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Magic Wood

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

'MAGIC WOOD'

A TRANSLATION AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF LIU QINGBANG'S NOVELLA AND LI YANG'S FILM

SUBMITTED TO

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AND

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Magic Wood and Blind Shaft: Critical Analysis

Author Introduction

The Chinese author Liu Qingbang was born in December of 1951 to a rural family in Shenqiu, Henan Province¹. Life for Qingbang was difficult growing up, and he received little education; however, during the Cultural Revolution during the mid-1960's he was able to join the Red Guard and catch a glimpse of what city life was like. After this period was over he attempted to join the army but he was rejected due to the fact that his father had been cast as a counter-revolutionary. He returned to hard labor and went to work for a coalmine in 1970. He worked there for a year before being moved to the publicity department of the mining bureau after they recognized his talent for writing. Qingbang continued writing as a journalist and novelist after he moved to Beijing in 1978. His works, such as *Magic Wood*, have won various literary prizes, including the Lao She Literary Award.

The novella 'Magic Wood'

Although the grisly plot of *Magic Wood* might seem too dark to be true, it actually has some grounding in real life. Police have uncovered several incidents in which miners were killed for compensation claims, and cons involving black mail are an almost common occurrence.² The bleak life depicted by Qingbang reflects one of the deadliest industries in the world, and Qingbang's personal experience in mining has undoubtedly influenced his work. Indeed, he has described coalmines as a "purgatory-like word"

¹ "Liu Qingbang." - *China.org.cn*. 29 Aug. 2013. Web. 23 Apr. 2015.

<http://www.china.org.cn/arts/citc/2013-08/29/content_29861905.htm>.

² Coonan, Clifford. "Miners Planned to Kill Workers for Cash Payouts." *Irish Times*. 8 Dec. 2007. Web. 23 Apr. 2015.

which caused him to recognize his “insignificance and impotence.”³ As China transitions from a rural to an industrial society, Qingbang sees miners as the key to understanding key societal changes because they work in an area where urban and rural traditions are often in conflict. Indeed, the setting and social interactions depicted in *Magic Wood* mirror a society largely devoid of compassion and the law, and where human life has little value. The two main protagonists, Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoyang almost exclusively see humans as being a source of income and view them through a very dehumanizing lens.

In the very first paragraph of the story we are introduced to Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoyang’s line of business, including the language of their trade. They don’t refer to the men they kill as humans, they call them “Diǎn”, which literally means dot or point (though “catch” is used in the translation). The two seek to distance themselves from the men they kill by creating a code name that strips their victims of their identity. The method for killing their victims is described in a very straightforward fashion; for Jinming and Zhaoyang there’s nothing personal about murder, it’s all just business.

Qingbang crafts an unsettling description of the two men as they sit down in a small restaurant for lunch. Jinming and Zhaoyang chew on the “offal of four legged animals” as they gaze out at the “two-legged animals” walking around the train station’s plaza. The two men do not even recognize humans as being separate from animals; they are merely a different type of animal, put into their own special category. The innards being consumed by the two men serve as a sort of foreshadowing of what will happen to

³ "Mining Literary Material." - *Culture China*. 18 Sept. 2012. Web. 23 Apr. 2015. <<http://news.cultural-china.com/20120918124431.html>>.

the next victim; he will be slain by the two men and his body will be used to extort sustenance in the form of a cash compensation. They are even described as “hunters”, lying in wait for their prey to enter their line of sight. This characterization fully reflects how devoid of compassion and humanity their work is. They have reduced man to the level of that of a rabbit or deer being pursued by a man for food.

Though it is easy to view Jinming and Zhaoyang as merely sociopathic killers, Jinming’s view of society does display some nuance. While lecturing Wang Feng in the mines he warns him that, “although a person’s life might be valued in other places, in a mine it becomes as fragile as an egg.” There is acknowledgement on Jinming’s part that it is not necessarily natural to place little to no value on human life. Instead, he seems to believe that there is something unique about the environment of a coalmine that leads to the degradation of human life. Due to the precarious nature of the work, and the austere and oppressive environment of a coal pit, life does not carry the same value as it does above ground. Zhaoyang on the other hand, is shown as having bought into the view that human life has almost no value. During an argument with Jinming he states, “I don’t see men, I only see prey!” The absolutist view held by Zhaoyang leaves no room for compassion or redemption; humans are just a means to an end.

It is important to note that the morbid descriptions and views are not just restricted to Jinming and Zhaoyang. Wang Feng has one of the more jarring juxtapositions in the novella as he waits in line at the bathhouse. Upon seeing the large metal pot used for boiling water he recalls the pot his family used to slaughter a pig for the New Year. The visceral description of the slaughter contrasts with the bathing miners who are jumping in out and of the bathing pool, and teasing one another. Even Wang

Feng, who is cast as the most naïve and virtuous of the three, cannot help but be drawn to comparing men to animals. At the coal pit, it seems even the most innocent man is eventually corrupted by his surrounding environment.

Indeed, the mine serves as the setting for most of the character's transformative experiences. It is where Wang Feng sees most of his naivety stripped away. But what exactly is it about the mine and the nature of their work that causes the miners to act the way they do? On his first trip down into the pit, Wang Feng is positively shocked by what he sees; men disrobing to engage in an "ancient scene of labor". His two "uncles" routinely work in the nude as they shovel and dig for coal. As they work their bodies become covered in soot, making it seem like they have become "fused" with the walls of the mine shaft. The miners seem to be returning to a primitive state, where modesty is thrown off for the sake of convenience. Like animals, they feel no need to wear clothes, which serve little purpose in the pit. By the time their work is done though, they are not even animals, as they appear to have become one with the coal; their black colored bodies are indistinguishable from the pit itself.

Though the work itself is crude and back breaking, there is some credence to the idea that the degrading nature of the mine is due to human involvement rather than the intrinsic nature of the coal itself. When Wang Feng finds a piece of coal with a fossilized leaf on it, he shows it to a fellow miner who tells him the story of how coal was discovered by man. He explains that it came from a tree that "was so old it had turned into a spirit" and that when men found it they, "without much thought", tossed it around or put it in a toilet before discovering its magical features. The miner presents the coal as an ancient gift that has spiritual properties; it is the end result of a long, natural process.

But when humans found it they treated it with little respect, even keeping it in the same place as human waste. It wasn't until after they discovered it could burn that they christened it "magic wood".

Thus, the abasement of humanity also has a spiritual aspect in the novel. Whereas men like the old miner see the coal spirit as something of respect, others are all too quick to hijack the spiritual and use it for their own purposes. At the second mine they visit, the mine owner forces them to give an offering to a coal deity, but they must buy the paper and incense from a woman at the mine. It is expensive, and they quickly realize that the woman is "on the mine owner's payroll"; the offering is just another way to exploit the workers. The spiritual has been appropriated by the mine owner for one of the basest reasons possible: to earn more money. The intrinsic value of prayer and sacrifice are no longer considered to be sacred by the men at the mine, and are instead used to signal loyalty to the miner and a willingness to be exploited.

The coal deity is a sham, but fakery is something which permeates the novella, blurring the lines between what is real and what is fabricated. There are fake identities, fake relationships, fake gods, and fake rockslides. The characters all switch names several times, moving between their real and assumed names, making it hard even for the reader to remember the names of each character. The false names do more than make it difficult for someone to track them down after they have made their kill; they also serve to conceal the true intentions of Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoyang. When they switch names in preparation for their second kill, they purposely choose names which have virtuous meanings. The characters *wáng* and *jūn* in the name Wang Mingjun mean king and supreme king. This can be seen as envy on the part of Song Jinming when he chooses

this name, but it also suggests the imagery of a king who might protect his loyal subjects. Tang Zhaoyang chooses the name Zhang Dunhou, the characters dūnhòu meaning honest and sincere. This might be the novella's greatest irony, as his character is easily the most ruthless and evil. But with names like these, are we so surprised that Wang Feng was drawn to them?

Fake names lead to fake relationships, which serve as the foundation for the ultimate betrayal: murder. It should be noted that the bonds being created and then corrupted are not merely those of a friendship, but those of a family member. Blood relationships hold a special place in the human psyche and are typically considered stronger than those created by mere strangers. Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoyang adopt the façade of a family to commit one of the most evil acts possible. They liberally call their first victim, Tang Zhaoxia, “big brother” over and over. Tang Zhaoyang even makes references to “our father”, encouraging Tang Zhaoxia to imagine that they a real family connection. All of this works quite well, and by the end of their toasts at the restaurant, Tang Zhaoxia is drunk and in tears, so moved is he by the words of these two men. Even the woman at the restaurant remarks that “those two brothers must be really close”. But it is all an act, and in the final scene Tang Zhaoxia is dead, his skull smashed open. The duplicity of the two only serves their greedy desires, and it thrives in their harsh environment.

The novella *Magic Wood* does a fine job of bringing together all the elements which worry those who see the societal transformations taking place in China: greed, cruelty, deception, and the degradation of the human spirit. The characters Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoyang ferry us through this underground world and their interactions with

Wang Feng, a babe in the woods, show the complex ways men work with, or against, an oppressive setting. Though there is no happy ending to the novella, the movie adaptation of the story, *Blind Shaft*, has its own unique take on Liu Qingbang's plot.

Director Introduction

The director Li Yang was born in Xi'an in 1959. He took up an interest in acting and eventually attended the Beijing Broadcasting Institute in 1985. Rather than stay on in China like many of his peers, he decided to move to Germany in 1988 where he continued his work in acting and directing. He graduated from the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne, Germany in 1995 and later received German citizenship. While in Germany he made several documentaries, but it wasn't until his return to China that he made his first non-documentary film, *Blind Shaft*, which would receive critical acclaim abroad and censorship at home. He is frequently associated with the so-called 'Sixth Generation' of Chinese filmmakers, who are known for shooting movies without much backing from the government, though Li Yang himself rejects this title⁴.

The film 'Blind Shaft'

The film opens up with a shot of a desolate mining area; workers are filing out from small huts on the side of the mountain and shown shivering in the cold as they wait to head down in the pit. As the workers file through the mine shaft, the only things which can be seen are their bobbing headlamps set against the sounds of drilling and whistling. From the first scene the film seems like a worthy successor to the novella; however, Li

⁴ Teo, Stephen. "There Is No Sixth Generation!" Director Li Yang on *Blind Shaft* and His Place in Chinese Cinema." *Senses of Cinema*. 1 July 2003. Web. 25 Apr. 2015. <http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/li_yang/>.

Yang made several structural and thematic changes to the film which diverge from the novella. Most notably, allusions to the corrosive effects of materialism are more overt, and the implications of the film's ending versus that of the novella are quite different. Though Li Yang insists that he didn't intend to "prescribe some truth in a didactic fashion"⁵ to the viewers of the film, it is quite apparent that the problem of greed is presented in a much less subtle way. Indeed, he has stated that he is uncomfortable with the "spread of bourgeois values"⁶ among Beijing's counterculture, and is concerned that the hunger for material goods can "[wipe out] our morality and humanity."⁷

This is evinced through several conversations between Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoyang. As the two are sitting in the restaurant at the train station, a news program plays on the TV behind them about some crony who embezzled several million yuan. Song Jinming expresses shock and remarks that the man "deserves to be executed". If that were the only commentary on the story then we might interpret it as being ironic; the man who just murdered another in cold blood is calling for someone else to be killed for a crime involving money. But the conversation continues on, with Zhaoyang expressing an understanding of the man's actions while Jinming insists he would "use it all" to send his son to college. Seen in this light, it appears we are meant to sympathize with Jinming; the man who embezzled the money is likely some greedy businessman or bureaucrat, but if Jinming had the money he would put it to virtuous use.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Kahn, Joseph. "Filming the Dark Side Of Capitalism in China." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 6 May 2003. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

⁷ Teo, Stephen. ""There Is No Sixth Generation!" Director Li Yang on *Blind Shaft* and His Place in Chinese Cinema."

This view is further strengthened by the next two lines of dialogue. Jinming states that he would have gone to college “if my family had the money” and Zhaoyang follows up by saying that “Now only money fucking matters.” The implication here is that if education was cheaper or his family a little wealthier, then he wouldn’t have been condemned to a life of hard labor and a side business in murder. It can’t be seen as only wishful thinking on the part of Jinming when paired with Zhaoyang’s comment. There is probably no other piece of dialogue in the film which so nakedly reflects the belief that money is the be all end all in society today, acting as a corrupting force on men who would otherwise be living virtuous lives. Despite their deadly deeds, Li Yang feels that sympathy and understanding are in order for these two men.

Though materialism is the central point of criticism, the government itself does not escape critique. When Jinming and Zhaoyang visit a brothel they insist on singing the anthem ‘Long Live Socialism’. As Zhaoyang sings the old lyrics, the prostitutes correct him and sing a new set of lyrics, “The reactionaries were never overthrown/The capitalists came back with their US dollars/ Liberating all of China/Bringing the sexual climax of socialism.” Here Li Yang seems to be poking fun at the impotence of the government rather than making a comment on the effects of capitalism on China. It is the Communist government which is supposed to be seen as the savior of the Chinese people, not American wealth; but here it is capitalism which is being cast as the liberator of China. We are likely meant to view the government as being ineffective in the face of the transformative social changes which have been taking place. As old traditions and social institutions are being cast to the wayside, the government is not acting to help the men and women who are caught up in these changes. Li Yang has said he is upset with the

fact that the people who followed the directives of the Party in the past “want support but are not given it”⁸, which undoubtedly influenced him to include this scene which is absent in the novella.

The ending of the film also serves as an interesting contrast to that of the novella. In the novella, Song Jinming is committed to killing Wang Feng but creates an elaborate trap that simulates a rockslide. When he ends up killing Tang Zhaoyang it comes as a surprise to both men, and in the end he commits suicide, urging Wang Feng to carry through with the plan and collect the compensation from the mine owner. In the film the opposite happens; Zhaoyang first strikes Jinming, but before he can kill Wang Feng he is felled by a dying Jinming. There is more space to interpret Jinming as redeeming himself in the film as opposed to the novella. It appears he was resolute not to kill Wang Feng, leading Zhaoyang to try to get rid of him. But in his final act he saves Wang Feng, solidifying his atonement and suggesting he was a man with an innately good heart. While in the novella he actually tries to get Wang Feng to help him kill Zhaoyang, and only accepts his doom after the boy refuses to help.

The fate of the boy is the final major divergence between the film and the novella. At the end of the novella Wang Feng comes clean to the mine owner, but only receives enough money for a train ticket home, and the final scene shows him unsure of what to do with his life. Li Yang has stated that he wanted a more open ending, and he sees the boy as the “hope of the story.”⁹ Thus, Wang Feng does not deny that he is a relative and receives a hefty payout from the mine owner. Though his future here is also uncertain, there are certainly more reasons to be optimistic about his fate. Presumably he will go

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

back home and pay for his own education and that of his sister. Although Li Yang wants us to see Wang Feng in a hopeful light, his ending can also be viewed from a darker angle. Wang Feng only received the money because he decided to go along with the two murderers' deception; is this blood money really any different from that received by Jinming and Zhaoyang after their previous kill? Was virtuous behavior rewarded in the end, or was it simply unable to escape the corruption of greed and deceit?

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'MAGIC WOOD'

(1)

It was winter. A little over a month till the New Year. Small flurries of snow fell from the sky. At a little railway station, Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming were looking for their next catch. "Catch" was the language of their trade, referring to a suitable victim. Once they found a good catch, they would take him to a small, remote coal mine and dispatch him. They would then claim to be a family member, and exchange the catch's life for the mine owner's cash. They were already quite cunning at this trade. They were so smooth that they reaped gains in quick succession. The two of them were a fine pair, working with each other in tacit agreement, and never once slipping up. In keeping with their plan, they would put away one more catch before the Lunar New Year and leave it at that. By disposing of a single catch they could get at least 10,000 yuan each. If fortune was in their favour, they could even make 20,000 yuan. Going home for a lavish New Year celebration wouldn't be a problem.

On one side of the train station was a small restaurant. By the entrance was an eye catching menu that offered "Genuine Mutton Braised Noodles", "Longevity Mutton Soup", sesame seed buns, and other dishes that went with liquor. Tang Zhaoyang became fixed on the soup and swore, "Nowadays everything makes you live longer, except for seeing hookers." A waitress addressed them as "Gentlemen", and beckoned them to come sit in the shade. They ordered two bowls of the "Healthy Mutton Soup" and four sesame seed buns, but told her to hold off on bringing the dishes, they wanted to drink some liquor first. Still, their thoughts were not with the spirits, but rather on the train plaza with its two-legged animals. The two of them sipped their Baijiu casually as they chewed indifferently on the offal of four-legged animals.

Their two pairs of eyes looked through the three open sides of the restaurant, darting back and forth towards the packs of people. There was still some time till the New Year, but people's steps were already noticeably hurried. Some people carried fancy luggage, rushing toward the train station's entrance with lively strides. One woman walked quickly, pulling the hand of her child to drag him along. She picked the child up and spanked its bottom twice, and then continued walking, still dragging the child. Another woman was wearing a red leather jacket, a cell phone glued to her ear. She was talking non-stop and didn't yield to anyone as she tramped along the road. People came and went. The light snow on the plaza failed to stick. If it wasn't carried off on people's shoes, it was trampled into slush. The only ones who were motionless were several panhandlers begging for money. An old lady was kneeling down to kowtow, her grey hair hung loosely on the ground like a pile of tangled grass. In front of her head was a worn-out white tea mug with some small change thrown inside of it. There was also a young woman sitting on the concrete with a small child sprawled on her legs. The child's face was pale and lifeless, both of his eyes were closed. You couldn't tell if he was sick or starving. An enamel tea mug was set in front of the woman's head. People rushed by as if the panhandlers were invisible, and hardly anyone threw money into her mug. Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming were baffled, it didn't matter whether it was New Year's Day or Chinese New Year; these were just dates on the calendar. It wasn't that these people were in heat, these innumerable men and women. So why on earth were they so flustered? Why were they so restless and uneasy?

The reason why the two of them had not initiated an attack was because, for the time being, they had not yet sighted their prey. They sat in the small shack, motionless, like hunters concealed in camouflage waiting for their desired target to appear. A shiver would run through them once their prey entered their field of vision. They wouldn't

miss the opportunity to capture the target of their pursuit. They weren't looking for a boss, and they didn't want someone who looked like a bureaucrat, nor did they want a woman. They just wanted a migrant worker. If the labourer was part of a larger group, they would reject that kind of person too. They specifically focused on single men. Generally speaking, single labourers were easy to cheat, and when confronted by two people, didn't put up much of a fight. A labourer lured by the promise of gain was like a neck with a noose looped around it. There was no need to lead him; he would obediently walk along with them. They had still not found their single male labourer, but they did catch sight of three prostitutes who were weaving their way through the crowd. The girls' style of dress was seductive, and they specifically chose to strike up a conversation with single men who looked moneyed. The girls would block the men from walking forward, and whisper as they stroked their hair. Some of them also pulled the sleeves of the men's jackets in an effort to get the men to follow them. The attitude of most men was resolute, and they paid no attention, but a few men took the opportunity to tease the girls, haggling over the price. Once the girl started getting interested, they would give her the cold shoulder and walk off looking pleased with themselves. Just a few couldn't resist the temptation, hesitantly following the women to an unknown location. Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming could see that these girls were chickens. Any sucker ushered into their chicken coop would fall deep into a dark hole, and even if they were a rooster they would still have to cough up an egg. Tang and Song were not in the same line of work as these girls, so there was no competition between them. As far as they were concerned, every one of those girls could trick man away, slaughtering men whose stomachs had become overgrown with fat.

The waitress came over to ask the two of them if they wanted the soup now.

Song Jinming took a good look at her and asked, “Do you have “Longevity Chicken Soup” here?”

Song Jinming could see that Tang Zhaoyang was bent on mischief; he stared at the tight lips of the girl to see how she answered. The girl bent her thin body. Her neck was very slender. From the look of it, she was an inexperienced girl from the countryside who had yet to open her legs, yet to experience the joys of battle. That’s the kind of woman who’s fun to take to bed. Once a women’s body has soft meat, she no longer had the taste of a free-range chicken. Instead, her taste becomes that of a table hen stuffed with fodder. The girl’s enticing lips moved, and she replied that she wasn't sure if they had “Longevity Chicken Soup” or not.

“Your restaurant has “Longevity Mutton Soup”, how can you not sell “Longevity Chicken Soup”? Chicken soup isn't expensive to make, you could make more money from it than from mutton soup,” Tang Zhaoyang said.

The girl said she would go ask the boss, and she turned around to enter the kitchen.

Song Jinming kicked Tang Zhaoyang’s legs, “Fuck you, don’t even think of that. If you want to get her into bed, it’s going to cost you five hundred at least.”

“I’d pay a thousand for it!”

The boss came out from the kitchen; it was a young married woman. The woman's body had quite a bit of soft meat in front and back, no match for the waitress. The young woman spoke, “You two guys have got to be kidding me, you’ve eaten your fill of the mutton soup, and you're still worried about not getting some chicken soup!” The married woman pouted her red lips and pointed toward the beauty salon next door,

“You can drink it there for as long as you like, mouth to mouth too, no one will care.”

Tang Zhaoyang could tell that the boss was no pushover, so he dropped the chicken soup issue and said, “Bring out the mutton soup.”

Both of them noticed a video-cassette playing room to the left of the restaurant. A black cloth hung over it, and a man and a woman stood in the doorway selling tickets, four yuan per person. No time limit. Beside the doorway was a black stereo speaker which blared out solicitations to customers. Most of what the speakers played was the sounds of women whose throats seemed to be blocked somehow, so that their utterances were indistinct. On the right side of the restaurant was the facade of a small shop for hairdressing and cosmetics. Written on the large glass windows of the facade were two lines in red, “Low prices, good service.” Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming had been to this type of place before. Although the facade of such a salon wasn’t big, the world inside of it was actually quite deep. You would have to turn corner after corner, and having entered a side door, you would have to go down a passageway, and sometimes have to go upstairs and downstairs. When you finally made it to a little room, a girl would emerge and you could wash and soak one by one. Of course what you’d be washing would be your second head, and what you’d be soaking would be your third foot.

