldiers, the two of us were so excited we couldn't sleep. One of our high school teachers was going into the county seat on business and we asked him to go to the recruiting office and ask if Brigade Leader Cai was there yet. When the teacher came back he told us that the Liberation Army recruiters this year were all air force orderlies dressed in brown coats and blue pants and not from Brigade Leader Cai's unit. I was disappointed, but you were full of confidence: "Brigade Leader Cai wouldn't lie to us!" "He forgot about us a long time ago." I said. Your dad also said, "Give you a stick and you think it's a rifle. He was just stringing you along like children. Good metal isn't made into nails, and a good man doesn't become a soldier; get through your graduation, come home, and pull a plow; quit dreaming about doing something fancy." You said, "He didn't take *me* for a child. He certainly didn't take *me* for a child." Your face flushed a deep red as you said it. Your dad said, "That's enough!" I looked at your blushing face in astonishment, saw that special expression barely perceptible on your face, and blurted out wildly, "Maybe, if he doesn't come this year he'll come next year, or if he doesn't come next year he'll come the year after."

Brigade Leader Cai certainly was a noble and dignified specimen of a man! He was tall and slender with a cold handsome face that was always cleanly shaven. Later on you frankly admitted to me that the night before he left he held you and kissed you lightly on the forehead. You said that after he kissed you he whispered softly, "Little Sister, you're really pure . . . because of that I've felt so

much nameless anger." You said, "After I join up, I'll marry him." I said, "Don't be a dreamer! Even if you gave him two hundred catties of pork into the bargain, Brigade Leader Cai would never want you." "If he doesn't want me, then I'll marry you." "I don't want you!" I shouted. You gave me a look and said, "I really got to you!" Thinking about it now, you were quite a looker in those days; those budding little breasts of yours regularly made my heart throb.

The Mute obviously looked down on me; he pointed with his little finger to express his loathing and contempt. I put on a broad smile in an attempt to win his friendship, but he put the fingers of both hands together in a very strange shape and brandished them before my eyes. I recalled the vulgar answer to such a gesture from the accumulated lore of my childhood mischief and suddenly felt as though I were holding a slimy toad in my hands. I even wanted to turn around and run, but then I saw three identically dressed and identical-looking bald-headed little boys come tumbling out of the house, stand in the doorway, and glance furtively over at me with identical muddy brown eyes, their heads all inclined to the right like three irritable but featherless little rooster chicks. The children all looked old, their foreheads were wrinkled, their lower jaws were broad and solid, but they all trembled slightly. I hurriedly pulled out some candy and said, "Have some candy." The Mute immediately waved at them and spat out a few simple sounds. The boys stared longingly at the party-colored pieces of candy in my hand, but they didn't dare move. I wanted to walk over to them, but the Mute stood in my way, flailing wildly with his arms and uttering strange, intimidating sounds through his mouth.

Nuan walked rather haltingly out of the house with her hands crossed in front of her. I understood perfectly why she was so long making an appearance: she had obviously just put on a clean indigo blue blouse and a pair of neatly pressed gray dacron pants. Indanthrene and traditional-style blouses made of indanthrene had not been worn for a long time, and seeing them all of a sudden like that gave me a disturbing feeling of nostalgia. Young women with ample breasts wearing that sort of blouse have their own special charm. Nuan was a woman with a long, straight neck and elegant facial features. She had an artificial eye in her right eye socket and her face had regained its natural symmetry. I felt quite sad for her goodness and her suffering; I generally observe human life in a very low key, my heart strings as fine as silk threads and sensitive to the smallest nuance, so naturally I trembled. I couldn't look closely at that eye; it had no life and it gave off a turbid magnetic glow. She realized that I was watching her and put her head down, walked around the Mute, lifted the bag off my shoulders, and said, "Let's go in the house."

The Mute abruptly pushed her aside with a hot, angry glare in his eyes. He pointed at my pants and stuck up his little finger again, shaking and gurgling at the mouth, his entire face moving, at once pinched up together then suddenly wide open and expansive, his facial expressions were both animated and terrify-

ing. Finally he spit and trampled it into the ground with his heel. The Mute's hatred for me seemed to be directly related to my blue jeans; I regretted wearing these pants home and decided to change into a pair of Eighth Uncle's baggy pants as soon as I got back to the village.

"Look Sis, Big Brother doesn't recognize me." I said with embarrassment.