The waitress brought out the “Longevity Mutton Soup”. It had been cooked in an earthenware pot, and so that the pot wouldn’t scald her hands, the woman used a pair of tongs to grip it. Only after she placed the steaming soup on the table did she separate it in two. Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming took a discerning look at it; the broth was thick and white, and on its surface were golden beads of sesame oil. The strong aroma of the fine broth bore straight toward their noses. The two of them picked up their

spoons and were just about to sample a “healthy” taste when Tang Zhaoyang shot a glance towards the train station plaza and said, “There!” At nearly the same time, Song Jinming also spotted their catch, the catch they would deliver to death. The two men locked eyes. Their pupils glittered with joyful drops of light, it was a vicious joy. They put down their spoons at the same time. Their prey was a big pile of bank notes that for now still had two legs and was moving around freely, they absolutely wouldn’t allow him to slip by. Their eager hands trembled slightly with excitement. Their spoons clattered as they put them down on their plates. Song Jinming stood up, and said, “I’ll go hook him!”

Like an actor in a play, Song Jinming walked forth from the restaurant. He didn’t forget to bring a prop, a bedroll in a plastic snakeskin bag. It was in an outdated style, an artificial leather bag with a broken zipper. The opening of the duffel bag exposed a towel that was filthy and a little black, half of it was inside the bag, while the other half drooped out. This type of prop was easy for labourers to identify with.

(2)

Song Jinming followed the tracks of his catch over to the train station plaza. Judging from his appearance, the catch wasn’t very nervous, as if the purpose of his actions was not very clear. While crossing the train station plaza, he took a moment to look upward at the sky to see how overcast it was, trying to figure out how heavy the snowfall would be. He stood distantly looking at the woman with the child who was begging for money. He didn’t walk close to the woman, nor did he pull out money to give her. The prey moved to the ticket office but didn’t buy a ticket. He went to the middle of a large wall to look at the train schedule, strolled to the ticket window, and

then left. When he walked outside someone struck up a conversation with him. Song Jinming suddenly went on the alert; he was worried that man would run off with his prey midway through their walk. Song Jinming anxiously took two steps forward, considering approaching the target. He listened to what that man and his catch were talking about so that he could play it by ear, and then lay claim to his catch. Song Jinming's worries were unnecessary though. He still couldn't hear what the two were saying, but they eventually split up; one went in, while the other went out, each going his own way.

The prey went down the concrete stairs of the ticket office entrance, and came upon a large red cigarette box that had been tossed on the floor. The box was a hard pack and looked as good as new. Step by step, the prey trampled the box flat. He stood still for a moment, looking left and right. Only when he didn't see anyone watching him did he pick up the box. He peeked inside the box, and used his fingers to dig around inside it. Even after he accepted that the box was empty, he still didn't throw it away. Instead, he stuffed it inside the pocket of his trousers.

Song Jinming could see all this very clearly. When his prey looked left and right, Song Jinming averted his gaze, pretending he hadn't seen anything. The prey surely wished he could pull out a roll of money from the cigarette box, but the box was empty. Not only did he not have any money, there wasn't even a single cigarette left in the box. Without a doubt this disappointed the adorable catch. Drawing on these details, Song Jinming had unconsciously completed his observation of the catch. He made his judgement; this man was someone who had no money and was eager to make it. This type of person was the easiest to hook. There was no room for hesitation; he had to quickly strike up a conversation with his catch.

In one corner of the train station stood a newspaper kiosk, and the target went over to take a look. Different types of magazines hung along the three glass windows of the kiosk. Almost every magazine had a pretty woman printed on its cover. Song Jinming took out a cigarette and seized the opportunity to press close to his catch, asking, "Excuse me, got a light?"

The target turned his head to take a look at Song Jinming., and said he didn't have a light. Since he didn't have a light, Song Jinming put the cigarette behind his ear and started to walk away, as if he was going to find another person with a light. Of course he wouldn't really leave. He took a few steps forward, and then turned to come back, speaking to the catch, "Why do you look familiar?" He didn't wait for the catch to respond to his question, and followed up with another, "You're heading home for the New Year, right?"

The catch nodded his head.

"We're still a month away from celebrating the New Year, why're you going home so early?"

"If not home, then where would I go?"

"We have a good connection with a mine, we're preparing to go there to work for a bit. The weather's cold over there, the coal sells well. The people coming from there say, if you work at the mine for a month, you can make at least this much." While saying this he bent his forefinger into a hook to symbolize the number nine. He watched the prey's eyes light up, and quickly brought in his hands. Right then, someone smoking a cigarette crossed over from the side of the road and Song Jinming went over get a light. He fished out a cigarette and offered it to the catch, but he didn't take it. He said he didn't smoke. Song Jinming could see that the catch felt a bit wary, so he didn't press

him to smoke. Rather he took the initiative to put some space between himself and the catch, moving back to the side to smoke alone. On one side was a rectangular flower bed, and in the spring and summer the flowers would be in bloom. At the moment though, it was winter and the flower bed only had withered stems and decaying leaves. Hanging on the barbed stems were wind-borne plastic bags waving to and fro, like pennants calling spirits from the dead. The base of the flowerbed was a cement platform half a leg tall. Song Jinming placed his bedroll on the ground, and sat on the platform. He was experienced at trapping people, trapping people and angling fish were quite similar; you put on the bait, throw it out, and then you must sit back, waiting patiently for the prey to slowly hook itself. If you're too hungry for a catch, pushing the bait at the prey's mouth again and again, you'll only scare it away.

Sure enough, the catch wound around the newspaper kiosk in a circle, slowly moving closer and closer to Song Jinming. The catch approached Song Jinming, but avoided eye contact, as if he had no intention of walking to Song Jinming's side.

Song Jinming was pleased. He thought to himself; if you're looking to get killed, don't blame me. He didn't greet his catch, who put down the bed roll he was carrying on his shoulder. His bed roll was also inside of a plastic snakeskin bag. No one had made it a rule, but within the past few years almost all the migrant workers used this kind of snakeskin bag. If you saw someone, or a group of people, walking along the side of the road carrying the lumpy snakeskin bag on their backs, there was no question; those men were migrant workers. The snakeskin bag had more or less become a symbol of the worker. The catch placed his bedroll relatively close to Song Jinming's, both were standing upright. The two bags, in the eyes of other people, looked like a pair. Song Jinming paid close attention to his catch's moves. He had chosen this bedroll as a

prop, and he had still not used it in the act, and the catch identified with the prop. In a flash, he had created a bit of an illusion, as if he wasn't fishing for someone, but the opposite was happening. The person was trying to hook *him* and exchange *his* life for money, but his heart gave a signal, to quickly drive out the sensation.

The catch coughed, asking where the mine was.

Song Jinming gave a vague location.

The target thought it seemed a bit far away.

“That's right, all the places you can make money are far away, but the close ones are where you blow money.”

“Are you saying, if you go to this place for a month you can make 900 yuan?”

“900 yuan is the minimum, I can't say how much more.”

“Are you going alone?”

“No, I've got a partner, he's waiting close by. I came to buy tickets.”

The catch didn't speak, he hung his head, and scraped a foot along the floor. His cotton shoes were made of a type of black canvas and rubber bonded together with glue. The inside of the shoes had a large hollow space and, from the look of it, they were rather clumsy. Song Jinming knew some migrant workers lacked confidence, and wanted to hide what little money they had inside of these cotton shoes. He wasn't sure if this guy was the same. Song Jinming stared probingly at his catch's shoes, fixing his gaze upon them. The prey brought his foot back, and placed both feet right next to each other. Song Jinming could tell his chosen catch was taking the bait. Now, in this world, you have to depend upon your mind and tricks to make money. If you're like this idiot, even if you have a measure of strength, you won't be able to support a wife or children.

This type of person is only suitable for being another person's catch, to have their life exchanged for a bunch of cash. The catch had started to nibble on the hook, and he asked Song Jinming, "Can I go with you guys?"

Song Jinming didn't answer; he continued to hold the bait, suspending it in front of the catch, allowing him to bite on the steel hook of his own accord. He said, "I'm afraid not, the boss only asked for two people, how can we suddenly show up with three?"

The target replied, "I'll go, I promise I won't steal a job from you. If I don't get the job, I'll return home immediately. My word can be trusted, if you don't believe me, I'll swear to God."

Song Jinming stopped him. To swear to God was something only the stupid did. The stupid person didn't have another method to make people trust them; they only adopted this vow of spiritual self-mutilation to humiliate themselves. A vow was nothing more than horseshit. Nowadays, who still trusted divine non-sense? Song Jinming said, "I can't make the final decision, the job was set up by my partner. You need to talk to him."

Song Jinming led the catch back to the small restaurant, and went up to the old woman who was knocking her head on the ground. Song Jinming made the catch wait as he fished out some money from his pocket and tossed a one yuan bill into the old woman's mug. The old woman only nodded and then, quickly and repeatedly, tapped her head on the floor while saying, "Travel safely good man, travel safely good man....." Song Jinming walked up to the young woman holding the child and suddenly threw out two yuan. The young woman parroted what the old woman had said, "Travel safely good man."

The catch stood behind Song Jinming, studying him. He decided to give the beggars some money too. He fumbled around his pockets for a bit, but when he finally brought out his hands they held no money.

Tang Zhaoyang watched as Song Jinming brought back their catch. He purposefully avoided looking at them, and only asked Song Jinming if he had bought tickets.

Song Jinming replied, "I still haven't gotten them, but this fellow wants to come work with us."

Tang Zhaoyang was immediately irritated, and said, "You're bullshitting me, what fellow! I told you to buy the tickets, and instead you brought back this guy. Can we use him as a ticket, or ride him like a train!"

Song Jinming spoke haltingly, putting on a show of being hurt, and explained, "I told him it wouldn't work, but he still wanted to see you. If you don't believe me, ask him. Didn't I say it wouldn't work out?"

The prey replied, "You shouldn't blame this on him. He really said it wouldn't work out. As soon as I heard you guys were preparing to go to the mine, I wanted to pair up with you guys, I wanted to see the mine."

"Why, have you worked in a mine before?"

"I have."

Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming quickly exchanged looks. Tang Zhaoyang's tone became a little more relaxed. He wanted to use this opportunity to further investigate their catch, to figure out which mines he had previously worked at, each one he had been to. They couldn't go to them again so as to avoid exposing any weaknesses

or hidden dangers. Tang Zhaoyang spoke, “I can’t tell if you’re someone who’s had experience mining coal, where have you worked before?”

The catch named two mines.

Tang Zhaoyang made a mental note of these two names, and then asked the catch, “What province are these mines in?”

He replied with a province.

The investigation was complete. Tang Zhaoyang still chatted with the catch, casually asking him, “What were the two mines like?” and “Were you able to make any money?” The prey answered them one by one. This time, Tang Zhaoyang wasn't relaxed, he was still playing hard to get, and said, “It won’t work, you look too old. I’m worried the owner won’t want you.”

The catch replied, “I just look older, but I’m not even forty, I’m only thirty-eight.”

Tang Zhaoyang stayed silent. He nodded a bit and smiled.

The catch didn’t realize it was just a trick, and was suddenly depressed. He hung his head low, his eyes blinked. Looking at him in this state made their eyes wet.

Tang Zhaoyang could see the catch was acting pitiful. He wanted to punch the catch straight in his face and bloody him. This type of person had no other skills, all he could do was act pitiful and make people sick. This type of miserable creature was born to be a tool. What was the point of keeping him alive if he had no use? If you killed him there would be one less of these idiots. Tang Zhaoyang was already used to examining his targets by how he would dispatch them. It was just like a butcher taking a look at the object of his slaughter, and then considering where to put the knife. The catch was

wearing a hat and his hair wasn't very thick. He estimated a single rock could smash the target's skull in. Even if they couldn't smash it to pieces, they could still pound it flat. He also looked at the prey's vertebrae; it was just like a string of abacus beads. If he fiercely sliced down with a pickaxe, with one blow the mark would fall head first and never get up again. Nevertheless, in the course of this work you had to be steady, accurate, and ruthless, there was no room for error. At the same time, he could tell their prey was willing to work hard. This type of man had undergone long periods of physical labour; he had a certain brute force and strong vitality. When you dealt with this kind of person, it was necessary to knock them senseless, to make him lose the ability to resist. Only then could you put them to death. If you didn't beat him stupid, then thing wouldn't go so smoothly. Tang Zhaoyang laughed ominously when he thought of this. He gave a curse and said, "It might work if you were my older brother. I'll talk with the mine owner, he might well accept you."

Song Jinming hastily told the prey, "It's not that easy to act as his brother. Go on then, agree to it."

The catch saw this as a turn for the better, and didn't know what to say. He wanted to agree but didn't know how.

"Do you want to act as my brother or not?" Tang Zhaoyang asked.

"I do, I do."

"What's your last name? What do they call you?"

"My last name is Yuan, my full name is Yuan Qingping."

"That last name Yuan, I haven't heard it before. Then, isn't Old Yuan not that

far off from Old Turtle?”¹

“That’s true.”

“If you’re going to be my brother, you can’t use Yuan. My last name is Tang, so you must also be a Tang.”

Tang Zhaoyang told Song Jinming, “Brother Song, find a name for my brother.”

Song Jinming had already prepared a list of names, but he leaned to the side and pretended to rack his brain, he then said, “My friend is named Tang Zhaoyang, so let’s call you Tang Zhaoxia.”

Tang Zhaoyang said, “Tang Zhaoxia? Why’d you choose something that sounds like a woman’s name?”

Song Jinming replied, “First, there’s the sunrise hitting the clouds, then there’s the morning sun². He’s your older brother, so what’s wrong with Zhaoxia?”

The catch had already approved it, saying, “It’s fine, it’s fine, just call me Tang Zhaoxia.”

Tang Zhaoyang said to Song Jinming, “Goddamn, you really know how to pick 'em.” He abruptly called out, “Tang Zhaoxia!”

For a moment, the person named Yuan Qingping did not react, it seemed as if he didn’t know who Tang Zhaoyang was calling, he was in a daze.

“Fuck, I called you, why aren’t you answering!”

Only then did Yuan Qingping break out of his daze and mutter a reply.

¹ Calling someone a turtle, or a Lǎobiē, is occasionally used as a taunt.

² Zhāoxiá literally means “rosy dawn”, while Zhāoyáng means “the morning sun”.

“From now on, the person named Yuan Qingping is dead, he doesn’t exist. The one who’s living is Tang Zhaoxia, is that clear?”

“It’s clear!”

“Brother!” Tang Zhaoyang called out as a test.

This time the person now called Tang Zhaoxia reacted, except he didn’t reply with much force, as if he was still a little timid.

But it was good enough for Tang Zhaoyang, “That’ll do, we’re like the Taoyuan Trio³.” He called to the waitress, “Come on, bring over two bowls of the mutton soup, and four sesame seed cakes.”

Song Jinming knew that Tang Zhaoyang had already eaten the two bowls they had originally ordered. Still, he asked while knowing the answer, “And you? You haven’t eaten?”

Tang Zhaoyang said he had been so starved that he couldn’t wait, and he had already eaten. He had ordered the bowls for the two of them.

Tang Zhaoxia said he wouldn’t eat as he had just eaten something.

Tang Zhaoyang replied, “Now that we’ve become brothers, you don’t have to be so polite.”

“You can eat too, I’m acting as your brother, I should pay. I’ll treat you to lunch.”

Tang Zhaoyang turned hostile again, “How much money do you have? Take it all out!”

³ Refers to a fictional event in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, where the characters Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhangfei took an oath to be sworn brothers and protect the Han Empire.

Tang Zhaoxia didn't take out any money.

“If you act like a stranger, then you won't be my brother. You'll take your road, I'll go to my coal pit!”

Tang Zhaoxia didn't dare act like a stranger anymore. Judging from Tang Zhaoyang's savage intimacy, he felt he had met good people who would become his friends. He didn't know it yet, but once he drank the “Healthy Mutton Soup” and walked off with the others, he would be starting on a road with no return.

(3)

The three of them rode on a train headed north, and then switched to a long distance bus heading west, piercing deep into the mountains. The mountains were coated with snow; there was a vast expanse of whiteness everywhere. There were more than a few small mines in the area. Wherever the mountains had had their bellies torn up and intestines pulled out, wherever there was black stuff piled on the snow, you'd find a small coal pit. A couple of tractors pulling coal panted, taking coarse breaths as they climbed the mountain road. The road conditions weren't very good and the tractors tottered unsteadily, looking like they might flip over at any time. But they hadn't had one turnover, just a few scattered pieces of coal, and they kept driving on. There were hardly any people or trees in the mountains. You could only see logs used to build triangular pit-head frames, and chimneys stretching up from the squat rooftops. The good thing was, from every chimney smoke gently rose, signalling some signs of life. Tang Zhaoyang sized up the road for a second, doubting that this place was remote enough. So he took Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoxia and continued westward. It seemed like he had a well-thought out plan, for he soon said they were almost there.

They flagged down an empty coal hauler and climbed into its trailer. “Be careful that you don’t freeze into sticks of meat!” the driver warned. Tang Zhaoyang replied, “The harder the better, when it’s time for screwing I won’t need a blowjob.” They continued west for another nine or ten miles. Tang Zhaoyang chose a mine that had a small pile of coal stacked at the mouth of the pit. As soon as they got out of the trailer they headed down toward a small house near the entrance to the mine. Tang Zhaoyang had Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoxia wait outside while he went in to talk to the owner of the mine.

Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoxia found a place behind the house out of the wind. They shrunk back, freezing, and put their hands in their pockets as they walked back and forth any which way. From past experience, Tang Zhaoxia only had a few days left to live, at most, not more than a week. So, Song Jinming wanted to joke around with Tang Zhaoxia a bit, to make his life a little more cheerful during his final days. He asked, “Tang Zhaoxia, does your wife look pretty?”

“She’s not pretty.”

“Why isn’t she pretty?”

“Her mouth’s too big.”

“But that’s a good thing, I’ve heard that if a woman’s mouth is big, she’s also big down below, it’s good for giving birth. How many kids has your wife given you?”

“Two, a boy and a girl.”

“Who’s older, the boy or the girl?”

“The boy’s older.”

“How old’s the girl?”

“Fourteen.”

“What do you think about giving your daughter to me as a wife? I’ll give her a 10,000 yuan betrothal gift.”

Tang Zhaoxia became irate, and he pointed to Song Jinming and said, “You, you...you you’re screwing with me!”

Song Jinming laughed and said, “Fuck you buddy, I was just kidding with you and you took it to heart. My wife sits at home all day idle, why on earth would I want to marry your daughter? To tell you the truth, what I worry about most is my wife sleeping with other men. Tell me, you’ve been running off for all these years, has your wife been with another man?”

“She hasn’t”

“How can you be so sure about that?”

“Where I’m from, all the men have left.”

“Oh, so that’s how it is, all the turnips have been plucked from the ground. Hey, how about you write a note so I can go have your sister-in-law fuck me.”

This time Tang Zhaoxia wasn’t angry, he merely said, “You can do whatever you want, why do you need me to write a note?”

After the time it would have taken to smoke a pipe of tobacco, Tang Zhaoyang came out from the mine owner’s house. He stood at the entrance and called out, “Brother, brothers.”

Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoxia quickly came out from behind the house, and walked towards Tang Zhaoyang. This time the mine owner also came out from the house. He was wearing a leather jacket and leather pants, with leather shoes on his feet.

From top to bottom he was packaged in animal skin. The mine owner's attire was completely black, and it bulged and shone like lacquer. There's a kind of dung beetle that looks just as magnificent. When the mine owner came out he didn't speak. He was biting on a long, amber coloured cigarette holder. Tobacco smoke steadily burned from the cigarette holder. Tang Zhaoyang introduced Tang Zhaoxia to the mine owner and said, "This is my brother."

The mine owner silently took a look at Tang Zhaoxia.

Tang Zhaoxia stayed glued to Tang Zhaoyang's side and said, "This is my brother, my younger brother."

The mine owner scoffed, "You don't say!"

Tang Zhaoyang also introduced Song Jinming to the mine owner and said, "He's from the same town as me, we came together."

The mine owner took out the cigarette holder from between his teeth, flicking off ash, and asked, "Have you really been down a mine before?"

The three of them said that they had.

"Where have you been most recently?"

Tang Zhaoyang named a place.

"Why'd you leave?" The pitch of the mine owner's question wasn't very high, but he pressed forward with piercing authority, as if he wanted to give the strangers who had come into the mountains a show of strength.

Of course, this didn't trouble Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming, they had a whole set of methods to deal with mine owners, or rather, they specialized in extracting money from the mine owners pockets. In their hearts, they sneered at every pretentious

mine owner. But on the outside, they seemed to be humble, even going so far as to appear ignorant, like a simpleton who had never seen much of the world. Tang Zhaoxia had this type of air, but it wasn't a facade, he was actually like this. He was already intimidated by the authority of the mine owner.

Tang Zhaoyang answered, “The roof of the mine collapsed, crushing two people.”

The mine owner replied, “Who’s counting two dead men! You eat a meal and go take a shit, you open a mine and people die. If you’re afraid of dying, then don’t go down a mine!”

Tang Zhaoyang nodded vigorously, he really agreed with the mine owner’s point of view, and said to himself, “You speak the truth you fucking dog. Just wait, I’ve come to give you a dead man!”

Song Jinming added, “Normally two dead men don’t count for much, but somehow the news of the dead leaked out. Some people from the top rode in on a sedan to take a look at the mine. They immediately announced that production was suspended for reorganization.”