She gave the Mute a shove, pointed at me, stuck up her thumb, pointed in the direction of our village, pointed at my hand, pointed at my fountain pen and the school insignia on my shirt pocket, made a motion like writing, held her hands in the shape of a book, stuck up her thumb again, and pointed skyward. Her facial expressions were colorful and varied. The Mute was puzzled for a moment, then he suddenly let down all his defenses and stood there with a docile look in his eyes like a big kid. He laughed like a dog barking, opening his mouth wide, and displayed a row of yellow teeth. He gave me a pat on the chest, then skipped and shouted until he was quite red in the face. I understood him completely and was extremely moved. I felt relaxed all over to have won my mute brother's trust. The three little boys came running up around me with their eyes intently fixed on my hand full of candy.

I said, "Go on, take some!"

The boys raised their heads and looked at their father. The Mute chuckled, heh heh, and the boys dashed up quickly and grabbed the candy out of my hand. One piece fell to the ground and those three bald noggins were bumping around together struggling to pick it up. The Mute laughed as he watched them. Nuan heaved a soft sigh and said:

"Now you've seen everything, you probably think we're ridiculous."

"Sis . . . how could I . . . they're all so cute. . . ."

The Mute looked at me sheepishly, laughed, turned around, and kicked the three struggling boys apart with his big foot. The boys stood there panting and looking truculently at each other. I took out all the candy I had, divided it into three equal portions, and handed each boy one. The Mute shouted and made hand signs to the boys. The boys all put their hands behind them and stepped backward. The Mute shouted even louder; the boy's faces twitched; each one took a piece of candy, placed it in their father's big, rough hand, gave a loud shout, and ran off out of sight. The Mute held up the three pieces of candy, looked them over stupidly for a moment, turned toward me, and made "Ah ah" noises while gesturing with his hands. I didn't understand and looked to Nuan for help. She said, "He says he heard of you a long time ago; he wants to taste a piece of this high-quality candy you brought from Beijing." I made a gesture of putting something in my mouth. He smiled, very carefully unwrapped the candy, put it in his mouth, chewed, and bent his head to one side as if he were listening for something. He stuck his thumb up again and this time I understood perfectly that he was praising the quality of the candy. He soon ate the second piece of candy. I told Nuan the next time I come I'll definitely bring some genuine high-quality candy for Big Brother.

Nuan said, "Can you really come again?" I said I'd certainly come.

After the Mute finished the second piece of candy, he thought for a moment and then held the last piece up in front of Nuan. She closed her eyes. "Argh . . .," the Mute shouted. I felt nervous as I watched him hold the candy up in front of Nuan again. She closed her eyes and shook her head. "Argh . . . Argh . . .," the Mute shouted angrily, grabbed Nuan by the hair with his left hand, pulled back so that her face was raised up, put the candy in his own mouth with his right hand, tore the wrapper off with his teeth, held the candy, now sticky with his saliva, between two fingers and forced it into Nuan's mouth. Nuan's mouth wasn't small, but it looked very small in contrast to his two cucumber sized fingers. His crude black fingers made her lips seem delicate and tender. Under his huge hand her face became fragile and weak.

Nuan held the candy in her mouth, neither spitting it out nor chewing it, with an expression on her face as unmoved as still water. The Mute smiled triumphantly at me because of his victory.

Ambiguously she said, "Let's go in, we're pretty silly standing here in the wind." I glanced around the yard and she said, "What're you looking at? That big mule kicks and bites so that no human being dares to go near it, but in his hands it's gentle as a lamb. He bought that cow this spring; it just dropped a calf last month."

There was a big open shed in her yard with a mule and a cow. The cow was extremely emaciated. Under its legs a nice fat calf was nursing; it dug in its hind legs, wagged its tail, and repeatedly pushed its head into its mother's udders; the cow arched its back in pain as its eyes glowed pale and blue.

The Mute had an amazing capacity; he drank nine-tenths to my one of a bottle of very powerful "All Cities White Lightning." His expression hadn't change a bit, but my head was reeling. He opened another bottle, filled my glass, and held his up with two hands to me in toast. I was very fearful of hurting this friend's feelings, so I resolved to do the impossible, took my glass, and drank it down. For fear that he'd toast me again, I keeled over on the bed pretending I couldn't hold myself up. He got so excited he was red in the face as he turned and gestured to Nuan. He and Nuan gestured back and forth and then she said softly, "Don't compete with him, ten of you couldn't drink as much as one of him. Whatever you do, don't get drunk." She gave me a long, hard stare. I held up my thumb and pointed at him then held up my little finger and pointed to myself. Then she took away the wine and brought out the dumplings. I said, "Sis, let's all eat together." After Nuan received the Mute's permission, the three boys clambered up onto the *kang** in a bunch and started wolfing down the food. Nuan stood by the side of the *kang* serving the food, pouring water, and waiting on us; asked to eat, she said her stomach didn't feel right and she didn't want to eat.

*A northern Chinese brick bed under which a fire can be built in winter.

After we ate, the wind stopped, the clouds scattered, and a murderously hot sun burned down from the south. Nuan took a piece of yellow cloth out of the cupboard, pointed at the three boys, and made some gestures for the Mute in a northeasterly direction. The Mute nodded his head. Nuan said to me, "Rest here for a while; I'm going into town to have some clothes made for the boys. Don't wait for me, you just go on home after a while." She gave me an intense look, picked up her bundle, and walked quickly out of the yard; White Dog followed behind her with his tongue hanging out.

The Mute and I sat there across from each other, and every time he caught my eye he grinned from ear to ear. The three boys played around for a while then lay down sideways on the *kang* and went to sleep; seemed as if they all fell asleep at the same instant. It felt hot as soon as the sun came out; cicadas were buzzing loudly in the trees across the road. The Mute took off his shirt and bared his muscular upper body; I felt both frightened and ridiculous smelling the bestial odor emanating from his body. The Mute blinked his eyes tightly, scratched with both hands at his chest, and scratched off several pieces of gray dust that resembled rat droppings. At the same time he continuously stuck out his quick, lizard-like tongue to lick his thick lips. I felt hot, dry, and nauseous and thought of the green water shimmering under the bridge. The sun came through the window and beat down on my blue jeans. I looked at my wrist watch. "Ah, ah, ah!" the Mute shouted as he jumped down off the *kang* and pulled an electronic wrist watch out of a dresser drawer. I saw the hopeful expression on his face so I insincerely pointed at my watch with my little finger and at his electronic watch with my thumb. As expected he became extremely happy and immediately strapped the electronic watch onto his right wrist; I pointed to his left wrist and he shook his head in confusion. I laughed.

"What a hot day. The crops are growing pretty good this year. You'll have a late harvest this fall. That's a great mule you've got there. The peasants' lot has improved greatly since the Third Plenum.* You've grown prosperous Brother. You should buy a television. All Cities White Lightning is a good old brand, got a real kick."

"Ah, ah . . . , ah, ah" He had a look of complete happiness on his face as he smoothed back his hair with both hands, then he ran his hand back and forth in front of his neck. I wondered in alarm, whose head does he want to cut off? "Ah, ah, ah . . . ah, ah, ah . . . ," his hands trembled and he became very anxious when he saw that I didn't understand. He pointed to his right eye, ran his hand over his scalp again, going all the way down to his neck before stopping. I got it. He was trying to tell me something about Nuan. I nodded. He rubbed his dark black nipples, pointed to the children, then rubbed his stomach. I seemed to understand but not completely and shook my head. He squatted down and ges-

*The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee (November 1978) ushered in the reform policies of Deng Xiaoping.

tured anxiously around like crazy so that nearly every part of his body was sending me a signal; I vigorously nodded my head; I really should learn sign language. At last, with sweat pouring down my face, I bid him good-bye. It was not at all hard to understand when he stood there with a look of childlike naiveté on his face, first patting me over the heart and then patting himself over the heart. I spoke up clearly, "Big Brother, we're good brothers!" He woke the three boys with three quick slaps and had them see me off with sleep still fogging their eyes. In the doorway I took the collapsible umbrella out of my bag, gave it to him, and showed him how to use it. He received it like a rare treasure, held it up, opening it and closing it, closing it and opening it over and over again. The three boys looked up at the rapidly opening and closing umbrella and their lower jaws shook once more. I poked him and pointed toward the road south. "Ah, ah," he shouted, waved his hands, and dashed back into the house. He brought out a five-inch-long knife, removed the ox-horn scabbard, and showed it to me. The cold steel blade gleamed, and it was obviously very valuable. He stretched up on tiptoe and pulled a one-inch-thick branch down off the willow tree in front of the gate; with one slash of the knife the branch fell to the ground.