The mine owner didn’t like hearing that, he waved his hand at them and said, “Reorganization is bullshit, reorganization won’t stop people from dying!”

Song Jinming still had some words he wanted to say, they were part of the plot he had meticulously drawn out. They had been put to the test and proven effective. He said these words to provoke the mine owner, so that he'd remember well. In this way, it was tantamount to showing what would happen next, and what would be required of the mine owner. When the time came he'd make use of this foreshadowing and the mine

owner would have to be careful; they would then be leading him by the nose. He went on, “We stayed around for a few days, we wanted to get our back pay from the mine owner. We waited for a long time but he never showed his face. It wasn’t until afterward that we found out, that the people at the top had...”

The owner interrupted Song Jinming. As expected, he had become upset and seemed a little out of breath, and said, “We’re starting off on the wrong foot. I can’t guarantee that people won’t die at this mine. There’s a good saying, that struggle requires sacrifice, death is normal. Of course, nobody who opens a mine wants people to die. Here’s how it’ll go, you’ll work for two days while I watch you. If I say it’s fine, you’ll get the job. If I see that’s not the case, you’ll immediately pack up and leave. You won’t get money for these two days, it’s a trial period. Normally I would take your probation dues, but I can see you’ve come from faraway. Making money isn’t easy, so I’ll waive the dues.

The three of them nodded, “Thank you, boss.”

On the first day, Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming didn’t give the signal to dispatch Tang Zhaoxia. For the time being they used their strength to dispatch the coal. Once they had arrived at the bottom of the mine, they then had the urge to kill and take care of their prey. But the mine owner wanted them to work for a trial period; they would have to put up with that first. They would wait until the try-out was over and the mine owner had signed their contracts, only then would they eliminate their prey. Then the owner wouldn’t be able to default on his debt. Now and then, Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming exchanged glances, their eyes glistening in the dark. In their view, the bottom of the mine was extremely suitable for murder, it was simply a natural killing ground. They extinguished their lamps, making the pit pitch-black. If you got to work

killing someone, no one would be able to see you, it was as black as the darkest of nights. There was no God at the bottom of the mine, there was no Devil, they were far from heaven and hell, even God wouldn't know of a murder, the Devil wouldn't know, heaven wouldn't know, neither would hell. Even if the sounds of bludgeoning rang out as they killed him, or if the victim moaned, the bottom of the mine was separated from the world of man by thousands of layers of rock and mountains. Who would be able to hear them! The pit had an oppressive atmosphere; it was filled with the decaying scent of death that made a person sleepy as soon as they entered. The murdered and murderer both became numb, as if they had taken an anaesthetic. It wasn't like being on the surface in broad daylight, where killing someone would easily cause a scene. Crucially, there were many natural disasters that happened at the bottom of a pit, accidents were frequent. Often you had someone go in standing upright, and coming out on their backs. Killing people in the mines was so easy; you could say it was a natural death rather than a man made one. Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming knew how to handle this from past experience, and they exploited the natural conditions of the pit very well, without any reservations they would attribute the death to the pressure in the pit, the rocks, wooden beams, and posts. This time, they planned to handle it the same way.

The three of them worked in one shaft of the coal mine, drilling, blasting rock, digging with pickaxes, bringing down the coal, and putting up wooden supports. The three of them were skilled at this work, and Tang Zhaoxia was particularly good. He wanted to make himself stand out, to gain the trust of his two partners. He rushed forward when moving the coal, he worked so hard his brow became beaded with sweat, there wasn't a moment he was idle. If you only looked at him from his work, Tang Zhaoxia was really quite the skilled miner. But, even as the pile of coal he dug out became taller and taller, all the money from selling it would just go to the mine owner.

They would make hardly anything! In his heart, Song Jinming said to his catch, I'm sorry, I have to take your life.

Two other miners were responsible for transporting the coal to the outside. They led in a mule pulling an iron cart with rubber wheels, filled the cart, and pulled it back toward the pit's mouth. Once they unloaded the coal, they returned and loaded it up again. Each time an empty cart returned, Tang Zhaoxia picked up a large shovel to help the men fill the cart. Tang Zhaoyang wanted to show affection for Tang Zhaoxia in front of the coal shifters, so he seized the shovel from Tang Zhaoxia's hands, and said, "Brother, rest for a minute, I'll load it up." Though his hands no longer held the shovel, Tang Zhaoxia didn't remain idle. He used both his hands to pick up a few large lumps of coal and tossed them towards the cart. Tang Zhaoyang's concern for his brother went up a notch, and with an exasperated tone he said, "Brother, brother, will you rest for a minute! There isn't a moment you're not wearing out your hands, nothing bad's gonna happen!" Tang Zhaoxia believed that Tang Zhaoyang truly cared for him, he saw Tang Zhaoyang as his younger brother, and said, "Brother, don't worry, it's not going to tire me out."

Compared to other days, their first day saw several extra tons of coal brought up, and the mine owner seemed pleased.

On the second day, Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming had still not yet eliminated their catch. The relationship between the older and younger brother seemed to get closer. The mine owner quietly observed their work area, but it was as if Tang Zhaoyang had a third eye, he could tell the owner was standing off to the side of the shaft; however, he pretended not to know, he simply stuck to Tang Zhaoxia's side, calling out "brother" left and right. Tang Zhaoxia knew how to properly use a pickaxe

to dig up coal. Tang Zhaoyang pushed Tang Zhaoxia to the side, and said, “Brother, watch out for a collapse!” He wrested the pickaxe from his brother’s hands, he wanted to dig it himself, but his brother didn’t let go, and said, “Little brother, it’s not a problem, nothing’s going to happen!” The younger brother replied, “I can’t let you, by the time there’s an accident it’ll be too late. Our father used to have a saying, he’d say it doesn’t matter how much money you make, you’d better watch out for your safety!” When “our father” was mentioned, the older brother thought of his own father. His father had already died, and now he had to recognize a new “our father”. His mind had to make an adjustment, and when that happened, his hands relaxed, and his good younger brother then took the pickaxe. Tang Zhaoyang’s action was zealous, the blows from his pickaxe came down like hail, and numerous pieces of coal began to pour out, flowing together like rain.

Song Jinming could see through it all. He cursed to himself, Tang Zhaoyang could really fucking act. The more he acted, the better he got. The more expert his performance, the more loving he seemed to be, the less their victim would know what was coming. The mine owner, too, would also become trapped in this act.

The mine owner spoke, “I can tell you guys have really worked at other mines.”

“That’s right boss, have you come to inspect our work?” Tang Zhaoyang asked.

“I wouldn’t call it an inspection; I just came to take a look. What’s with all this “boss” business, when I hear you call me that it’s like you’re calling me ‘landlord’⁴, my surname is Yao.

Tang Zhaoyang switched to calling him Mr. Yao.

⁴ In the original Chinese, the mine owner is often referred to as Kuàngzhǔ, meaning “mine proprietor”, which he feels sounds similar to Dìzhǔ, meaning “landlord”.

One person was standing to the side of the mine owner, he was probably an assistant or a bodyguard. The mine owner walked over, he still had the amber cigarette holder clenched between his teeth, except there wasn't any smoke coming from it. The owner took out the cigarette holder and pointed at them saying, "I remember, the last name of you two is Tang, you're a pair of brothers, and your last name is Song. Not bad, huh?"

"Mr. Yao, you really have a good memory. So, are you going to feed us?" Song Jinming asked.

"Feeding you is easier, but what about women? You'll earn so much money, are you gonna go pick up women?"

Their responses differed to this sudden question. Song Jinming answered, "I'm not, I can't afford it."

Maybe Tang Zhaoxia had misheard the question, or didn't understand it, but he asked, "Chase what?" Tang Zhaoyang understood, the mine owner had revealed his approval of them, he was joking with them in an effort to build rapport, so he asked, "Where would we go?"

The mine owner laughed and said, "Where can't you go! Where there's water, there'll be women. Wherever you can wash your feet, you can pick up women."

Tang Zhaoyang said, "Who doesn't want to chase women? But we don't know our way around here, so we can't."

The mine owner laughed and replied, "There's nothing to be afraid of, if you see a woman go chase her. You have to right wrongs in accord with heaven's decree. Do you understand? This is an honourable mission sent to you from heaven. If you can't

complete this mission, or if you don't do it well, the gods in the next life will chop your dick off. They'll turn you into a girl, and make other men chase you.”

Tang Zhaoyang modestly replied, “Mr. Yao, now that you've explained it, we get it. Once you've paid us Mr. Yao, we'll strive to complete the mission.”

Only then did Tang Zhaoxia understand the talk about chasing girls. He chuckled, clearly amused.

When they got to the top of the pit, the mine owner sent someone to inform them that their trial period had ended. They could work at the mine on a piece-work basis, getting more pay for more production, and they would receive their wages once a month. He hoped that they would stay during the Spring Festival, when their wages would be doubled.

Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoyang found the mine owner, and asked if he could officially sign their labour contract.

The mine owner replied, “What're you talking about? I've never used that kind of thing. A mine stays put, but miners come and go. If you want to earn money here, then earn it. If you don't want to make anything, I have other people lined up at the door.”

(4)

They didn't want to keep dragging things on, so on the fourth day, Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming made their decision. They would kill their catch that day. Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming had heard someone say that in every dynasty and in every era, before a condemned prisoner was put to death, he was allowed a final meal of

good food and liquor. In keeping with this code, they wanted to treat Tang Zhaoxia to a meal, to let him eat and drink his fill before hitting the road. His farewell ceremony would take place in the evening on the third day, after they had left the pit. The three of them rode in the open mouth of a large metal lift used for transporting coal. Heavy snow was falling as they were ferried out of the pit. The winter days were short, and every day they came up from the mine, the sky was already black. As they rose up to the mouth of the mine they thought they saw some light at the top. They believed it wasn't yet dark out. As they waited, snowflakes fell on their necks and face, they realized then there had been a large snowfall. Song Jinming said, "It's easy to get homesick when it's snowing, how about we get a drink?"

Tang Zhaoyang immediately agreed, "Alright, let's go get some liquor, to celebrate our new jobs. But first, let's get this straight, the drinks are on me. I'll treat you brother, and Brother Song will be my guest too. If you don't let me pay, I won't drink a single drop."

Tang Zhaoxia insisted on paying and dug in his heels, "If you don't let me pay I won't even take a taste. I'm the older brother, and if I always let you take me out, then what does that make me?" He spoke with some vigour, as if he was gritting his teeth. His determination to pay the bill was clear.

Tang Zhaoyang took a glance at Song Jinming, and finally made a concession, "Ok, ok, ok, today I'll let my brother treat. An older brother is like a father. As they say, both the palm and back of the hand are made of flesh, it doesn't matter who pays."

They hadn't showered, their bodies and face were covered with coal dust. They walked toward a small restaurant not far from the pit's entrance. Because there was no mess hall at the mine, all the miners ate at this small, independent restaurant. The

restaurant in question was run by three people: a husband, a wife, and their daughter. The wife was allegedly a relative of the mine owner. By the time they got to the restaurant's entrance, they were no longer black but covered from head to toe in snowflakes. The black men had become white men. The wife warmly welcomed them and handed over a broom so they could dust off the snow. With one sweep the snow was off, they had again become black men, only their teeth and eyes were still white. Tang Zhaoyang wanted Tang Zhaoxia to order the meal, but Tang Zhaoxia refused. Tang Zhaoyang ordered a pork stew with noodles, boiled cabbage and tofu, shredded lamb's head, and lastly, a bottle of Baijiu. Tang Zhaoyang urged Tang Zhaoxia to order a few more dishes, saying that he wouldn't miss home if he ate and drank his fill. After their order was placed, Tang Zhaoxia said he had to use the bathroom, and got up to go. Song Jinming reckoned Tang Zhaoxia would certainly use this opportunity to take out his money, if it wasn't sewn in his underwear, than it was hidden in his shoes. Song Jinming didn't share his thoughts with Tang Zhaoyang.

Song Jinming's guess was right on, after Tang Zhaoxia took a piss in the bathroom, he squatted on his heels, and took off one of his shoes. There was a slit in the tongue of the shoe, and sandwiched inside was a small plastic bag. Tang Zhaoxia peeled off two bills, and stuffed the bag back into the tongue of his shoe.

The dishes came, and they poured the liquor, Tang Zhaoxia urged them to drink, but the other two didn't raise their glasses. While looking at Tang Zhaoxia, Tang Zhaoyang said, "You're the big brother, so today you'll pay the bill, but we won't drink if you don't." Song Jinming echoed Tang Zhaoyang and said, "If you're Zhaoyang's brother, then you're mine too. We've come a long way, this was our destiny! Come on big brother, you should say a few words."

The white eyes on Tang Zhaoxia's face blinked, he cleared his throat and said, "I don't know what to say. What can I say? You two are both good men, I ran into some good people. It just goes to show, there's still some good men in this world. From this day on, us brothers will share our joys and sorrows together. Come on then, let's drink up!" Tang Zhaoxia downed an entire glass. He shook his head, said he couldn't really handle his liquor, drank two more cups, and then raised his head.

Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming had clearly planned out their prey's "farewell party". Of course they wouldn't just let Tang Zhaoxia slip away, so, these two smiling devils took turns calling him big brother and toasting to him. By this time tomorrow their prey would be on his way to paradise, they'd seen this before. Their toasts had two meanings, it was as though they were speaking both to a living person and a dead man's soul. One said, "Big brother, I raise a glass to you, drink so that you'll feel better." The other said, "I raise my glass to you big brother, that you may sleep with your mind at peace, and that you'll no longer miss your family." One went, "Big brother, I toast again in your honour, I hope you can forgive me for all the bad that I've done." The other went, "Big brother, another toast, I wish that you'll soon escape from this abyss of suffering, that you'll soon become immortal." Tang Zhaoxia's tongue was already stiff, and he said, "Drink, to death.....even if it kills me, I'll drink it..." Considering their plan, the two of them couldn't help but be taken aback by Tang Zhaoxia's mention of death. They exchanged looks.

Tang Zhaoyang suddenly grabbed Tang Zhaoxia's hand, and emotionally told him, "Brother, I haven't taken good care of you, I'm sorry!"

Tang Zhaoxia must have felt moved, mixed with all the liquor he had downed, he must have seen Tang Zhaoyang as a brother born from the same mother, and said,

“Little brother, I think you’ve had too much to drink, you shouldn't be apologizing to your big brother, it’s me that hasn’t given you enough attention, I’m so sorry!”

Tang Zhaoxia was crying the entire time he spoke. His tears washed away the coal dust around his bloodshot eyes.

The wife and her daughter saw the group speaking with emotion in another dialect. She watched them from the kitchen and told her daughter, “Those two brothers must be really close.”

Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming supported Tang Zhaoxia, dragging him over to the small cave that was being used as a make-shift dorm. Tang Zhaoxia fell asleep as soon as he collapsed on the straw mat. The snowfall had ceased and the ashy, pallid light of the moon shone on the small cave. Tang Zhaoyang also slept. Song Jinming was worried that Tang Zhaoxia would die from alcohol poisoning, and just like that, the catch they had invested so much time in would become worthless. They would have been celebrating for nothing. He twisted the catch’s head towards the light of the snow at the door, and slapped the catch’s ashen face, saying, “Ay, brother, wake up, take off your clothes, you’ll freeze like this.” The catch didn’t respond. He continued observing his catch, and noticed the cotton shoes he was wearing. An idea flashed through his mind, he wanted to take off the catch’s shoes, to see if there was money hidden inside. He covered the catch with a quilt and said, “Use this to sleep. Come on, I’ll help you take your shoes off” He used both hands to grip a shoe and was about to take it off, when the catch raised his foot and kicked him away, muttering some vague words. Song Jinming was elated that his catch was still alive, more importantly, he was certain that there was money stored inside his shoes. He wouldn’t let Tang Zhaoyang know this secret, he would wait until after they had taken care of the prey, and use the opportunity

to take the money from the shoes by himself. Just then, Tang Zhaoyang said something, “Go to sleep, it’s nothing.” All of Song Jinming’s thoughts were with the shoes, and Tang Zhaoyang’s fierce words had startled him. In that split second he had a strange feeling, as if Tang Zhaoyang was watching him as he tried to fish the money out of the shoes. To shake off the feeling, he asked Tang Zhaoyang, “You haven’t fallen asleep yet?” Tang Zhaoyang didn’t make a sound. Was Tang Zhaoyang dreaming? Or was he awake? Maybe Tang Zhaoyang was just dreaming. He looked at him from the corner of his eye, he needed to be more careful with this deadly man.

When it came down to it, the process of killing their prey was very simple; at the start the prey was still a living person who could fight back. But when they were done with him he wouldn’t have a breath left. It wouldn’t take more than five minutes, things were straightforward and neat.

Most things in life are like this. You spend a lot of time and energy preparing for something, but then it’s often over in a minute or two. As the saying goes, “You spend ten months being pregnant, and in one morning you give birth.”

Before killing the catch, they did their jobs silently, saying nothing. As his catch walked to the end of the road, Tang Zhaoyang didn't express much affection toward him. He didn’t ask him if he had any last words, as you would before a relative passed away. He was already holding the pickaxe close, peering at Tang Zhaoxia’s skull again and again. To an outsider it might seem that the three men were just hung over from a night of merry drinking. It was nothing out of the ordinary.

Song Jinming wanted to relax for a bit, so he said something that had nothing to do with killing their catch, “I really want to go fuck a woman right now.”

As mentioned before, Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming’s coordination was

fairly in sync. Tang Zhaoyang immediately understood Song Jinming's intentions, and chimed in, "You want to fuck a woman? In your dreams! I'll make a hole in the wall for you; you should just fuck the wall. Otherwise, wait until the coal cart comes over, and we'll look to see if the mule pulling the cart is male or female, if it's a female, my brother and I will let you pound into the mule's pussy!"

Song Jinming said, "Ok, I agree, whoever doesn't do that is going to be fucked by a mule."

The two of them watched their prey as they joked, they wanted to see if Tang Zhaoxia would laugh or not. Tang Zhaoxia didn't laugh, his mood was off today, and he seemed a little restless. Tang Zhaoyang made a hole which Tang Zhaoxia had the audacity to criticize for being too high on the coal face. He said it would cause the rocks in the roof to collapse. Of course, Tang Zhaoyang didn't listen to that, and asked, "Who's more skilled here, you or me?"

Tang Zhaoxia answered gruffly, "Alright, I don't care, if you cause a cave in you'll have a real problem."

"That's right, I want a cave in so it'll crush you!" Tang Zhaoyang replied.

Song Jinming didn't expect this to happen, that Tang Zhaoyang would say something like this. Didn't he just let the cat out of the bag? He shouted at Tang Zhaoyang to stop, grilling him, "How can you say that? Did you really say that to your own brother? Don't you know how serious that is? It's outrageous."

Tang Zhaoxia felt wronged and took a step back to the side, he was muttering, "Crush me to death? Ok, come on, kill me!"

Due to the prey's own words, his murder was going to come sooner than

expected. Tang Zhaoyang motioned to Song Jinming, he wanted to immediately get to work. He started dragging the pickaxe over toward the catch.

Song Jinming stopped him, “The coal cart is coming.”

Tang Zhaoyang listened, and sure enough he could hear the mule's iron shoes striking the ground in the tunnel. Luckily, Song Jinming was sober. If the cart caught them in the middle of the act, everything would be ruined.

Tang Zhaoxia was no longer upset after the coal cart arrived, and he lifted up the big shovel to help the other men pile up the coal; that was this man's virtue, even if he was annoyed with someone, he wasn't put off by labour. Regardless of how angry he was, it didn't affect his work. It was quite unfortunate that such a good worker had fallen into the hands of these two black-hearted men.

As soon as the sound of the mule's hooves disappeared, the two of them got to work. As Song Jinming fixed his footing he pretended to accidentally bump the catch's helmet and lamp, knocking them to the ground. This created an opportunity for Tang Zhaoyang to strike the catch straight in the head with the pickaxe, and with one blow of the tool the catch dropped. Tang Zhaoyang knew he couldn't waste this moment. He saw the prey's stooping head and picked up his helmet, and then brought the pickaxe up and down, striking the target in the side of his head. He didn't use the sharp end of the pickaxe; it would be easy to tell the sharp end was used by the wound. That would cause people to suspect murder. He turned the pickaxe over and used the edgeless-end as a hammer, so that all the wounds from the blows were blunt. Everyone would blame the stones, which couldn't speak. As it met with the prey's skull, a muffled sound came from the prey's head, it didn't sound pleasant. They say some people are so stupid their heads are hollow, even when you hit them there's no sound. That's probably what it

referred to. Although the sound didn't resonate, it was effective, and the prey slumped over a nest of coal.

Tang Zhaoxia didn't shout out, nor did he groan, he just wordlessly nibbled on the coal he had just dug out. He did all he could to turn on the side of his head, to figure out what had just happened, but his efforts failed. He couldn't move his face, it was as if it had been welded to the coal pit. It seemed like his legs wanted to crawl forward, but with one step, his toes just slipped along the ground. Even his legs couldn't help him get out of this.

Immediately, Tang Zhaoyang struck his "brother's" head a second time, and a third time, and a fourth time for good measure. When Tang Zhaoyang brought the pickaxe down for the second time, Tang Zhaoxia's entire body bounced, leaping up for a moment. It jumped more than a foot, shocking Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming. But they quickly discovered that Tang Zhaoxia's legs were just jerking, trying to straighten out. Sure enough, they couldn't straighten again, and suddenly they weren't moving. As they say, he had already "kicked the bucket".