He stuck the knife into my bag.

As I walked I thought to myself: even though he is a mute that doesn't prevent him from being a man with a genuine personality. Being married to him Nuan probably doesn't suffer too much; he can't talk, but after getting used to relying on hand signals and facial expressions they can break through that physiological barrier. Perhaps all those misgivings I had before were as groundless as the ancient man of Qi's phobia about the sky caving in. By the time I reached the bridge, I'd left off thinking of her problems and all I wanted to do was jump into the water and take a bath. The road was quiet and deserted. The morning's rain had long since dried up and the ground was covered with brownish dust. The oily bright sorghum leaves were rustling on either side of the road, locusts were flying back and forth in the bushes, their pink inner wings flashing and cutting through the air with a buzzing sound. The water was rippling under the bridge; White Dog was squatting at the head of the bridge.

When he saw me he started barking and baring his snow white teeth. I had a premonition of something unusual happening. White Dog stood up and walked toward the sorghum field, looking back over his shoulder and barking at me as if calling to me to follow him. Episodes from many spy novels came into my mind as I resolved to follow the dog; simultaneously I reached my hand into my bag and took a firm grip on the sharp knife the Mute had given me. As I squeezed my way through the thickly growing sorghum, I saw her sitting there on the ground beside her little cloth bundle. She had matted down some sorghum to clear an open space around which the sorghum stood

like a tall four-sided screen. As I peered in she took the yellow cloth out of her bundle and spread it out on the matted-down sorghum. Dark, mottled shadows played on her face. White Dog lay down to one side resting his head on his outstretched front paws and panting.

I felt cold and tight all over; with chattering teeth and a stiff jaw I spoke awkwardly: "Didn't you say . . . you were going into town? What're you doing here . . . ?"

"I believe in fate." A stream of glistening tears dripped down her cheeks as she said, "I told the dog, 'Oh dog, dog, if you understand my heart you'll go to the end of the bridge and bring him to me; if he comes with you, then our fates are not yet completely separate.' And he did bring you to me."

"You better go home quick." I took the knife out of my bag. "He even gave me this knife."

"You went away for ten years; I didn't think I'd ever see you again in this life. You aren't married yet? You aren't married. . . . Now you've seen him, that's the way he is, if he feels like it he can kiss you to death or he can beat you to death. . . . He gets suspicious if I talk to any man at all, and then he wants to get a rope and tie me up. I'm so bored that I talk to White Dog all day long. Oh dog, you've been with me ever since I lost my eye; you're getting old even faster than I am. I got pregnant the year after I married him; my belly swelled up like a balloon; just before my time I couldn't walk and I couldn't even see my own feet when I stood up. I had three sons all at once, four and a half pounds each, skinny as a litter of cats. When one cried they all cried, when one was hungry they were all hungry; I only have two breasts, when I fed two of them one of them kept on crying. I almost went crazy in those first two years. I began to worry the moment the kids were born; dear God, don't let them be like their dad, let them all open their mouths and speak. . . . When they were seven or eight months I began to lose heart. Things just didn't look right; they were all deaf and dumb, when they cried it sounded as dull as wood scraping wood. I prayed, God, oh God! Please don't let my whole family be mute; at least let one of them be able to talk and keep me company. . . . In the end they were all mute."

I hung my head very low and mumbled, "Sis . . . Sis, . . . it's all my fault, if I hadn't dragged you out to the swings that time. . . ."

"It wasn't your fault; anyway I think about it, it was my own fault. That time I told you Brigade Leader Cai kissed me on the forehead . . . if I had been brave enough to just go on down to the troops and find him, he would have taken me in; he really did like me. Then came the accident on the swings. When you wrote to me from school, I deliberately refused to answer you. I figured that I was already disfigured and unworthy of you; might as well suffer alone, no point making two people suffer; I was so stupid. Tell me the truth, if I'd asked you to marry me then, would you have wanted me?"

Seeing that look of wild abandon on her face, I was greatly moved: "Of course I would, I certainly would."

"Good, then . . . you should understand now. . . . I was afraid you'd be disgusted, so I bought an artificial eye. It's just the right time of the month. . . . I want a child that can speak. . . . If you agree, you've saved me; if you refuse, you've murdered me. There's thousands of reasons and millions of excuses, but you mustn't use any of them on me."

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