Despite this, Song Jinming picked up a rock and smashed in Tang Zhaoxia's skull. He was doing this for his own sake, laying down a firm foundation for the equal distribution of earnings at their next stage. After the rock smashed down, it settled down on Tang Zhaoxia's head, motionless. Blood dripped down from the bottom of the rock, flowing unhurriedly, quietly, thick and viscous. The colour of the blood seemed to be a little dull, as if it wasn't red, but black. Under the light of the lamp, the surface of the blood flow gave off a shade of faint blue light. Because their work area was blocked from wind flow, a fishy smell quickly filled the air. Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming stood face to face, their faces revealed small, triumphant grins.

This was the third man they had taken out together.

For some reason Song Jinming got up and kicked off the stone that was pressing down on Tang Zhaoxia's head to turn his body over. He flipped Tang Zhaoxia's body to face upward. Song Jinming had no regrets as he observed Tang Zhaoxia's bulging eyes, and asked, "What do you see? Look again; you don't even recognize us do you?" He picked up some coal scraps and sprinkled them onto Tang Zhaoxia's eyes. Strangely, when the coal fell onto his eyes, they remained still, and seemed to get bigger. It was as if Tang Zhaoxia's eyes had a layer of glass on them; as soon as the coal scraps fell they slipped off his face of their own accord. He had no choice, Song Jinming turned Tang Zhaoxia face down.

This time, Tang Zhaoyang made a tasteless joke to Song Jinming, "He'll remember you. Be careful, when he gets to Hell he'll want to settle his debt with you!"

Song Jinming cursed Tang Zhaoyang harshly, "Shut your filthy mouth!"

To make their act more believable, they set off an explosion on the roof of the mine shaft. The explosion caused a rockslide that covered up Tang Zhaoxia's body. Done like this, it didn't matter who saw, everyone would agree that Tang Zhaoxia had died from a cave in.

(5)

As soon as Tang Zhaoyang heard the faint sound of the mule's hooves, he called out in a hoarse voice, "Brother, brother, where are you....."

Song Jinming ran over to meet the cart and shouted, "Hurry, hurry, there was a cave in! Tang Zhaoyang's brother is buried inside!"

Tang Zhaoyang was pulling away stones and wailing, “Brother! Brother! You’d better be OK! Brother! Brother! Can you hear me? You have to hold on!”

Song Jinming and the other two workers rushed in to pull away rocks, one of them tried to console Tang Zhaoyang by saying, “Don’t cry, don’t cry, we might still be able to save your brother.”

When the mule pulling the iron cart arrived at the work area it stationed itself to the side. It was as if the mule could see through their tricks and didn't want to see anymore, feeling it was beneath its dignity to continue looking on. Its gaze was aloof. After they pulled Tang Zhaoxia out, Tang Zhaoyang propped him up in a sitting position and shook his arms, crying out, “Brother, wake up, wake up! Brother, say something! Brother, it’s Zhaoyang! It's your little brother Zhaoyang....”

The cart was empty, and so they lifted the motionless Tang Zhaoxia into the cart. Tang Zhaoyang held him in his arms as they were pulled toward the pit's entrance. They hoisted Tang Zhaoxia into the metal lift to take him up toward the surface. Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming rode together, and when they were halfway up, Song Jinming nudged Tang Zhaoyang’s stomach to remind him to cry. Tang Zhaoyang growled, “Fuck you, you’re feeling pretty good aren't you!”

As soon as they saw daylight, Tang Zhaoyang resumed wailing. This time he shouted, “Save his life, hurry, save his life...” Everyone at the mine heard his cries, it sounded like Tang Zhaoyang himself was fighting for his life

The mine owner heard the calls for help and ran over, asking what had happened. He wasn’t flustered, and he nonchalantly carried his cigarette holder and tobacco.

Song Jinming climbed out from the metal lift, while Tang Zhaoyang stayed in the lift, hugging Tang Zhaoxia's neck. Tang Zhaoyang's body was covered with blood, even his face was bloodied. Under the light of day, his blood seemed all the more red. Tang Zhaoyang was silent for a moment and then told the owner, "My brother's been injured. We need to take him to a hospital. Please save my brother's life!"

The owner turned to Song Jinming and asked him to explain.

Song Jinming shivered from head to toe, as if his entire body were frozen, it looked like all the blood had drained from his lips. He said, "The roof of our work area caved in, burying Tang Zhaoxia underneath. Me, Tang Zhaoyang, and the other two miners, dug him out. What do we do if he's gone?" His voice shook, and he started to cry.

Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming fed off of one another, pushing each other's act forward. Seeing Song Jinming cry, Tang Zhaoyang decided to make an even bigger scene, "Brother! Brother! How'd this happen? You can't go, come back now! Let's go back home and celebrate the New Year. We don't have to work here anymore----" He wailed until he lost his voice, he was an absolute mess.

As soon as they heard the crying, the other workers at the mine, those sleeping in the cave dwelling, those eating at the restaurant, they all ran over. The mine owner had some people bring over a stretcher, and they lifted the injured man up, and placed him on it. The mine owner waved his hands to make the crowd disperse, "Go back to whatever you were doing, there's nothing to see here." But the crowd didn't break up, the onlookers just moved back two steps, and stood watching.

Even after Tang Zhaoxia was laid up on the stretcher, Tang Zhaoyang was still shouting, begging them to have his brother taken to a hospital. Someone in the crowd

said, “There’s no point, there’s no way to save him. His skull’s crushed in, it’s all over.”

When the wife at the restaurant caught sight of Tang Zhaoxia’s open eyes, she screamed and covered her mouth, saying, “My god, that scared me to death! Why hasn’t anyone closed his eyes yet?”

The mine owner took two fierce drags from his cigarette and squatted on his heels. He was quite the expert at checking Tang Zhaoxia’s pulse, and he looked over Tang Zhaoxia’s eyes. When he was finished he stood up and said, “His pulse is gone, his pupils are dilated, I think he’s gone.” The owner had two men take the deceased into a small room behind the bathhouse.

Tang Zhaoyang wouldn’t accept the mine owner’s verdict and sobbed, “No, no, no. My brother was fine yesterday, we even went out for a drink. How can he be gone now?”

The owner replied, “That’s a question you need you ask yourself. You said you understood your jobs, but what ended up happening? You caused a cave in after only a few days. Now I have to deal with this huge mess.”

Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming followed the mine owner’s every word. He accepted their story about the cave in, they had already fooled this cocky fellow, and he had no suspicions regarding Tang Zhaoxia’s death. They felt at ease.

Song Jinming once again stressed the cave in, saying, “Who wants a cave in? No one wants to have a cave in. You’ve been good to us; we wanted to stay on to work. Who saw this coming!”

The small room behind the bathhouse was used especially for storing corpses, it was like a hospital morgue. They placed Tang Zhaoxia in the back of the morgue, and

when the crowd of onlookers walked over, the mine owner lost his temper, and shouted, “Whoever doesn't leave, I'll shut them in that hut, and make them keep watch over the body!” Only then did the crowd leave.

There were no windows in the hut, and snow was piled up in the front and back. The doors were made from dark planks of wood, and on them a word was written in chalk, Heaven. Some snow was even packed under the entrance. The hut was almost as cold as an ice cave. A corpse could stay in there for a few days before it started to rot.

An older man was charged with closing the victim's eyes. The man quickly rubbed his hands together to warm them up, and then placed his hand on the victim's eyes. When he thought the eyes were warm enough he tried to smooth them closed. He did this twice, but each time the eyelids refused to stay shut.

Tang Zhaoyang took the opportunity to cry again, “My brother, my brother. He's missing his family, missing our father, missing our mother, missing my sister-in-law, missing my nephew and niece. My brother died so tragically, he didn't go in peace!” He ordered Song Jinming, “Go now and find a place to send a telegram. Call our mother, father, and nephew, tell them to come. How am I going to explain this to my family? I should just die!”

Song Jinming lowered his head and agreed to go send the cable. He didn't look at the mine owner, but knew he would follow him out. Sure enough, just as he turned to the corner out of the hut, the owner came out and asked him where he was going. Song Jinming was still unsure. The owner said he could only send a telegram at the county town, and that it was over forty miles away! Song Jinming asked the mine owner if he could dispatch someone with a motorcycle to take him to the county town. He had seen a large, red motorcycle that parked daily outside of the entrance to the mine owner's

office. The mine owner did not explicitly refuse the request, he only said, “Ah, let's talk this over for a moment. Do you think it's really necessary for so many people come?” He had Song Jinming come over into his office.

Song Jinming knew what was happening, compensation negotiators had officially begun. Every stage in the discussion had a bearing on the amount he would gain, and each sentence had to be deliberate. He refocused his attention for a moment, and said, "I understand how Tang Zhaoyang is feeling, his main priority is to have his family come and see his brother one last time.”

The owner still couldn't remember the victim's name, and asked, “What was Tang Zhaoyang's brother called?”

“Tang Zhaoxia.”

“As Tang Zhaoxia's younger brother, Tang Zhaoyang can act on behalf of Tang Zhaoxia's family. He can take care of the funeral arrangements by himself. What do you think?”

“Don't ask me about this. Human life is beyond value, nothing I say matters. This is something you need to ask Tang Zhaoyang.”

Right in the middle of their discussion, Tang Zhaoyang walked in with rage spread across his face. He berated Song Jinming and asked him why he still hadn't left to send the telegram.

Song Jinming replied, “I'll leave now, but it's a ways away. I wanted the mine owner to have someone to take me on a motorcycle.”

“What are you talking about? Is the mine owner's motorcycle yours to ride whenever you want? Walking won't kill you. We're from the same town, doesn't that

mean anything to you? Or do you not care? It's because that dead man isn't your brother, right?"

The mine owner placed his hands on Tang Zhaoyang's shoulder and tried to make him sit, but Tang Zhaoyang refused. The mine owner said, "Hey Little Tang, don't be so emotional. Please, listen to me. I can understand your bitterness. If this had happened to anyone else they would feel exactly the same. Accidents are just a natural part of mining. I've also experienced a lot of pain. But, those things are in the past, grieving by itself won't solve anything. You've just got to think of a way to deal with it. I believe, since you're Tang Zhaoxia's younger brother, you can act on behalf of your family and take care of this matter by yourself. I'm not against having your family, or anyone else come, but just think about how cold today was, how far away the road is. You'll be celebrating the New Year soon. Is it really right to make your parents and nephew come? They'll be tired and cold, it won't be good."

Of course Tang Zhaoyang wasn't going to make Tang Zhaoxia's family come, he wasn't even sure of which town or village they were at. But he had to put on this attitude, during this stage he had to act like anyone else would. At the same time, he hung the prospect of Tang Zhaoxia's family coming over the mine owner's head. He wanted to pressure him, and he already had a thorough grasp of what the mine owner was thinking. When someone died at a mine, the owner's greatest fear was that it would become widely known, stirring up trouble. The more public it became, the more they tried to cover it up. The more people made a big deal out of it, the more scared they became, craving for it to fade away. It didn't matter if the mine owner was arrogant; once you lead him along by his nose, he could no longer be smug, and would meekly follow along. But they had to create confusion, so that the owner wouldn't have time to

look into the details of the accident. He would just follow the trail they had set out. Tang Zhaoyang spoke, "This has never happened to me before. Why wouldn't I have my mother and father come! And my nephew, if he asks for his dad back, I'm his uncle, what do I say!" Tang Zhaoyang then brought out his menacing plan, "Or I suppose, I can also have the secretary of our village branch come. That would work."

The mine owner rebuffed this at once, "What's the secretary got to do with this business? Nothing. I've never set any store by these secretaries." The owner knew that as soon as the secretary came, he would bring along a gang of people and claim to represent some level of government. It wouldn't matter whether it was the lowest or highest level, everything would be touched by it, then things would really get out of hand. The owner said to Tang Zhaoyang, "You're not thinking clearly. The more people you bring out, the bigger your expenses are going to get. The fees for travel, for lodging, for the reception, they're all going to come out of the victim's compensation fund. There's going to be deductions left and right. Your family will be left with hardly anything."

Tang Zhaoyang said, "The fees don't matter, this is about my brother's life. You couldn't buy my brother's life for a million yuan. I have to do right by my brother!"

"If you talk like this, then we're not gonna get anywhere!" The owner took out his half smoked cigarette from the holder, and threw it on the floor, using his foot to rub it into the ground, he then went to go stand outside.

Tang Zhaoyang stopped asking Song Jinming to send the telegraph, and he went back to go cry in the mortuary. His sobs were loud, and he made a deafening noise each time he beat the wooden door, "Brother, brother, I don't wanna live any longer, I'll go with you. In the next life, the two of us will still be brothers..."

The mine owner came back into the room, he told Song Jinming to figure out how much compensation Tang Zhaoyang wanted. Song Jinming went out for a bit, and when he returned he told the owner that Tang Zhaoyang wanted 60,000 yuan. As soon as the mine owner heard this he wrinkled his brows, and said, “I can’t, I simply can’t do that. He must be joking; I might as well hand him the entire mine. Forget it. Hey, what’s your relationship with Tang Zhaoyang like?”

“We’re fellow-townsmen; we live not too far from one another. We came out here together. Tang Zhaoyang is very honest, his speech and actions are straight. His brother was even more honest, his father was afraid other people would take advantage of him. So he made the two brothers go out together, so they’d take care of one another.”

“I spoke a bit with Tang Zhaoyang, at most I can give him 20,000. I hope he’ll accept that. My mine isn’t very profitable, with 20,000 yuan I’ll have already exhausted all I can give.”

Song Jinming cursed to himself, “Fuck you, you only want to give us 20,000 and then send us off. But I’m not so cheap! We’ll get around 40,000.”

He agreed to try to speak with Tang Zhaoyang. Song Jinming went over to the mortuary for a while, then came back and told the owner that Tang Zhaoyang had lowered his sights. He no longer demanded 60,000, just 50,000, but not a yuan less than that. The owner still refused to go above 20,000. He claimed that he didn’t have any more money. When the negotiations stalled, Song Jinming pretended to stand in the mine owner’s shoes, and suggested, “I think this business will simply cause people from the county coal and labour offices to get involved. When people at the top start putting on pressure, then Tang Zhaoyang won’t argue anymore, he’ll just take what he’s

given.”

The mine owner looked Song Jinming up and down for a moment and said, “If you have the government come and deal with it, then Tang Zhaoyang won’t even get 20,000.”

Song Jinming replied, “I shouldn’t say this, but if people from the top come in and handle it, it doesn’t matter what they give him, he won’t make a fuss. That’ll save you a headache or two. You won’t have to haggle with him.”

Song Jinming made use of his negotiating experience. With a few light words he hit the mine owner where it hurt. The mine owner nodded his head and said nothing. He wouldn’t dare have anyone from higher up learn that man had died. As soon as someone from the top came, that would be the end of him. In September, a man was crushed to death at his mine. He didn’t know how this information leaked out, but men at the top were alerted, the sedans came one after the other. People came to poke around. There was an investigation, a meeting, a fine, and a bulletin. He had been really frightened. The television reporters also came, carrying the “big guns”, sweeping around in one go, and they still tossed their “hand grenades” in front of his mouth, forcing him to speak. In front of a crowd, he had had to feign ignorance. All these powerful people, he had to bribe everyone. Just in terms of cash he used up 200,000 yuan to handle that accident alone. It didn’t even include the losses from suspended production. In the end, people from the county mine reorganization office had come and left a warning; if there was another accident due to lax safety measures, they would seal up the mine, and blow up the pit. The warning rang in his ear. If news of this dead man reached the people at the top, he wouldn’t just have to spend more money, they might even really close his mine. The New Year was fast approaching, and everyone

wanted to make some more money. The county administrators were longing for new sources of income, and like maggots, if they knew about this dead man they would rush over and start breeding, imposing fines. So the first thing the mine owner did was seal off all information. He had an emergency meeting with his trusted aides. They were told to take control of the situation, to split up and keep a lid on things. No one could leave the mine, no one could have any contact with the outside world. Coal sales were temporarily suspended, to prevent the truck drivers from letting out news of the dead man, and especially information about Tang Zhaoyang or Song Jinming. He was eager to “take care” of them, to let them have some good food and drink. Everything would be free of charge. The goal was to quickly win over Tang Zhaoyang and reach an agreement. He had to have Tang Zhaoyang sign the documents and cremate his brother’s corpse as soon as possible.

(6)

That night, Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming saw shadows of people moving back and forth outside the cave dwelling. They were both keyed up, so they kept their eyes wide open, not daring to fall asleep. Tang Zhaoyang quietly asked Song Jinming, “They wouldn’t do anything to us, right?” Song Jinming replied, “Of course they would, they’re capable of anything!” Song Jinming spoke in this way to boost Tang Zhaoyang’s courage, in reality, he himself was quite frightened. They themselves would capture and kill innocent men, it was nothing personal. Why on earth wouldn’t the mine owner do the same and eliminate them! They killed their catch to make money, the mine owner would kill them to save money. It was all about money. They murdered their prey, and blamed it on a cave in. The mine owner could also kill them at

the bottom of the pit and fault their deaths on a rockslide. If that happened, you could say they got what they deserved. Song Jinming inspected the door again, which they had latched tightly. The door of the cave dwelling was also made out of wooden planks, and there were cracks down its middle. The space below the foot of the door was also large, and a mouse could go in and out as it pleased. Song Jinming thought about looking for a handy tool, a weapon to defend himself. He looked about, but the cave dwelling only had a few bricks that were used for flooring. He grabbed a brick and placed it by his hand, signalling Tang Zhaoyang to also grab one. They extinguished the lamp in the dwelling to give themselves some cover. If the people outside got closer, Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming would be able to see them through the cracks in the door.

Sure enough someone came and rapped their knuckles on the door. Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming went on alert. Song Jinming asked, "Who's there?"

The man outside replied, "Mr. Yao wanted me to give you two cartons of cigarettes, please let me in."

They didn't open the door, they were worried this man was part of an advance guard, trying to trick them into opening the door up. There could be others lying in wait on both sides of the door, ready to ambush and kill them in this dark room. Song Jinming replied, "We're going to sleep soon, we don't smoke in the evening."

The man delivering the cartons felt the space at the foot of the door and squeezed a couple of cartons inside.

Song Jinming crawled over and groped for the items the man had had slid in. There were indeed two cartons, it wasn't dynamite.

He paused for a moment as two more shadows came over, knocking on the door. Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming simultaneously picked up a rock.

The person knocking on the door was a woman who said, “Hey you two, Mr. Yao is worried you’ll freeze, he wanted us to give you two mattresses. They’re both brand new, if you lie on them I promise they’ll be nice and soft.”

Song Jinming wasn’t sure what game the mine owner was trying to play. He refused the offer, “Give Mr. Yao our thanks for his concern, but we’re not freezing, we don’t want the mattresses.” The men got up and tiptoed over to the door to peer through the cracks. There were really two women out there holding mattresses. The two of them both had plump cheeks, and even at midnight you could still see that their faces were a shade of white.

The other woman spoke, her tone was more gentle and pleasing to the ear, “Hey you two, my sister and I know you’re feeling down. We’ve come to chat with you, to help ease your minds. If you want to do something else, that’s fine too.”

Now they knew the mine owner was trying to use a honey trap on them. Just from the wafts of perfume coming through the crack in the door, they could tell these two women were prostitutes. If they let them in, they’d have no say in whether or not they lay on the mattresses. Song Jinming tugged on Tang Zhaoyang, pulling him back to the sleeping mat, and said, “Cut it out, we don’t need anything!”

That sweet speaking woman started calling them daddy, and asked them again to open the door, “Oh, it’s really cold out here, how do the two of you have the heart to let us suffer in the cold!” Song Jinming pulled on Tang Zhaoyang’s ear, and said a few words to him. Tang Zhaoyang suddenly cried, “Brother, how could you die so tragically! Brother, you should come through the cracks in the door, so the two of us

can sleep together....”

Their trick worked, and the two women took off as if they were fleeing for their lives.

The longer things went on the more dangerous things would become. By the look of it, they would have to settle their business as soon as possible. Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoyang both agreed, tomorrow they would lower their demand down to 40,000 yuan, but they wouldn't go lower than that.

On the second day both parties made progress. Tang Zhaoyang reluctantly backed down to 40,000, and the mine owner grudgingly went up to 25,000. Though they were constantly tugging back and forth, step by step they were getting closer to an agreement. It was like they were courting one another, edging closer and closer until they finally embraced. Getting to each new step was difficult, it was just like dating, each new step was felt out and discussed. When the negotiations reached this point, Tang Zhaoyang and the mine owner both stood fast at their positions. It became a game of chess. When progress stalled, Tang Zhaoyang went to go cry where the corpse was and ask him for help. He lamented his brother's death, and groaned that he would have to take care of his mother and father when they died, asking who would raise his niece and nephew. These efforts were a persistent tactic; they weren't part of the formal process, but they were even more effective.

On the third day, the mine owner became focused on persuading Song Jinming, he wanted to create a division between the two men. The mine owner called Song Jinming his old pal, and asked him to help win over Tang Zhaoyang. In the days to come, he and Song Jinming would become "friends". Song Jinming asked him what to do. The mine owner he didn't answer, and instead he took out a stack of money from his

pocket and said, "This is 1,000 yuan. Take it and get yourself some cigarettes."

As soon as Song Jinming saw the mine owner take the money out he stood up, as if he was frightened, "Mr. Yao, I can't do this, I absolutely can't take the money. If Tang Zhaoyang found out, he would really give me hell. I don't speak on Tang Zhaoyang's behalf, but to give him only 25,000 wouldn't be fair. If you add more to that, then I'll talk to him about it."

The mine owner tossed the money on the table and said, "I can give him a little more, but what does it have to do with you? He's not going to split it with you, right?"

Song Jinming had a sinking feeling and said, "This money is for his brother's life, even if he offered it to me, I wouldn't take it." He continued, "How much more do you plan on giving him?"

The mine owner stuck out three fingers and said, "That's all you're gonna get."

Song Jinming looked embarrassed, "That's still ten thousand less than what's demanded by Tang Zhaoyang, I imagine he'll disagree with it."

The mine owner laughed and said, "That's why I asked you to help me talk to him. I can tell you're a smart man. Tang Zhaoyang is still willing to listen to you."

Song Jinming was more than a little startled by the way the mine owner was talking. How could the owner tell he was a smart man? How did he know Tang Zhaoyang was willing to listen to him? Could it be that mine owner saw through him? He replied, "Mr Yao, you're too kind; I think I should distance myself from this business. If he hadn't insisted I wait for him, I would have left the day before yesterday."

The mine owner told Song Jinming to sit, "You're being paranoid, I didn't

mean it like that.”

The mine owner took out another stack of bills as soon as Song Jinming sat, and stacked it with the cash that was already out on the table, “Here’s 2,000, I’m paying you for all your troubles. It’s fine, of course I won’t let Tang Zhaoyang know, and I won’t let anyone else know. Don’t worry about it.” While he spoke, he pulled open Song Jinming’s pocket and stuffed in the money.

Song Jinming didn't turn it down this time. He quickly began to add up the money in his mind; 30,000 plus 2000 would be 32,000. When he and Tang Zhaoyang split the 30,000, they would each get 15,000. Another 2,000 yuan would bring him up to 17,000; not that far off from his original goal of 20,000 yuan. He felt good about this unexpected gain. Tang Zhaoyang wouldn't hear shit about it. The last time they worked together, after all was said and done, they only made 23,000 yuan; they each received a little more than 10,000. There was far more money on the table this time. Song Jinming had already approved of this number. He wouldn't say this, though. He reluctantly agreed to help the mine owner, and then went off to talk to Tang Zhaoyang.

Song Jinming relayed Tang Zhaoyang’s decision. Tang Zhaoyang only added one additional request; that they change his brother’s clothes before they cremated him, dressing him in a suit and a necktie. The mine owner readily agreed, “That won’t be a problem.” He grasped Song Jinming’s hand, taking a firm grip as if the two of them had formed a new alliance, “Thank you, my buddy Song.” Song Jinming replied, “Mr. Yao, we didn't contribute much here, we only caused trouble. We apologize!”

The mine owner rode out on his red motorcycle to the county bank to withdraw the funds. Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming waited in the cave dwelling, sitting on pins and needles. They worried that the tables might turn against them. The owner left

in the afternoon, and only returned as the afternoon sun was sinking towards the west. He looked like he had been drinking; his face was dark and he reeked of alcohol. He said to Tang Zhaoyang, “The higher ups at the bank refused to let me withdraw so much cash, they're trying to prevent bank runs so close to the New Year. I ran to several of my friends and borrowed this money.” He brought out two bundles of cash and lined them up on the desk, “This is 20,000.” He then brought out a pile of scattered bills, “Here's another 8,000. Go ahead, please count it in front of me.”

Tang Zhaoyang put his hand on the money and asked the mine owner, “This isn't what we agreed on. Why's there only 28,000 instead of 30,000?”

The owner glared and said, “Are you gonna be reasonable or not? Have you considered the reality of the situation? I had to borrow this money, it's just two fucking thousand yuan short! How about I cut off my two fingers and give them to you!” While saying this he took a sidelong glance at Song Jinming.

As soon as Song Jinming heard this he knew he'd been fooled by the mine owner. The owner had stuffed that 2,000 yuan into his mouth as a gag, deducting it from the final sum. This fucking dog, he really pinched his pennies. Song Jinming was silent. What could he say?

Tang Zhaoyang turned to Song Jinming, as if looking for an answer.

Song Jinming silently cursed Tang Zhaoyang, “What the fuck is looking at me gonna to do!” and he turned away.

Tang Zhaoyang pulled out a stained handkerchief from his pocket, and unfolded it to wrap up the bundles of cash.

Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming walked over to where Tang Zhaoxia was

going to be cremated. They had rolled the money inside of a quilt, and stuffed it into the snakeskin bag. They brought their luggage with them. They wanted to pack up Tang Zhaoxia's ashes as soon as his corpse was burned, and leave directly for home.

Before Tang Zhaoxia's corpse was cremated, the workers at the crematorium pulled out a small, clear bag from his pocket, and sitting inside of it was a photo. You could see four people in the photo; in the back were Tang Zhaoxia and his wife, and in front were their two children, a boy and a girl. Tang Zhaoyang put the photo away. Tang Zhaoxia's clothes had been taken off and thrown on the floor. Song Jinming picked up the shoes, saying he would take them as a keepsake. Tang Zhaoyang didn't say anything.

After Tang Zhaoyang packed away Tang Zhaoxia's ashes in a bag, the two of them didn't even stop at the county town. They immediately got on a long distance bus and rushed toward the next county town. They didn't go all the way there, however, but got off halfway, as if they were trying to escape someone who was chasing after them. They were still in a mountainous area, so they carried their luggage on their backs and walked toward the mountains. To anyone who saw them, they didn't seem any different from the average migrant worker, they were always exhausted and constantly on the move. They arrived at the side of an abandoned mine, and stopped at a pit-head when they saw that no one else was around. They each sat down on their packs. Tang Zhaoyang laughed to Song Jinming, and Song Jinming laughed to Tang Zhaoyang. There was something peculiar about their laughs. Tang Zhaoyang said, "Goddamn, once again we're victorious." Song Jinming knew they had won, but he looked a little discouraged, and he had no energy. Tang Zhaoyang asked him what was wrong. He said, "Nothing's wrong, I've just been really tense these past couple of days, and now

it's suddenly over. I feel exhausted.” Tang Zhaoyang replied, “That’s normal, just wait until you see a hooker, your energy will immediately come back.” Song Jinming said, “Hopefully.”

Tang Zhaoyang took out Tang Zhaoxia’s box of ashes and said, “Fuck you, you've served your purpose. We don't need to take you with us anymore.” In one motion he took out the box and threw it into the pit-head. The abandoned mine must have been quite deep. It seemed like forever before a slight sound from the box reverberated back up. Right then, the man called Yuan Qingping disappeared forever. For the rest of eternity, his departed spirit would be known to no one. Tang Zhaoyang took out the family photo to rip it to pieces. Before it was ripped, Song Jinming took a look at it. He pointed to Tang Zhaoxia and asked, “What will happen to his family name?” Tang Zhaoyang replied, “Who cares!” After Tang Zhaoyang seized the photo and tore it, he took it in his hands and scattered it toward the sky. The torn pieces didn’t fly very high, and they quickly fell back to the ground. Two pieces fell onto Tang Zhaoyang’s body. He felt that he had violated a taboo, and hastily picked the pieces up off the ground.

There was still something they hadn’t dealt with. Tang Zhaoyang turned to Song Jinming, “Take them out.”

“What?”

“Do you really not know what I’m talking about, or what?”

Song Jinming shook his head.

“I know you know. Get out the shoes!”

This son of a bitch, he already knew about the money hidden inside of Tang

Zhaoxia's shoes. Song Jinming said, "Fuck, what's so special about these shoes? If you want them then take them, they're a memento of your brother after all." Song Jinming took out the shoes from the bag, and threw them at Tang Zhaoyang's feet.

Tang Zhaoyang said, "The shoes themselves don't matter, I'm interested in how much money is inside of them." He picked up one of the shoes, and stuck his hand in between the tongue to pull out a small plastic bag. He flaunted it in front of Song Jinming, "Don't you see? There's money in here!"

Song Jinming scoffed for a moment.

Tang Zhaoyang took out the money and counted it; there was only 280 yuan, "Fuck his grandmother, this is hardly anything. It's not even enough for one session with a slut." He asked Song Jinming, "Hey, how could this joker have so little cash?"

Song Jinming replied, "How would I know!"

Tang Zhaoyang split up the money evenly, and handed half of it over to Song Jinming. Song Jinming refused it, "That's your brother's money, save it and spend it on yourself."

Tang Zhaoyang was bewildered by his response, "Fuck you, take a little. I won't break the rules." He took 140 yuan and tossed it into the open mouth of Song Jinming's bag. "I still don't get it though, the mine owner settled on 30,000 yuan, but when it came time to count the money, it was short 2,000. Why'd that happen?"

This time it was Song Jinming's turn to be angry. He stared at Tang Zhaoyang and cursed, "Fuck your mother, what're you trying to say? What do you mean by what you just said? If you don't come clean then I've had it with you!"

Tang Zhaoyang had a smile across his face and said, "Why're you angry? It

wasn't about you. I cursed the words of that fucking dog, that his words can't be trusted. He didn't give us what he promised, it was bullshit.”

“There's no way that guy has a good bone in his body. The heart of every mine owner is like coal, black through and through!”

For two days they rode on buses and trains before they arrived at a small town on the flatlands. According to their original plan, they weren't in a rush to find new prey. But they also weren't splitting up to head home. They would first indulge their pleasures in town for a couple of days. They didn't buy any clothes, didn't go to any dance halls, nor did they gorge themselves on food and drink. When it came to satisfying their desires, whoring was the only thing on their minds. On the evening they entered the city, the two of them got a double room at a hotel. In one corner of the lobby were a sauna room, a massage room, and a beauty parlour. No question about it, they certainly had whores. As expected, they had just turned on the TV in their room and bounced on the mattress a bit when they had a phone call come in asking if they wanted girls. Song Jinming inquired about the cost, haggling over the price with the other person on the line. Two girls were sent to the room. Song Jinming let Tang Zhaoyang use the bedroom, while he led the other girl to the bathroom. Without another word, they arranged themselves separately and made war. When Tang Zhaoyang was finished, he paid the girl, but still hadn't seen Song Jinming come out. He went to the door of the bathroom and listened, he could hear the battle was still waging on to Song Jinming's heart's content. He couldn't help but be envious, “Goddamn, how can you be going for so long?” The girl replied, “Who made you come so fast?” Tang Zhaoyang seized his girl, demanding that they go another round. The girl extended her small hands and said that if he wanted to go again he would have to pay again. Song Jinming

came out from the bathroom as Tang Zhaoyang and his girl were bickering. Tang Zhaoyang let go of the girl and said to Song Jinming, “Good job, man.”

Song Jinming was modest, “No big deal, that's normal for me.”

When they parted ways, the two of them made an appointment on the 20th day of the first month. They would meet at a certain train station and set out from there. They clasped hands and left each other with the popular saying “Go in peace, brother.”

(7)

Song Jinming rode on the bus for over a day. It changed direction again and again before he finally arrived at his home. He had never told Tang Zhaoyang any of the details concerning his home, nor had he asked Tang Zhaoyang for any specifics about his family. People in their line of work harboured mutual feelings of distrust, whatever they did, they could never be sure of the other's true intentions. As a matter of fact, even Song Jinming's name was a fake. Only once he had arrived home would he resume using his real name. His last name was Zhao, and his full name was Zhao Shanghe. When he arrived at the edge of his village, someone called out to him, “Is that Zhao Shanghe?” He replied, “It's me, I'm back to celebrate the New Year” and without wasting any time he took out a cigarette for the man, he gave a cigarette to every acquaintance he ran into. He wasn't sure why, but he felt a little nervous; his face was white and had broken out in sweat. The man who was smoking the cigarette pointed out that the colour of his face didn't look too good, and seemed a bit gaunt. “Really?” he asked, as another layer of sweat was added to his face. A woman standing on the side explained for him, “That's it, Zhao Shanghe was out digging coal, so he didn't see the sun all day long. That's why his face turned white.”

For a moment Zhao Shanghe felt conflicted, he was about to deny he had been out digging up coal, when his daughter Haiyan was ran over to meet him. She shouted “Daddy, daddy,” and took the bag out of his hands. Haiyan had just started elementary school, and she still wasn’t very tall. She couldn’t pick up the bag, so she lifted up both of her hands and leaned back. She clutched the bag against her thighs as she walked forward. Zhao Shanghe patted the little girl’s head and said, “Haiyan you’ve gotten bigger.” Haiyan turned to her father and laughed. Her missing teeth still hadn’t grown in, so her laugh was a little shy. Zhao Shanghe’s son Haicheng also came out to welcome his father. His son was in junior high school, and was much stronger than his sister. He took the snakeskin bag with the bedroll from his father, easily lifting it. Zhao Shanghe said, “Haicheng, you still haven’t greeted me!”

His son awkwardly laughed before saying, “Father, you’re back?”

Zhao Shanghe responded as though finishing some sort of ritual, “That’s right, I’m back. With or without money, I come back to celebrate the New Year. What about your mom?” Zhao Shanghe raised his head to take a look, and saw his wife already waiting for him at the entrance to the courtyard. She was smiling, and her eyes were radiant. She said, “The two kids have been talking about you over and over for the past few days, asking why you weren’t back yet. Now you’re home!”

The whole family went into the central room where Zhao Shanghe opened his bag and took out two plastic bags. He gave one to his son and one to his daughter as New Year’s gifts. He had bought his son a charcoal jacket and a red jacket for his daughter. His wife said to their two kids, “Put them on quick, so your father can see!” His son and daughter split up to go try on the clothes. When they showed off in front of their father, Zhao Shang he couldn’t help but laugh. The clothes he had bought were too big, and they flopped around on his son and daughter like a bell shaking back and forth.

The hem of the girl's red jacket was especially long, and it almost covered her knees. The sleeves were also so long that they looked like those on a theatre costume. But Zhao Shanghe's wife said, "It doesn't look bad to me. You still have to grow, once you grow into it then it'll fit fine."

Zhao Shang turned to his wife, "I have a small gift for you too." As he spoke, he reached into the bottom of his bag and felt around for a small, red, heart-shaped box. He opened the box, and pulled out a pair of small, gold earrings from inside the red cotton seam. When the daughter first saw them, she said in astonishment, "Earrings, earrings!" The wife wanted to take them out for a look, but she didn't know where to start, "Why'd you get something so expensive, what's so good about my ears that I'd wear something so nice?" The little girl asked, "Are the earrings gold?" Zhao Shanghe replied, "Of course they're gold, 100%. There's nothing fake about them." Again he said to his wife, "You've worked hard in this household, both inside and out. And you still take care of our two kids. You've never worn any gold, I wanted to get you these earrings. They weren't expensive, just a little over 300 yuan." His wife replied, "I'm afraid I won't be able wear them out. I'm worried other people will say I'm showing off." Zhao Shanghe said, "If you're afraid about that, there's several other women in town who wear gold rings. They even wear gold chains on their ankles. It's really not a big deal to wear a pair of gold earrings." He took out the earrings and passed them to his wife, asking her to try them on. She turned her face to the side and tried to put the earrings on, but they wouldn't go in. She said, "Oh dear, these piercings are from when I was a young girl, perhaps they've closed up." She took the earrings and put them back in the box and said, "I'm putting them away, I'll wait until our daughter gets married, and she can use them as part of her dowry."

A middle aged woman with dark, thin features walked in. Given her age, Zhao

Shanghe was used to calling her “sister-in-law”. Zhao Shanghe and his sister-in-law spoke a few words and then she mentioned her husband Zhao Tiejun, “Have you seen Tiejun out there?”

Zhao Shanghe shook his head and said he hadn’t seen him.

“He left over six months ago, after the wheat harvest was finished. I haven’t seen him, I haven’t gotten any letters, and he hasn’t sent a single cent to his family. I don’t know if he died somewhere.”

Zhao Shanghe was sensitive toward the talk of death. He wrinkled his brows for a moment, thinking it was quite ominous for his sister-in-law to say something like that. But he didn’t say anything about it, he only replied, “He might come back in a few days.”

“Some people have said he hit it rich and that he’s got a mistress out there. That he doesn’t want his family or his kids, and that he’s planning a new life with his mistress.”

“They don’t know what they’re talking about, it’s not that easy to keep a mistress.”

“I don’t believe it either, that Zhao Tiejun is like that, he’s a cheapskate anyways, what woman would want him? You’re so much better. You know more about taking care of a family, you came back in good time, and the entire family has been reunited. Your brother is just a good-for-nothing. Wherever a good-for-nothing goes, he’s still a good-for-nothing.”

Zhao Shanghe and his wife joked, “Tiejun’s not at all useless. He built your family’s big, tile-roofed house with the money he earned! He’s only a few days late, but look at how much you miss him.”

His sister-in-law laughed and said, “I don’t miss him at all.”

In the evening, Zhao Shanghe still hadn't opened the filthy bedroll that he had brought back with him. He wasn't eager to let his wife see the money he had made, and decided he would sleep with her first. She never asked him how much money he had earned whenever he came home. She was always a mix of fearful and pleased when he took out the bundle of money. This time he didn't broach the topic of money because he didn't want to affect her mood. He burrowed into the quilt his wife had laid out for him. She seemed to be in a good mood as her body pressed close and warmly nestled against him. "Have you slept with other women out there?" she asked.

"I have." he replied.

"Seriously?"

"Of course I'm serious, I slept with someone every day, never the same one twice."

"I don't believe you."

"If you don't believe me then cop a feel."

As soon as the wife touched him he was happy, "Don't worry, you're getting all of the good stuff, I can't bring myself to waste even a little bit, come, I'll give it to you now."

After they were done, Zhao Shanghe took a long breath. His wife asked him how he was feeling, and he said, "There's nothing as good as being at home. No woman can compare with you. My heart's only free from anxiety when I return to sleep by your side."

His wife said, "Then, don't leave this time."

"Right, I just won't go, the two of us can work together every day."

"That won't be easy for you."

"How come, you don't believe in my ability?"

“I believe you, alright.”

“Ah, have you checked on the money we stored away? Will it get wet?”

“It’s fine, it’s wrapped in two layers of plastic bags.”

“We should still give it a look.”

Zhao Shanghe put on a padded jacket, but stayed naked below the waist as he got out of bed. He checked the door for a moment to see if it was closed. He then started dragging out a woven grain basket that was still half full with wheat. Even with two tugs he still couldn’t drag it out. His wife got down to help him pull. She didn’t put on underwear either, and just draped a coat around her shoulders. After they moved the grain bin to one side, Zhao Shanghe used an iron shovel to pry out two whole bricks from the wall, and then pulled out a board. He then took out a black plastic bag used for holding fertilizer. He untied the rope wrapped around the mouth of the bag and took out an earthen jar from inside. Inside the jar was still another white plastic bag, and finally there was the money. All the money was in two bundles, 10,000 yuan per bundle. Zhao Shanghe ran his hand over the money, flipping it over as he looked at it. He used his thumbs to smooth the creases, making each bill move of its own accord, listening to the quick sounds of the bills. Only then was he at ease. Zhao Shanghe said he had dreamt that water had gotten into the earthen jug, soaking the money and turning it into paste. When he looked again it had become maggots, infuriating him. His wife replied, “You’re worrying about the money, you’re just talking nonsense.”

Zhao Shanghe said, “This money here is what I’ve earned with each drop of sweat that’s fallen to the ground. Of course I’m concerned. I dare say, even if the sweat from my work filled a hundred jars it still wouldn’t be enough.” Only then did he draw out the bedroll from his snakeskin bag. While unrolling the bedroll he said, “I’ve brought back a little money this time, it’s more or less the same as the last two times.”

He brought out the money. It was split into a bundle and a half, all the bills were large.

As soon as his wife saw she let out a gasp and asked, “How’ve you made so much money again?”

Zhao Shanghe had already prepared a set of responses, “I was a contractor this time, working two shifts each day. This bit of money here isn’t much. Some men earned even more than me.” He placed the money back into the plastic bag, putting everything back in its original order. Only after he had helped his wife pull the grain bin back into its original spot did he get back into bed. He didn’t know why he was trembling, but he said, “It’s cold, it’s cold....” his wife wasn’t shivering, and she held him close, “Here, I’ll warm you up.”

After she warmed him up, his wife said, “From what I’ve heard, it’s hard to go out and make even a little bit of money right now. How did you make so much?”

Zhao Shanghe gave his wife a shove, pushing her away and said, “Goddamn, you’re annoyed that I make so much?”

“I’m not annoyed, I’m afraid...”

“You’re afraid of what? Do you doubt me?”

“I wouldn’t say doubt. I meant to say, regardless of how much money you make, we must go about it the right way.”

“Why wouldn’t I do it the right way? I go through a lot of trouble on the job out there. Firstly, I don’t steal. Secondly, I don’t rob. Third, I don’t gamble. And fourth, I don’t fuck other women. I don’t even like to spend one yuan more than necessary, don’t I deserve some credit?” Zhao Shanghe had probably taken this to the heart, for he started to cry, “I’ve worked myself to death, and for what? It’s all for this family. If even my wife doesn’t believe me, then what am I living for!”

She looked at her husband crying, and became frantic, “Haicheng’s father, why

are you like this? It's all my fault. I don't know what I'm saying, I upset you. If you want to hit me then hit me!"

"What would hitting you do? If I'm not human, if I'm a bastard, or if I don't do things the right way, then let me be struck by thunder, let a dragon seize me. How about that!" He refused his wife's embrace, and refused her again when she took his hand. He covered his face with his hands and just cried.

Half of his wife's body was leaning out of the quilt. She used the palm of her hands to wipe away her husband's tears, and said, "Haicheng's father, please don't cry. Don't let the children hear or they'll be frightened. I believe you, whatever you say is true, isn't that enough! Everyone in this family counts on you. When you leave, it's hard on me when you leave too!" His wife started to cry.

The two of them cried together, and then finally embraced once again. He stared into the darkness and suddenly had a thought. The business of capturing prey had to end here, he couldn't do it again.

The next day, Zhao Shanghe prepared a carton of cigarettes and two bottles of wine, and went to see the village's Party Secretary. The secretary was aloof as he took the tobacco and wine. He was a relatively older man, and believed that even when people from the village went far away, they still couldn't get away from his control. He asked Zhao Shanghe, "You do ok this time?"

Zhao Shanghe replied, "So-so, I made a small amount of money to celebrate the New Year."

"Other people didn't make anything, you did fine. I can tell your skills are getting better."

Zhao Shanghe knew the 'skill' mentioned by the secretary referred to his coal digging ability. He nodded his head in agreement.

The secretary went on, "What's the situation like out there? I've heard there's been a lot of muggings."

Zhao Shanghe was stunned for a second, and then said, "I've heard of this, but I haven't encountered it."

"Well, if it happens to you, you'll be done. Zhao Tiejun has been out for more than half a year. They haven't even received a letter. It doesn't look good, maybe he was the victim of a violent robbery."

"You can't be sure."

"It's more than a little dangerous out there, you shouldn't hurt anyone, but you also have to guard yourself, in the future, everyone has to watch out."

Zhao Shanghe promised to remember this.

On the first day of the Chinese New Year, Zhao Shanghe got up for the fifth watch. He burned money and incense to the heavens, and then he kneeled on the hard floor of his house for a long time. He tapped his head again and again, muttering. No one could make out what his prayers were. At his wife's signal, his son went forward to tug him away, "Father, get up." Tears rolled down his face and he said, "God bless us, and protect our entire family. Bring us peace."

On the second day of the year, Zhao Shanghe's sister-in-law returned to his home and said, "Zhao Tiejun still hasn't returned, I think he's dead." She hadn't even said three sentences before she started to cry.

Zhao Shanghe replied, "Sister, you can't say such things, you can't only think about the worst that could happen. It's bad to mention such dark things when celebrating the New Year."

Zhao Shanghe concluded, nine chances out of ten, Zhao Tiejun had most likely been hunted down as someone else's catch. He would never return. He and Tang

Zhaoyang were not the only ones in this line of business, there were certainly other people who relied upon prey to make themselves rich. He and Tang Zhaoyang had relied on other people for instruction before they became successful in their line of work. One winter day, he and Tang Zhaoyang were working at a small, privately owned mine. They unexpectedly ran into a fellow villager and two other men looking for work at this mine. He drank with the villager at a small restaurant, discouraging him from working at that mine. He said he was being worked to death, and he still hadn't earned any money. He said the mine owner was really bad, and constantly delayed paying out wages to the workers. He had already worked there for three months, but he hadn't even been paid once. He was trapped in a dilemma. The villager took two big swigs liquor, clearly he could handle himself. The villager replied, everything has a weakness, and he said he had a method for extracting the mine owner's money. Even if the mine owner threaded the money through his ribs, when the time came, the fucking dog would obediently hand it over. He asked the villager for advice, what his clever idea was, and repeatedly toasted the villager. The villager told him to stop asking questions, and to just watch him with open eyes, and if he said another word to not blame him for being impolite. One evening, while working at the bottom of the mine, the villager used a pickaxe to beat to death one of the men who had come with him. He even picked up a stone and smashed in the victim's skull. When he was finished, he started to cry and wail, calling the victim his uncle and saying that a cave-in had killed him. He swindled a compensation payment out of the mine owner. Just as the villager had said, the mine owner covered up the crime and carried out private negotiations with the villager, compensating him 22,000 yuan. Zhang Shanghe and Tang Zhaoyang were witnesses to this unique method of production. They didn't even break a sweat and the villager still gave them each 1,000 yuan. This sent a large shockwave through Zhao Shanghe, you

could say he had been taken to school. Now he understood why some people are poor and some are rich. This was how rich men actually worked. The big fish eats the small fish, the small fish eats the worm, and the worm eats mud. He had heard this figure of speech before, but he didn't completely understand it. But when he saw this he knew he himself was nothing more than a worm. He could only eat mud. If he couldn't even eat mud, then he himself would turn into mud. The villager asked him if he wanted to work together. His face was ashen, and said he wouldn't. He was afraid the villager would turn on him, murdering him. Afterwards, he and Tang Zhaoyang formed a partnership and began to stage hit-and-run attacks of their own. Tang Zhaoyang also used an assumed name, Li Ximin was his real name. They called themselves underground agents. After they killed their prey and shifted to a new location, they would change their names. Zhao Shanghe already had the blood of three men on his hands. The money hidden at the bottom of the jar in his house stood as evidence, it had been obtained from the shattered skulls of three men. But Zhao Shanghe could guarantee, none of the men he had killed were locals, not even one was an acquaintance. Zhao Tiejun was like this, even if he came in his line of sight, he wouldn't be able to take Zhao Tiejun's life. A rabbit doesn't eat the grass by his own burrow.

Just before his sister-in-law was about to leave the house, she brought up a request to Zhao Shanghe, "Older brother, after the 15th, I'd like Jinnian to go out with you, to find some work, and to find his father's whereabouts."

"You'd better get those thoughts out of your head. Isn't Jinnian attending school right now? It's best to let the kid go to school, school is the right path. What grade is he in right now?"

"The first year of high school."

"You should definitely stand by sending him to school, urge him to test into

college.”

“I don't care if it's embarrassing, things aren't alright. We can't afford it. Tuition to the school costs three or four hundred yuan, where could I get that from? My heart was still full of hope that his father would earn something and come back home. But he hasn't returned with money, and no one's even seen his shadow.”

Zhao Shanghe said to his wife, “Lend her 400 yuan of our money, it's essential that the child attends school.”

The sister-in-law replied, “No no no, I didn't come to borrow money.”

Annoyance flashed on Zhao Shanghe's face, “Sister-in-law, don't act like a stranger. Whose family hasn't run into a little hardship? We can't just stand by and watch a child drop out of school. Again, we're lending you the money you need. Just wait until my brother Tiejun comes home, and then you can pay us back.”

His sister-in-law replied, “The two of you are good people, I'm going to have Jinnian come over and kowtow to you.” Only then did she accept the money and leave.

(8)

As soon as the 15th day of the first month was over, the migrant workers set out one after the other with their bags on their backs, and like a wave they surged toward the bus and train stops. Zhao Shanghe had originally thought that he wouldn't leave, but his soul seemed to be summoned by something. He felt restless sitting in his room at home. His wife tried every possible way to console him, but he became angry toward her. He complained that their house was so small that they didn't even have enough land for her to till. What would tying him up at the house accomplish! In the end, Zhao Shanghe decided to go along with the tide. He kept to himself, refusing to travel on the road with the other people. Many people looked over at him, some even gave him gifts,

hoping they could travel with him. But he denied all of their advances. He didn't outright refuse them, he merely said he hadn't decided whether or not he was going out this year, and at that he would talk about it when the time came. He slipped away in the middle of the night. The remaining snow around the crops along the side of the dirt road had still not melted away, and the north wind was bitterly cold. He faced into the wind, fastened his bedroll and bag on his back, and began striding toward the town. On his arrival, he didn't plan on taking a bus, and would get a ride on a three wheeled car to the county town. As he left, he turned around and took a look at his village. It was pitch black. He didn't see any lights, nor did he hear any noise. As he started forward again, he asked himself, "What are you doing? You're sneaking around like a thief." He answered aloud, "It's nothing, you're not a thief. It's peaceful and quiet to walk at night." He worried someone would hear him talking to himself, so he looked left and right, and then squatted down to observe a cemetery by the side of the road. He thought to himself, this time you don't necessarily have to kill your prey again. Killing prey is easier than digging up coal, but if there's an accident, you'll be executed. If Tang Zhaoyang really wanted to do this again, at most they would do it once more and then call it quits. Right now, he had 35,000 yuan stored in that jar. He would wait until he hit 50,000, and then he wouldn't have to save any more money. Once he had 50,000 yuan in hand, then he wouldn't do things as he had in the past, he wouldn't have to sell his crop to pay this or that levy imposed from on high, he wouldn't have to beg for loans right and left so that he could pay for his children's school fees. When this time came, he wouldn't go anywhere. He would pass the days at home with his wife and children.

On the arranged day and time, Zhao Shanghe arrived at the small train station. He saw that Tang Zhaoyang was already there waiting for him. Tang Zhaoyang was waiting at the small restaurant on the side of the station where they had bought the

Healthy Mutton Soup. The year before, from that spot they had led their prey to his death. There were so many passengers at the station that they believed the workers at the restaurant wouldn't remember the two of them. Tang Zhaoyang jestingly cursed his Zhao Shanghe, and asked him what had taken him so long. Tang Zhaoyang asked him if he had gone to some bathroom to fool around with a prostitute. Zhao Shanghe hadn't seen him in over a month, but he felt close to Tang Zhaoyang as soon as he saw him. He cursed Tang Zhaoyang's little sister, and said he had been screwing her up against a large mirror in the bathroom. When their bonding was over, they got down to business. Tang Zhaoyang said he had spent 10 yuan on a fortune teller to come up with a new name for him, the name was Zhang Dunhou. Zhao Shanghe said that wasn't bad. He said Zhang Dunhou aloud twice, and chanted "The more honest the more generous" to remember it. He told Zhang Dunhou he also had a new name. He called himself Wang Mingjun, and asked, "Do you know what the meaning of Jun is?" Zhang Dunhou replied, "Who knows what you have in mind."

Wang Mingjun said, "To tell you the truth, Jun is an emperor, and Mingjun is an enlightened emperor. Get it?"

"You boy, you want to be an emperor!"

"What's wrong with wanting to be an emperor? Empires rise and fall, power comes from the barrel of gun. What empire isn't acquired through battle?"

"I think you're more or a less a black emperor."

"You don't even get it. Because you're too low in class, I can only make you a low ranking official. Zhang Dunhou!"

"Your loyal subject!" Zhang Dunhou bowed his head and clasped his hands.

“Alright, that’s how it is.” Wang Mingjun again assumed the airs of an emperor, and ordered Zhang Dunhou, “Bring me some liquor!”

“Yes master, at your command.”

Zhang Dunhou turned his head and saw a girl standing by to the side of the road smearing on purple lipstick. She smirked, and promptly walked over to them. She called them “Two gentlemen” and asked them “if they needed a bit of something”. Zhang Dunhou remembered the former waitress from there was a maiden from the countryside. She came and went, they didn’t know where she had gone. This girl in front of their eyes took advantage of her lips to get customers, she had clearly seen the ways of the world. Zhang Dunhou ordered two appetizers and half a bottle of liquor. The two of them drank slowly. For a moment, the manager came out among them, looked at them blankly, and then went back to some other work. The manager seemed to have completely forgotten them. Most of the people moving about the station were migrant workers carrying their bedrolls. They were like ants anxiously searching for food, walking here and there, and bumping into one another. These workers could all be captured as prey. Even if they killed one off every day, they still wouldn’t be able to reduce their numbers by very much. The ability of this resource to regenerate was quite strong, you could even say it was inexhaustible.

A worker walking by himself entered their line of sight. The two of them exchanged looks. Zhang Dunhou said, “I’ll go take a look.” This time it was Zhang Dunhou’s turn to hook the target. Wang Mingjun would sit tight.

Wang Mingjun said, “Don’t bring back a girl!”

Zhang Dunhou was tilting his eyes, staring closely at that worker. He murmured to Wang Mingjun, “This time I’ll hook a woman disguised as a man, the type like Hua

Mulan⁵. We'll fuck her and then do her in. It'll be like killing two birds with one stone.”

“If you can't get Hua Mulan, then don't come back to see me.”

Zhang Dunhou picked up his mat and bag, and began edging toward that worker in a roundabout way. The flood of New Year's travellers had still not abated, and the waiting room couldn't hold all the people waiting for the train. The station had put up signs displaying the numbers of trains on the station square, causing people to queue up there. That worker arrived in front of the train schedule and looked at the times above. Zhang Dunhou pretended to go over and look at the times on the schedule to get a better look at the catch he was planning to pursue. To Zhang Dunhou's surprise, when he glanced at the catch, the catch looked back at him. He couldn't get a clear sense of how the catch had spotted him; it was as if the target had an eye in the back of his head. Without missing a beat he withdrew his gaze. The second time the catch he fancied glanced at him from the corner of his eye, he couldn't believe it. The catch had again darted his eyes toward him. Zhang Dunhou had a feeling, the catch's gaze was very firm, and a part of it was biting cold. He couldn't help but shake with fear for a moment. Fucker, could it be that he had run into an equal? Had this guy also come to catch prey? He retreated back a few steps and stood. As he was thinking about what was going on, the worker took the opportunity to walk over and asked, “Townsmen, where are you preparing to go to?”

Zhang Dunhou replied, “Where am I going to? I don't know yet.”

“So you're by yourself?”

Zhang Dunhou nodded his head. He had decided to figure out whether this worker was also fishing for a catch. He decided to have a competition with him. He'd

⁵ A folk hero, and legendary woman warrior who disguised herself as a man.

see if this man was a master and if he could beat him at his own game.

“Have a smoke.” The catch took out an unopened pack of cigarettes, he opened it, and first stuck one in his own mouth and lit it. After that, he handed one to Zhang Dunhou and gave him a light. “It’s crazy out there right now. It’s not good for someone to go out alone, it’s best to have a partner.”

“I’m planning on meeting one of my townsmen here, he was supposed to arrive the day before yesterday. But I’ve looked for two days and I still haven’t seen him.”

“That’s a little bothersome. Perhaps he already left and you’re just pacing around for nothing.”

“Where are you preparing to go to?”

The prey mentioned a mine.

“What’s it like there? Can you make money?”

“Who would go if you couldn’t make money? I wouldn’t say it’s a lot, but you can make at least 1,000 yuan a month!”

“Is it alright if I go with you?”

“I’m sorry, I already have a partner.”

This guy was probably whetting his appetite, so Zhang Dunhou decided to play hard to get, “Then forget it.”

“We’ve also run into some problems. Our agreement is for four people, so that’s what we came with. Everyone understood, but a brother got sick halfway through the trip, so he returned home. We only need to fill in for one person, but we’re only looking for people we know. We don’t want strangers.”

“Strangers, friends, you’re strangers when you meet but you soon become friends. If we’re together won’t we get to know each other?”

The target hesitated for a minute before replying, “It isn’t just my decision. I’ll take you to meet my two brothers, we’ll see if they agree to take you. If they’re willing to have you, count yourself lucky, but if they don’t want you then don’t be pissed off.”

Zhang Dunhou had given the test, and sure enough, this guy was in the same line of work; he had also come here to catch some prey. He didn’t seem to be too old, not older than twenty five or twenty six. He had the face of a baby, and regular features. Even the guy’s appearance wasn’t threatening; often a good hand killed someone in the blink of an eye. Zhang Dunhou's heart jumped and soared. To his surprise, he was a little frightened. He thought to himself, if he went with this fellow only a few days would pass before he became cash in someone else’s hands. That wouldn’t do. He had to expose this guy so he wouldn't have to compete with him. He took a few steps back and said, “I can’t go with you!”

“Why?”

“I don’t know who you are. After you get me to the bottom of the mine and kill me, then what will I do?”

Sure enough the fellow became quite flustered, “If you don’t go, then fucking forget about it. What you're saying is sheer nonsense, I don’t even like you!”

Zhang Dunhou laughed coldly and said, “First you’ll beat me to death. Then you’ll say you were my relative so that you can get money from the mine owner. Am I right or wrong?”

“The more you talk the more insane you sound.” The guy cast away Zhang

Dunhou and quickly walked away.

Zhang Dunhou cried out, “Hey, brother, don’t go. We were still talking.”

In an instant the fellow squeezed into the crowd of people and disappeared.

(9)

Zhang Dunhou brought back a young boy who had the look of a middle school student. This irritated Wang Mingjun quite a bit. As soon as Wang Mingjun saw this he mouthed “No way, no way!” The osprey captures a fish, not minnows; what was the point of bringing back a child? He thought Zhang Dunhou hadn’t handled this well, or that he’d let his standards slip.

Zhang Dunhou thought Wang Mingjun was doing the same as he’d done before, deliberately making the prey anxious so as to get a firm grip on him, so he urged the prey to quickly call Wang Mingjun ‘Uncle’ and talk to him nicely.

The boy took a timid look at Wang Mingjun and cried out “Shu Shu⁶”.

Wang Mingjun didn’t answer.

Zhang Dunhou pointed to the boy, “You can’t call him Shu Shu, that’s too casual. You have to call him Uncle like he’s your family.”

The boy followed Zhang Dunhou’s directions, and called Wang Mingjun ‘Uncle’.

Wang Mingjun still didn’t answer. This time he wasn’t going to go along with Zhang Dunhou’s act. He thought using this underage boy just wasn’t right, he really

⁶ ‘Shu Shu’ is an informal way of saying uncle and also used for close friends, not just family members.

didn't fit the role at all. Though the boy was of average height, he had still not shed his childish look. Though his lips had started to grow some whiskers, it was just a layer of dark stubble. It was clearly the boy's first time growing a moustache, and he had never shaved with a razor. The boy's gaze was fixed looking on one spot; he didn't dare look at anyone or say anything. What a big boy, he had the look of someone standing in front of a teacher. In fact, he probably saw the two of them as teachers. The boy's luggage also bore the signs of a middle school student. His sleeping bag was a good copy of the one used by migrant workers, it was also squeezed into the type of snakeskin bag used for holding grain. But he wasn't holding a duffel bag. Rather, he carried a yellow, canvas book bag on his shoulder. He could see that the book bag was stuffed full and bulging at the seams, perhaps it was jammed with textbooks! Though he was comparable to any other boy his age, he still looked a little different. His spirit seemed very dejected, and his eyes were constantly brimming with tears. To put it bluntly, he looked like someone whose father had just died. Wang Mingjun said to the boy, "You don't look at all like a laborer. You're not running away from school, are you?"

The boy shook his head.

"What does that mean? If you're running away then say so, if you're not then say you're not."

The boy replied, "I'm not."

"Then I'll ask you again; you came out to look for work, does your family know?"

"My mom knows."

"What about your dad?"

"My dad..." The young boy didn't say what had happened to his father. Tears slowly started to roll down his face.

“What happened?”

“My dad’s been gone for over eight months. He didn’t come home to celebrate the New Year, we haven’t even received any mail.”

“Oh, I see.” Wang Mingjun looked at Zhang Dunhou. The corners of his eyes showed a slight smile, and he asked, “Could it be that your dad made a lot of money, took a mistress out there, and now he doesn’t want you anymore?”

“I don’t know.”

Zhang Dunhou bumped Wang Mingjun for a moment. He wanted him to stop bullshitting, so he said, “This boy is quite pitiful. Let’s bring him along, we can say he’s your nephew.”

Wang Mingjun understood what Zhang Dunhou was saying, Zhang was going to insist they bring the boy along. He said to the boy, “It’s not that we can’t take you, it’s just that there’s a certain danger to working in a mine. Aren’t you afraid?”

“I’m not scared; I can do any kind of work.”

“How old are you this year?”

“I’m going to be seventeen.”

“If you’re sixteen, then it’s definitely out of the question. You need to say you’re eighteen, otherwise the people at the coal mine won’t let you work. Additionally, you need to go out and get a razor and start shaving when you get to the mine. The more you shave, the thicker your hair will grow out. Wait until your moustache is really thick, and then you’ll look like an adult. From now on, you can call me Uncle. Remember, no matter who asks you, you always have to call me Uncle. This way I can protect you, and no one will dare try to take advantage of you. You just say the word, and I’ll listen.”

“Uncle.”

“Right, that’s how you say it. Your father’s my older brother, and I’m the younger one. Ah, what’s your name?”

“Yuan Fengming.”

Wang Mingjun’s eyes shifted for a second and he asked, “From now on you won’t use that name, I’ll give you a different one. We’ll call you Wang Feng. It’s the Feng that means wind, got it?”

The boy replied, “I got it, I’m Wang Feng.”

And like that, their new prey was ready. They ate “Healthy Mutton Soup” together, and then the two men started out on their trip with their prey that was named Wang Feng. Last time they went north, so this time they went straight north-west, riding and switching trains, going farther than before. How could Wang Feng know that these two men who were taking him on a long journey were persistent devils, just two monsters that were bringing him to his Judgment Day. All along the trip he looked out the window of the train. There were still many things about the outside world that he found strange and new. On the train, Wang Feng told his two “uncles” about his family’s situation. He was in his first year of high school, and his little sister was in her first year of junior high school. After the Chinese New Year, he went to school with a quilt and enough steamed buns for a week. But because he didn’t have enough money to cover his books and miscellaneous fees, his teacher wouldn’t allow him to attend class. The teacher made him return home to borrow money. The various mandatory fees added up to over 400 yuan, but he had only brought a little more than 200 yuan. His mother had gone everywhere to try to borrow money for that 200 yuan. He went home to speak with his mother, and she said she couldn’t borrow any more money. She just cried. His sister also didn’t have enough money to pay for tuition. But because his sister was the class leader and an especially good student, the head teacher mobilized her

entire class to donate money for her school fees. Again he went back to school, carrying the steamed buns. He asked his teacher if he could possibly postpone paying the money he owed. The head teacher told him to go see the principal. The principal's reply was a 'No'; if he couldn't pay at once then he couldn't attend class. So he returned home carrying the quilt and the steamed buns, he couldn't study at the school. As soon as he arrived home he started to bitterly weep. As Wang Feng spoke, tears welled up around the corner of his eyes.

Wang Mingjun said, "Actually, you shouldn't leave home. You should think of a way to borrow money for school. Leaving home just interrupts your studies." He kindly patted Wang Feng on the shoulder, "I can see you're a very smart boy, and I'm sure you're grades aren't bad. It would really be a pity if you didn't go back."

"There's no way, I need to go out and make money to help my sister go to school. I can't let her studies be interrupted again. I'm already an adult, I should share in my mother's burdens. And while I'm out working, I can ask about my father's whereabouts."

"I'm afraid it won't be easy to find out about your dad's location, China's so big, and where are you going to start!"

"The people in my village told my mother to find a police station in the countryside. The police told my mother to print a missing persons notice. As soon as she heard she had to pay a lot of money for the notice, she decided not to do it."

"She made the right decision, they're not useful. It would be pointless to spend money on that. It costs 100 yuan to print a missing person notice, but they wanted your family to spend 300 yuan and then take the other 200 yuan for themselves. Even if you printed it, there wouldn't be any place to paste it up. If you paste it somewhere you're not supposed to, they'll fine you, and then you'll spend even more money. You

wouldn't find anyone, you'd just be falling between two stools. Is what you told your Uncle the truth?"

"It's the truth. Uncle, my mother told me to be careful while I'm out here. Do you think there are more good people or bad people in the world?"

"What do you think?"

"I think there's more good people. You and Uncle Zhang are both good people."

"Of course we're good people."

Zhang Dunhou interjected, "If the two of us aren't good people, then there's no good people out here."

(10)

They arrived at a small mine deep in the mountains. They were accepted for work after Wang Mingjun personally arranged business with the mine owner. The owner was an older man, who claimed to take production safety seriously. He looked Wang Feng up and down for a moment before saying, "I can see this guy hasn't even turned eighteen yet. You didn't falsify his age, did you?" Wang Feng's face turned white and he looked over to Wang Mingjun.

Wang Mingjun said, "My nephew's honest, what he says is absolutely true."

Before going down the mine, the mine owner said they had to take a safety course. They went to a small room in the back of the house to receive lamps. At a wall in the back of the room was a tall altar with offerings to a coal deity. The deity had a white beard and red face. Its body was painted with colorful clothing. Set out in front of the deity was a large incense burner, and the inside was filled with the ash from incense

and paper. There were still clumps of incense that hadn't been completely burned, so it continuously sent out vapors of smoke. Sitting on a stool to the side of the door was a middle aged woman who sold incense and bamboo paper. Her paper and incense were both rather expensive, but the mine owner insisted that they buy her stuff. As soon as Zhang Dunhou and Wang Mingjun took a look they understood, this woman was definitely on the mine owner's payroll. They made use of the deity's name to squeeze the mine workers for more money. There was no way out of it, anyone who came there had to respect the deity. If you didn't respect the god, they could refuse to give you work, and you wouldn't get the chance to be exploited, even if you wanted to be. Zhang Dunhou bought a pack of incense and paper. Wang Mingjun also bought some. It was Wang Feng's turn to buy, but he didn't take out any money. He had already spent everything. Wang Mingjun had no choice but to buy a pack for him. The three of them burned the incense and lit the paper. In unison they kneeled on the floor and bowed their heads before the deity. The mine owner required them to say two prayers, "First, you must pledge to this coal deity so that it watches over your safety everywhere, and that you don't cause trouble at the mine. Second, ask the deity to bless and protect your safety." Wang Mingjun's heart beat like a drum. Could it be that someone else had killed off their prey at this mine? Had the owner already shed blood? Otherwise, why was the mine owner always talking about safety? By the look of it, they would have to be careful when doing in their prey.

Wang Feng was looking at Wang Mingjun as he knocked his head on the floor. Wang Mingjun knocked his head a few times and Wang Feng followed along. He only dared to stand once he saw Wang Mingjun get up.

The miner owner said, "It doesn't matter if it's the day or night shift, every day before you go into the mine you'll first pay a visit to the coal deity. You can't miss even

one time. It's just like how in the past you had to "read every day". Have you heard of "read every day"?"

The three of them looked at one another, before they all said they didn't know what it was.

"You don't even know 'read every day'. I can see you're too young."

The mine owner had someone issue the three of them worn-out hard hats, and made them leave a deposit. This time, Wang Feng was too embarrassed to have his Uncle pay for him, so he asked if it would be fine if he didn't wear a helmet. The man who issued out the hard hats replied, "Only if you're trying to get yourself killed!"

Wang Mingjun immediately put on a show of protecting his nephew and said, "My nephew doesn't understand this, couldn't you explain things nicely!" Again he said to Wang Feng, "It's absolutely not ok to go into the mine without wearing your helmet. If you don't have any money tell me, don't be embarrassed. If I'm wearing one, then you should put yours on too." He removed the hard hat he was wearing and put it on his nephew's head.

Wang Feng looked at his Uncle and was moved to tears.

The pithead frame of the mine wasn't made from wood; rather it was welded together with iron. It was also in the shape of a square rather than a rectangle. Tied onto the frame was a red banner that already faded to white from the wind and rain. A black backed wolfhound was chained to the pithead frame. As the three of them walked into the pit entrance, the wolfhound stood up and barked. It set its vicious gaze upon them and let out a guttural howl. The hound was fat and tall. Both of its cheeks were bulging, and its large head was just like a lions. Zhang Dunhou and Wang Mingjun stepped back a bit, refusing to take another step forward. Wang Feng was frightened and hid behind Wang Mingjun. Zhang and Wang had both been to many small, private mines, but they

had never seen a wolfhound chained to a pithead frame. They weren't sure what the mine owner's intentions were. Right then, the mine owner came over and called the hound "Herr Wolf". He shouted its name, and introduced it, "This fellow's name is Hitler. When you come here to work you must check in with him, otherwise, he won't let you down into the mine." The owner cradled the dog's head and stroked its fur twice, "When you come over, let Hitler get your scent. As soon as he remembers your scent, he won't be so vicious to you." Zhang Dunhou hesitated for a moment. He saw that Wang Mingjun was unwilling to be the first to let Hitler sniff him, so he gave up and walked over to Hitler. The hound stretched its snout toward his body and inhaled before allowing him to walk over. Wang Mingjun had heard that a dog's nose was very powerful, there were many difficult legal cases where a dog has taken a whiff and then cracked the case. He was worried that Hitler would bite into him when he smelled the demons in his heart. His heart sank as he drew back, but he feigned composure and walked toward Hitler. The hound didn't bite him as he passed by, it actually seemed to be a bit dull. As soon as it had finished sniffing Wang Mingjun, its eyelids dropped down, and it stretched out its legs and plopped onto the floor. Wang Feng hid his hands by his crotch, inclined his body to the side, and cautiously walked toward Hitler. The hound sniffed his trousers as if were a mere formality and let him pass.

The three of them rode down together in a metal lift. Wang Feng's heart was pounding as the lift dropped down into the dark mine shaft. His eyes became bigger and bigger. He squatted on his heels and didn't dare move an inch. He looked extremely nervous. He couldn't tell how long they had been dropping, it was as if the lift was falling into a bottomless nightmare. His heart jumped into his throat when they finally hit the bottom. It was probably because he was scared, but his brow was already beaded with sweat.

Wang Mingjun said, “Kid, you’re wearing too many layers.”

Wang Feng now noticed, his Uncle and Uncle Zhang both wore a light shirt, trousers, and a sleeveless jacket when they came down into the pit. But he was decked out with sweat pants, long underwear, and a charcoal student jacket. No wonder he was so hot.

There were two men at the bottom working and talking. Their faces were black, and when they spoke they revealed their bright white teeth. Wang Feng was confused for a moment. He felt like he had fallen into another world. This world and that of the outer world were completely different. He was in a dark world filled with ghosts and goblins. While he was dazed, a black hand touched his face. It startled him and he cried out. The man who touched him laughed in delight and said, “Your face is so white, it’s just like a girls.” Wang Feng’s eardrums squeezed into his skull, as if they were getting thicker and distorting the sounds in the pit. That man was standing and speaking right in front of him, but his words seemed far away.

Wang Mingjun said to the worker, “This is my nephew, please excuse him.” He ordered Wang Feng, “Quick, greet him as your ‘uncle’.”

Wang Feng greeted the man. The words that came out of his mouth seemed to be a little peculiar, it was as if he wasn’t speaking, but rather his shadow was speaking.

They walked into the depths of the tunnel. As a middle school student who had never been down in a mine, Wang Feng wasn’t just nervous, he was simply terrified. The caverns had no illumination, they were pitch black from front to back. Their lamps were the only lights. The tunnels were low and narrow, and the footing was uneven. The tunnel’s supports were also extremely crude; the sides and roof of the rock had a vile visage, like the masks of Ox Head and Horse Face from a play. If Yama made an order, perhaps Ox Head and Horse Face would swoop down and capture him, taking

him back to the King of Hell. The muscles in Wang Feng's face were rigid and his eyes were filled with dread. He closely followed his Uncle, stooping low and ducking his head. He didn't dare fall behind. He really wanted to pull on his Uncle's lapel, but he was afraid his Uncle would look down on him, so he stopped himself. His Uncle walked in a leisurely manner, as if he wasn't the least bit scared. He couldn't help but admire his Uncle. He started to recognize this man he had bumped into midway through his journey as his real uncle, and had actually developed a feeling of dependence on him. His Uncle reminded him to pay attention, but he still didn't know what to pay attention to. He smacked his head on a heavy rock with a thump. Despite the hard hat he was wearing, his head still ached and he saw stars.

His Uncle said, "Look, you're not paying attention, you need to pay attention. You bumped your head?"

Wang Feng put his hands under the helmet and rubbed his head as his eyes welled with tears.

His Uncle asked, "What do you think? This place isn't as fun as your school's playground, right?"

The image of a playground quickly flashed through Wang Feng's mind. It was enormous and its four sides were lined with white poplars that stretched toward the sky. He wasn't sure what his classmates were doing on the playground, but he was drilling in a dark and terrible place.

His Uncle saw that he wasn't talking so his tone became more severe, "I'm telling you, the bottom of a pit is a place that can kill you, human life isn't worth much here. Although a person's life might be valued in other places, in a mine it becomes as fragile as an egg. It's like eggs rolling over rocks. One wrong move and you'll crack open, dripping all over the place. Then you'll be finished."

As Wang Mingjun lectured Wang Feng, Zhang Dunhou stood behind Wang Feng. Zhang Dunhou brought up his pickaxe and for a moment, and he made an evil gesture toward Wang Feng's head. Wang Feng would be done for as soon as he brought down the pickaxe. Wang Mingjun knew Zhang Dunhou wouldn't do anything just yet. Their catch wasn't fattened yet, and they still hadn't won over the trust of the mine owner. Moreover, they followed the principle of "taking turns in power". This time the prey would be killed by him, and mourned by him. Zhang Dunhou was very cunning, but even if you told him to kill and cry, he still wouldn't want to do it.

Zhang Dunhou and Wang Mingjun wanted to show their hands at the work area, so that they could demonstrate their superior skills. At their request, the pit master assigned them to a single work area, a so-called remote chamber. Just like an alley in a city, it was a dead end. The work area at the remote chamber was a bit different from a dead end. You can still access the sky from an alley, and the air could circulate. Every inch of this chamber was tightly blocked. It was like a bottle that had been inverted; you could only exit from the mouth of the bottle. If an insect climbed into the bottle and you put a stopper on it, the insect would suffocate. The problem with the chamber was that although the entrance to the tunnel wasn't sealed shut, the air in the work area still couldn't escape, and the outside air couldn't get in. The air in the chamber was rotten and stale, it was truly a pool of stagnant water. When people walked in they would mix and circulate the "stagnant water", but the air would just become muddier, more viscous, and more difficult to breathe. This type of work area had no ventilation equipment, and it was noted for being especially hot and suffocating. Although they weren't burning the coal, it felt as if it had already been set alight. The heat brought out a boggy smell made by hundreds of millions of years' worth of coal, it was a muggy air

with the odor of a rotten carcass. Wang Feng felt a knot in the pit of his stomach as soon as he arrived at the chamber. His eyelids sank and he broke out into a vigorous sweat.

Zhang Dunhou said, "Goddamn. The ground's frozen up there, but down here it's already summer."

As he spoke, Zhang Dunhou and his Uncle began to shed off their clothes. They exposed their arms, only wearing their thin trousers. Uncle said to Wang Feng, "What are you staring at? You still haven't taken off your clothes!"

Wang Feng didn't expose his arms, and he kept wearing his long red underwear.

Uncle didn't immediately throw Wang Feng into the work, he wanted him to watch and learn first.

As his Uncle and Uncle Zhang used their pickaxes to dig up a sizable amount of coal, it became so hot that they tore off their thin trousers. Their entire bodies were now naked while they worked. When they took off their pants their bodies were still white, but after working for a bit the coal dust stained their entire body. They had become black, as if they had fused together with the jet-black wall of coal. Wang Feng didn't dare shine his lamp toward their bodies. This ancient scene of labor shocked him. He slowly turned his head, carefully shifting his lamp along the wall of coal. It was black everywhere, and the rock that was set among the coal was also black. Wang Feng didn't know where they were, he didn't know how far up it was to the top, or how distant the bottom was, he also didn't know how far out in front it went, or how deep it was behind him. He thought to himself, they wouldn't make it out if the pit collapsed. The people up above wouldn't be able to save them; they would be buried alive, gone forever. For a moment he had a vision, that his Uncle was his father. His father was digging naked when the pit suddenly caved in, swallowing up his father. This vision made him tremble with fear, and thoughts of escaping flashed through his mind. This time his Uncle called

him over to start digging. He didn't want to, but he still walked over with trepidation. The coal along the cavern wall didn't seem too hard, but when you struck it with a pickaxe you could feel how hard it was, it was like digging into stone. His hands shook so much they became numb, but he couldn't dig out any coal. He wasn't digging for long before he was sweating from head to toe. The sweat fell into his eyes, it stung. It went into his mouth, it was salty. It dripped through the groove of his back, soaking his clothes. It moved into his crotch making it look like he had pissed himself. He let off more sweat than coal. No coal came out of the places he hit with his pickaxe, rather it fell from the areas he didn't dig into. The coal made a crashing sound, and hit his hard hat as it fell. He thought the pit was collapsing. He let out a shout, tossed his pickaxe, and started to run.

His Uncle called him back and cursed him. He asked him why he was running and shouting blindly, "Your courage is even less than that of a rat. Are you a man? Are you a coal miner? If you're afraid to die you'd best get out of here!"

Wang Feng was still badly shaken. He felt hurt and started to cry as he sprang up.

Zhang Dunhou tried to mediate, "Forget about it. Who isn't scared on their first time in the pit? Next time, you'll be fine." He was afraid their small catch would run off.

His Uncle ordered Wang Feng to continue digging, and forced him to strip off his clothes. Wang Feng took off his drenched long underwear, but his Uncle went on, "Take off your trousers too. You're like a startled chick. There's no women here, no one is going to bite off your cock!"

Wang Feng clutched the waist of his trousers and hesitated for a moment, but he finally took them off. But he didn't strip completely, and left on a pair of underwear.

The underwear was his last line of defense. He wore a firm and angry expression, nothing they said could make him give up this final shield.

A coal transportation worker arrived at their work area. His Uncle substituted for Wang Feng, telling him to help the others load up the coal. Uncle spoke with the other workers, "Let my nephew help you guys haul the coal."

The worker replied, "There's no need, I can do it myself. Your nephew's young."

"That's right, he is young. He's not even twenty yet."

Wang Feng watched as the worker pulled a cart with two low shelves. A large, rectangular woven basket sat on top of the frame. Wang Feng continued to watch as they started placing coal in the basket. A large plastic bottle was hanging from a corner of the cart, and it was still more than half full with water. When he saw the water, Wang Feng felt thirsty. There was a burning rage in his throat, and he wanted to talk with the worker, to ask him for a gulp of water. But he kept his mouth shut and swallowed his urge.

The worker asked him, "Hey fellow, have you been to the market?"

Wang Feng just blinked. He didn't understand the meaning of the worker's question.

Zhang Dunhou explained to him, "He's asking if you've fucked a woman before."

Wang Feng nervously shook his head.

The worker laughed and said, "I see, you ought to go. Just wait until you make some money, and then you can ask your uncle take you."

Wang Feng finally understood the meaning of market. He felt like he had been humiliated, and was resentful towards the worker.

When the basket was full, the worker fastened a rope over his shoulder, and began pulling the heavy cart. The worker bent low at the waist, and kept his body close to the ground. At times he gripped the ground. From behind, it didn't seem like a person was pulling the cart, he looked like a mule or a donkey.

(11)

They were assigned the night shift. On their first day in the mine, the sun had not yet set, and when they left the mine the next morning the sun had already risen.

When Wang Feng came out of the mine he felt as if he had finally woken up from a very long nightmare. He looked all around to prove to himself that he had woken up. When he caught sight of the sky and the earth, they both felt very dear to him. Even the hound, tied up at the pit entrance, didn't seem as frightening or as hateful as it had yesterday. Maybe it was because he had just come out of a dark place and into the glaring sunshine, or maybe because he was moved by everything above the mine, but there were tears in his eyes.

A hot shower was necessary when the workers came out of the mine. The bath house wasn't very far from the pit entrance. It was only a single room, and facing the entrance was a huge metal pot. A walled-in rectangular bathing pool connected to the back of the pot. The water flowed into the bathing pool after it had been heated up. Wang Feng had seen this type of large pot before. When his family slaughtered a pig to celebrate the New Year, they would place the fattened pig into such a pot to skin it. The coals at the bottom of the pot were red through and through. They smouldered as the fire roared, and the water was continuously steaming. Because the top of the pot was so high, it blocked Wang Feng's view of the bathing pool. He was under the impression

that people were jumping right into the pot to bathe! That wouldn't be right. If people jumped into the pot wouldn't they boil? While waiting to get into the bathhouse he saw the bathing pool, and he felt relieved when he saw that people were in the pool.

It wasn't acceptable to bathe without taking off your underwear, so Wang Feng took advantage when people weren't paying attention to quickly strip off his underwear and take several big strides into the pool. The water was already dense, but it wasn't deep enough, Wang Feng hastily crouched, and it was only with much effort that he finally submerged his body. He had only just begun to grow a thin layer of hair around his crotch. He couldn't cover this up, and it only added to his embarrassment. A boy of this age was at his most self-conscious. Like a chick that had just hatched from its egg, he only had downy feathers. He hadn't yet grown his flight feathers, so he couldn't fly. A little chick like this was very fragile, something you just couldn't stand to look at. Wang Feng was even more reluctant to let people see him in that room. The workers would be even more loath to see him in the bathhouse. A worker said, "Hey brothers, stand up and show yourself. Let's compare whose is bigger." Another worker said, "Brother, your hair still hasn't grown out properly!" And still another said, "I bet this boy has yet to open a pot⁷!" While they were teasing him, Wang Feng became ever more shy and resistant to exposing his body. He crouched and moved to a corner of the pool. He faced the back wall of the bathhouse and scooped water up to his face and rubbed his neck.

One worker shouted to the outside, "Lao Ma, Lao Ma!"

Lao Ma turned out to be a young woman. She replied and walked over, asking, "What are you calling me for? Isn't there enough water to cover up your butt?"

⁷ To "open a pot" refers to sleeping with a woman.

The worker who had called Lao Ma replied, “This water’s cold. Heat it up a bit, make us a little more comfortable.”

“Comfort your mother’s foot!” the young woman wasn’t the least bit embarrassed as she spoke while walking through the bathhouse.

The workers who had their butts exposed were more nefarious. When they saw the young woman enter they weren’t ashamed and they didn’t even try to hide themselves. They all stood up and faced the young woman, targeting their penises at her. They grinned and laughed at her. Their laughs sounded a bit stupid. Only Wang Feng turned away, hiding himself in the water behind the other workers. He didn’t dare move, he wasn’t sure what would happen.

The woman pulled out a bucket of water from the big iron pot and splashed it over their bodies. They shouted together in confusion. Perhaps the water’s temperature was a little too high, and it scalded them a bit as it fell on their bodies. Maybe it was just right, and they felt really good. Or maybe it wasn’t because of the water and there was some other reason. In any case they became quite aroused. Their yelling was like cheers, but their cadence wasn’t very consistent. Some shouts were long, others were short, and some were vulgar, while others were delicate. There was no discernible meaning to anything they said. If you only heard their cries, you would have hard time figuring out if they were a group of people or a pack of animals.

“What’re you shouting for? If you call your mother again she won’t feed you!” The young woman picked up another bucket of water and poured it into the pool.

A worker said, “Lao Ma, there’s someone here who hasn’t slept with a woman before, how’re you gonna help him?”

The workers made space, moving to the sides and exposing Wang Feng.

“What? He’s never slept with anyone?” Lao Ma asked.

Some of the guys made Wang Feng stand up so that Lao Ma could take a look and confirm what they had said.

Wang Feng knew that everyone was looking at him. That woman was also looking at him, and her gaze was like a needle on his back, he wished he could just bury his head in the water.

Some of the men pulled away Wang Feng’s arms, others pulled his shoulders back, and still some of the men pushed their legs under his butt, their toes stretched like the claws of a crab. He was sandwiched in on both sides of his crotch.

Wang Feng became angry and said, “I’ll curse whoever teases me again!”

Uncle said, “My nephew’s shy, please forgive him.”

The young woman laughed and said, “I can see this young boy here really hasn’t slept with anyone. That’s really unlucky, you’d better help him lose his virginity.

One miner replied, “Even if we find a way for him to lose it, we still won’t have the tool to do it!”

The young woman said, “That’s a funny thing to say, didn’t I lend you the tool already?”

For a moment that miner didn’t understand what the young woman was referring to. The other men also looked at that miner’s body in confusion, they weren’t sure where the tool was at.

The woman revealed her meaning and said, “You’ll find it below his nose.”

Everyone laughed as they suddenly realized what the joke was.

Wang Feng slept very deeply. He slept through half of the afternoon and didn’t even bother to eat his lunch. When he finally woke up, he wasn’t sure where he was. He blinked before he finally came to and remembered that he was in the miners dormitory. This dorm was circular, half of it was underground, and the other half was above ground. When you entered the dorm you had to first go down several flights of stairs, and when you left the dorm you had to bow your head before you walked up the stairs. Sleeping mats were laid out throughout the entire dorm on soft, broken up pieces of straw. There were no windows in the dorm, and it was almost as dark as the pit itself. From dawn till dusk the lamps glowed in the dorm. Dust had fallen on the light bulbs, so they gave off a very dim light. Wang Feng saw that Uncle and Uncle Zhang had also woken up. They were in a pool of smoke. No one spoke. Both uncles wrinkled their brows, and their expressions seemed bit dejected. There were also several other miners living in the dorm; some were still sleeping deeply, others held a needle between their fingers as they sewed their clothes, and still others turned their clothes inside and out to catch lice. One miner was leaning up against a wall and reading a book. The book was already tattered; its cover had been worn down by many hands. You could faintly see a character on the cover dressed in bright red and green clothing, and it looked like he was holding a glimmering sword. Wang Feng guessed that the book was a martial arts story.

Wang Feng rose slightly to take out the satchel he had brought with him. He opened it and took out his textbooks; they were for English, biology, politics and Chinese. He flipped through each book he took out before setting it down. When he

opened the Chinese book he pulled out a photo from between its pages. It was a photo of his entire family; his mother and father were in the back, while he and his sister stood in front. His mind began to wander as he looked at the photo, and his thoughts flew back to his home.

“Wang Feng, what are you looking at?” Uncle asked.

Wang Feng shivered and said, “A photo. It’s a photo of my family.”

“Let me see it.”

Wang Feng handed the photo over to Uncle. He pointed out his father and said, “This is my dad.”

Uncle set his hard gaze on him.

Wang Feng quickly shut his mouth. He was aware that he had made a slip; what type of man wouldn’t recognize his older brother?

Uncle spoke, “I know. I’ve seen this photo before.” When he said this, he realized that he had also slipped up, exposing a shocking clue. He tried to cover up his mistake by adding, “We took this photo at our house.”

Zhang Dunhou looked about. When he saw the photo he only looked at it for a moment before turning toward Wang Mingjun.

Wang Mingjun looked back at him.

The two of them came to the same conclusion; this photo was the same as the one Zhang Dunhou had torn apart earlier. The boy in the photo was just like their last catch. Nothing more needed to be said, this boy was the son of the man they had killed.

Uncle handed the photo back to Wang Feng and said, “This photo’s too small,

you should get a bigger one.” As soon as Wang Feng held the photo, Uncle took it back from him, “How about, if I happen to go to town for something I’ll also get your photo enlarged.” While saying this he put the photo into his bag, stood up, and walked out the door. He pretended to accidentally bump into Zhang Dunhou as he left. Zhang Dunhou understood and walked behind him out of the dorm. When they came to a small gully, they looked around and saw no one; only then did they stop. Wang Mingjun said, “Damn, as soon as this boy said his last name was Yuan when we were back at the station I knew that something wasn’t right. I suspected he was the son of our old prey, I didn’t want him. It turns out he actually is that man’s son. Goddamn, how could something like this happen?”

Zhang Dunhou replied, “What’s wrong? It’s fine as long as he had two legs. Everyone’s the same, I don’t see men, I only see prey!”

“If we kill this boy, how will his family line continue on?”

“What does his family legacy have to do with us? There’s bound to be some people who don’t have any kids.”

“I’ve always thought this business was a bit strange. You don’t think this boy come to look for some sort of revenge?”

“If you’re gonna talk like that, that’s even more reason to kill him. Just completely eliminate the root of our problems!” He stuck out his hand toward Wang Mingjun, “Take it out!”

“What?”

“The photo.”

Wang Mingjun fished out the photo and handed it over to Zhang Dunhou.

Without even taking a look at the photo, Zhang Dunhou began to rip it up piece by piece. He set his gaze on Wang Mingjun as he tore it up, as if he were ripping it up for him to see.

Wang Mingjun didn't try to stop him from tearing up the photo and asked him, "What are you looking at me for?"

"It's nothing, but weren't you going to enlarge the photo?"

"Fuck you. Did you really think I was going to get him a photo? Pictures are just hidden dangers, I just said that to take it from his hands."

Zhang Dunhou tossed the pieces of the picture onto the ground, and used his foot to bury them into the earth. When they wouldn't go into the earth, he used his heel to dig up some dirt and covered the shredded bits underneath.

(12)

Wang Feng had acquired a trophy during his second shift, and he brought up a lump of coal with him. The lump was about as big as a clam, and on one side was the image of a tree leaf. When he had discovered this lump of coal with the leaf mark, Wang Feng seemed elated. He immediately gave Uncle a look, saying, "Uncle, Uncle, look! This piece of coal has a leaf on it, it's a fossil."

Uncle replied, "There's nothing remarkable about it."

Wang Feng said, "But it is remarkable. My teacher explained to us once that the forest transforms into coal, but we still didn't believe him. Now that I have this piece of coal, I can trust that it was really created from the forest hundreds of millions of years ago."

“Coal is coal, why does it matter if you can prove it or not? Coal is black, whether you prove it or not won’t turn it white. Alright, get rid of it now.”

“No, I want to bring it back to my family. I’ll give my sister and teacher a look.”

“When do you plan on going back home?”

“I don’t know yet. I listen to you and Uncle. When you say to return home, then I’ll return.”

Wang Mingjun sneered and thought to himself, “You boy, you’re still worried about going back home, huh? In a couple of days your ghost will be returning home.”

Wang Feng brought the lump of coal back to the dorm and looked over it again and again. The imprint of the leaf was shaped like a fan, its stems and veins were quite clear. Wang Feng didn’t know what type of tree the leaves came from, but he guessed that it had died out long ago. He used the pads of his fingers to lightly stroke the “fan”, and used two fingers to pinch the stem of the leaf. He thought it would look even better if he could strip off a layer of black from the leaf.

There was another, older miner in the dorm who said, “Hey buddy, what are you looking at?”

“A leaf, it’s a leaf that’s been on the coal for a long time.”

“Can I see it?”

Wang Feng brought it over to the miner. The miner looked it up and down as he turned it over. He said in an admiring tone, “Not bad. It is a leaf. This leaf is a soul of the coal!”

Wang Feng was a little surprised and asked, “The coal has a soul?”

The miner replied, “You don’t understand this, but of course the coal has a soul. Long ago, coal wasn’t called coal, do you know what it was called?”

“No”

“It was called ‘magic wood’”

“Magic wood?”

“Right, magic wood. In the past, the people here didn’t know how to dig up or burn coal. Then one year there was a big flood and coal rushed up from the riverbed. People saw black stuff with the veins of wood, but with one knock, they discovered that it wasn’t wood, it was more like rock. The people scooped up the black stuff, and without much thought, casually tossed it into a courtyard, or hung it up on the wall of a toilet. When it was burnt by the rays of the sun it began to smoulder. What was happening? Could it be that the black stuff could burn like wood? Some people struck the black stuff together and threw it into an oven. You can guess what happened, it went up in flames. It was red from top to bottom, and gave off a fire that flashed with blue. It really was a spirit. Suddenly, they all understood. This tree was so old that it turned into a spirit. It had become magic wood.

Wang Feng listened with bright eyes and said, “This piece of coal has a leaf from the magic wood.”

To avoid a slip up, Wang Mingjun didn’t want Wang Feng talking with any other people, so he said, “Wang Feng, I told you to shave, have you?”

“I haven’t shaven.”

“You’re such a child, you don’t even listen to what I say. If you continue speaking like this, I won’t bring you along next time. Go shave now.”

Wang Feng took out a razor from his book bag and started to shave. He touched the small layer of fine hair along his lips. He hesitated with the blade; it was the first time in his entire life that he had whiskers, and he felt rather reluctant. He had heard once, the more you shaved the more your beard would grow out. He didn't want that to happen, and neither did any of his male classmates. As soon as your beard began to grow out, then you no longer looked like a student. But, Uncle wanted him to shave, so he didn't dare refuse. Uncle wanted him to look like an adult as soon as possible. He couldn't go against Uncle's will. He brought the blade of the razor up against the layer of hair, at long last he had finally used a razor. His whiskers didn't make any noise. One after the other, the fine hairs from his first beard dropped down onto the straw on the bed mat. It was a dry shave, he didn't use any soap or water. After he had shaved, the area above his mouth was burning hot, as if he had lost something. He couldn't help but feel somewhat emotional.

When he woke up in the afternoon, Wang Feng brought out a pen and paper to write a letter for his family. He leaned against a wall, setting a textbook on his knee, and placing the paper on top to write. His mother couldn't read, so he wrote the letter for his little sister. He had never written a letter before, and he thought about every sentence he wrote. He recalled his sister, as if he could see her. He asked about his mother, as if he was looking at her. He mentioned that he had still not found their father, as if he could also see him. He wasn't sure how to leave behind his impression. He thought of each family member, and a certain image of each of them appeared in his mind: his sister was crying in front of his mother, afraid that she wouldn't let her attend school. His mother's hair was covered in dried grass, and her brow was beaded with sweat as she worked in the kitchen preparing food. And his father, he had just returned home and was still carrying his bedroll. He began to snivel as the images of his family flashed

through his mind. The rims around his eyes became red. The tears would have fallen on the letter if he didn't rub his eyes several times. Zhang Dunhou bumped Wang Mingjun, he wanted him to pay attention to Wang Feng's every move. Wang Mingjun could tell Wang Feng was writing a letter to his family, but he asked anyway, "Wang Feng, are you writing a letter a girl at school?"

Wang Feng replied, "No, I'm writing to my little sister."

"Have you flirted with the girls at school before?"

Wang Feng blushed and said, "I haven't."

"Why not? Aren't there any girls that like you?"

"Our teacher forbids classmates from dating."

"Your teacher forbids a lot of stuff. You have to do it on the sly. Your teacher doesn't have to know. Just be honest with Uncle, tell me if there are any girls at school that like you."

Wang Feng pursed his brows and thought for a moment. He finally said that there weren't any.

"When you get back to school ask someone out on a date, that way your father and I won't have to worry about you anymore."

When Wang Feng finished writing the letter, Wang Mingjun immediately went over to grab the letter. He said that he was going into town to deal with something, and that he would drop it off at the post office for him. Wang Feng believed Uncle without a second thought.

Wang Mingjun picked up the letter, and walked over to a neighbouring ravine. Zhang Dunhou followed along behind him. They found a place that was out of the wind

and away from people. He sat down to read Wang Feng's letter. In the letter, Wang Feng told his little sister that he had found work at a mine digging up coal. He told them they would have to wait until he got paid before he could send any money back home. He assured his sister that he wouldn't let her drop out. He wanted her to put all her effort into studying. He said he had given up on returning to school, but it was so that he could ensure that his sister would be able to attend school. He hoped that she would work hard. He asked about his mother's health, and to tell her not to worry about him. He used the phrase, a good man travels far to make his own mark. He was also a good man. He could no longer live off his mother's support, and had to make his own way into the world. He also said the place he was working was very safe, and told her not to worry. He said he hadn't heard of his father's whereabouts, and would continue asking around. He would ask around everywhere he went. He planned to go to a newspaper office after he had made some money, and put a missing person's notice in the paper. He didn't believe that his father was missing somewhere far away. Wang Mingjun had still not finished reading the letter when Zhang Dunhou pushed him, and told him to look at the top of the ravine. Wang Mingjun turned toward the cliff to take a look, and quickly put the letter away. Standing at the top of the cliff was that condescending man, and in his hand was the leash of his condescending hound. Both the man and the hound were rather large, they almost touched the sky. The man was the owner of the mine company, and the hound was the mine owner's trusted companion. Together, the owner and his companion steadily observed them. The mine owner boomed, "What are you two doing? You're being sneaky. You're not working on something secret, are you?"

The wolfhound let out two low howls as if to threaten them, echoing his owner.

Wang Mingjun replied, "Boss! I had my nephew write a letter to home. I'm

checking if anything's been written wrong."

"You can do that in the dorm, what did you come here for?"

"I want to mail the letter. I started walking but I don't know the roads, so I took a wrong turn and ended up here."

"I told you, if you want to work, then work honestly. Don't cause trouble!"

The hound struggled to break free and dash down the ravine. The mine owner used all his strength to stop it, and shouted, "Hey old boy, behave, little Hitler!" The mine owner pointed Hitler one way, and he and the hound started walking along the cliff. Hitler lunged forward, but the mine owner pulled him from behind. The hound had a tremendous amount of energy. The mine owner held the leather leash of the chain in his hands, digging his heels into the earth, and using all his strength to pull the hound. But Hitler continued to drag him along inch by inch, the hound couldn't be restrained.

Wang Mingjun waited until the mine owner and the hound had disappeared from the cliff, and only then did he bring out the letter to finish reading it. At the end of the letter Wang Feng said he had run into two good hearted men; one was Uncle Wang, and the other was Uncle Zhang. The two uncles cared for him as if they were his real uncles. Wang Mingjun kneaded the letter between his fingers, but didn't say a thing. He was still startled by the mine owner's sudden appearance. He sucked on his teeth and said, "I can tell this owner's a sly fox, he found us acting suspiciously"

Zhang Dunhou replied, "That's impossible. He just came out to walk his dog and happened to run into us. That dog can't stay tied up, it needs to be walked every day. Don't be so jumpy."

Wang Mingjun strongly disagreed with Zhang Dunhou, "Regardless, that guy

isn't normal. If nothing else, you heard the name he gave that dog, Hitler. How can it be easy to deal with some who's leading Hitler around?"

"It doesn't matter if he's not easy to deal with, when someone dies at the mine he'll shed blood as usual. You just have to handle killing our prey, and I'll deal with him!" Zhang Dunhou brought out the letter and read it all the way through. He didn't give the letter back to Wang Mingjun. Rather, he gave a cold laugh and tore it to shreds, just as he had done to the photo.

Wang Mingjun wasn't happy, "You, why did you do that?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"I couldn't tear it up myself?"

"It got shredded, didn't it? I was afraid you'd be reluctant to rip it."

"What are you trying to say?"

"You should ask yourself that. You sympathize with that boy, don't you?"

Wang Mingjun was taken aback and denied this, "Why on earth would I sympathize with him! Right, if I feel for him, who will feel for me?"

Zhang Dunhou replied, "That's right, just think about it. If the letter got out, then our trade secrets would slip out, and that wouldn't be good for business. Even if we're firm in how we do our work, if this letter fell into the hands of his family, it would be the cause of our downfall."

"You're the one who understands everything. Alright, I'm an idiot! Why would I take the letter? It can't be because I'm in control of the situation, or because I'm plugging up leaks as soon as they appear can it? My main concern is, this boy will walk through this world once. He hasn't even tasted a women yet, isn't that a little raw?"

“Isn't that easy to handle? We'll take him to a restaurant on the side of the road, or a hair salon, find a woman, and let him have fun for a bit. Won't that be the end of it?”

“I'll give that job to you, how about you take him to play.”

Zhang Dunhou couldn't help but duck to the side, “He's your nephew, why're you giving it to me! If I had the money, I would go have some fun myself. We've never treated the other people we killed like that. Who cares if he sleeps with a woman or not?”

Wang Mingjun pointed at Zhang Dunhou, “That's your attitude? You're not going to cooperate are you?”

“Who isn't cooperating? Did I say I wasn't going to cooperate?”

“Then why are you arguing? Why're you only paying attention to the details?”

Zhang Dunhou saw that Wang Mingjun had become angry, so he decided to compromise, “Ok then, you'll pay first. Wait for the mine owner to hand over our compensation, and then we can work out the details.”

Zhang Dunhou advocated that they take Wang Feng out to lose his virginity that afternoon, but Wang Mingjun insisted on going the next day. The two of them disagreed on how to handle the problem. Zhang Dunhou felt they should dispose of their prey at the first opportunity. Another day that the prey continued to live was just another day of trouble. Wang Mingjun said that he was tired, he didn't want to go because he didn't have any energy. He said that Zhang Dunhou should just take their prey out himself. Zhang Dunhou stuck out his hands so that Wang Mingjun could lend him the money. Wang Mingjun slapped Zhang Dunhou's hand, “I'll lend you a cock so you can go give it to your sister!”

Surprisingly, Zhang Dunhou replied, "Take it out, take it out! I want your cock too, I'll stew it up like a dog's penis."

"There's nothing you don't want. I can tell you're finished. There's no saving you."

(13)

They ate after the day's work was done, and then Wang Mingjun and Zhang Dunhou took Wang Feng into town. In accordance with their plan from yesterday, they wanted this young boy to take a taste of a woman and truly become a man before they sent him off.

They hadn't walked far from the mine when they saw a small restaurant on the side of the road. There were two girls sitting on tall stools at the doorway. The sunlight was bright and from the distance they could see that the two girls were gaudily dressed. Their faces were white, their lips red, and their eyebrows black. Zhang Dunhou said to Wang Feng, "Look, chickens."

Wang Feng took a look towards the restaurant and said, "There's no chickens."

Zhang Dunhou had him look again.

Wang Feng still didn't see them and asked, "Are the chickens dead or alive?"

"Of course they're alive," replied Zhang Dunhou.

Wang Feng shook his head and said, "Women are humans, how could they be chickens?"

Zhang Dunhou smiled and patted Wang Mingjun back, "Your uncle has done a lot of research on chickens, let him give you an explanation."

Wang Feng looked at his Uncle, searching for an answer.

Uncle said, “Don’t listen to Uncle Zhang’s nonsense, I don’t even understand them. Women are humans, chickens are chickens, you can kill chickens for food, but you can’t kill women for food. Why on earth would you call a human a chicken?”

Zhang Dunhou thought for a moment and replied, “Who said you can’t kill women for food? It’s just that the way you slaughter them isn’t the same. You cut a chicken’s throat, but you murder a woman’s pussy.”

This talk confused Wang Feng even more, “Why would you kill someone?”

Because murdering people was a delicate topic, Uncle said, “Your Uncle Zhang is just babbling.”

Wang Mingjun wanted to skip this small restaurant and find another place in town, but when they arrived at the entrance they realized that bypassing it wouldn't be easy. As soon as the two girls caught sight of them, they stood up, welcoming them in with winsome smiles. The girls called them “Gentlemen”, and asked if they were ok, inviting them inside to take a rest.

Wang Mingjun said, “I’m sorry, but we already ate.”

One of the girls said, "It's fine if you already ate. You can drink some tea instead."

Wang Mingjun replied, "We're not thirsty, we don't want tea. We're going to go see what's up ahead."

The other girl asked, “How aren’t you thirsty? When men are away from home, they're bound to work up a thirst.”

Zhang Dunhou probably wanted the prey to solve his problem there, and asked,

“What kind of tea do you have here? Do you have flavoured tea?”

One of the girls replied, “Yes we do, we have every type of flavour. You can have any flavour you want.”

The two girls came over as they were talking. They had a coquettish appearance, and they each pushed on the small of Wang Mingjun and Zhang Dunhou’s backs.

The two men were unable to resist the girls’ advances, their mouths said one thing but their legs did something else. They protested, but their legs were already in the door. The inside of the restaurant was empty, there weren’t any other guests.

Only Wang Feng stood outside the door and didn’t move. He had never seen something like this before, and he didn’t know what was going to happen.

A girl turned to Wang Feng and said, “Hey little brother, come in, what’re you dazed about! We’re not tigers, we don’t eat people.”

Uncle chimed in, “Come on in, we’ll sit for a bit.”

Only then did Wang Feng hesitantly walk in.

They had just taken their seats when the Madame standing at the counter came over and asked them what they needed. She was quite tall and rather good looking. Judging from her looks she didn’t seem too old, she couldn’t be over thirty. Her experienced smile was the crux. She had an arresting charm that was irresistible to men.

Wang Mingjun asked, “What do you have here?”

The Madame replied, “We have girls here, only girls. We have it all, can’t you see?”

Wang Mingjun couldn't help but smile, he agreed with her, but went on, "Do you do massages here?"

"Of course, we can give you whatever massage you want. You can make love too."

"Ah, making love." The talk of making love caused Zhang Dunhou's grin to become wider and wider, "That sounds really fucking good."

Wang Feng blushed and he didn't dare look at anyone. He understood what making love referred to.

Wang Mingjun had the Madame walk over to the side with him, and he quietly haggled over the price with her. The Madame said one session was 200 yuan but he only wanted to pay 100 yuan. They finally agreed on 150 yuan. The Madame said, "For the three of you, I only have two girls, so one of you will have to wait awhile."

Wang Mingjun looked intently at the Madame and asked, "If we add you in then it'll be just right, how about the two of us?"

The Madame gave an even happier smile and replied, "It's not that I can't, but it'll cost at least 500 yuan."

Wang Mingjun said, "I was just joking." He hinted at Wang Feng to let the Madame have a look and softly said, "That's my nephew, today I wanted to bring him out to see the world and open his eyes."

The Madame seemed a bit disappointed.

Wang Mingjun turned to Wang Feng to prepare him for what was to come, "I can tell your strength still hasn't matured, you're not strong enough at work. And today, I'm having someone cure you. There's no need to be afraid, no one will give you a shot,

and no one will make you take any medicine. They're just gonna give you a full body massage. After the massage, your muscles will be strong, your bones hard, you'll be all grown up."

The Madame called a girl over, and the girl said to Wang Feng, "Come with me."

Wang Feng looked to Uncle who said, "Go on."

He took two steps with the girl before he turned back and said to Uncle, "I don't want a massage. I'll just work out more."

Uncle replied, "Exercise isn't a substitute for a massage. Go on, Uncle Zhang and I will wait for you here."

There was a door at the back of the restaurant, and when you opened it you went into a small back courtyard where there were several sheds. The girl led Wang Feng into one of the sheds.

It wasn't long before Wang Feng came running back. He was blushing wildly and his breathing was rapid.

Uncle asked, "What happened?"

Wang Feng replied, "She took off my pants, and, and... I don't want a massage anymore."

Uncle put on a straight face. With the dignity of an elder family member he said, "Son of a bitch, how can you get a massage if you don't take off your clothes? Go back now, and accept her treatment. When they give you your treatment there, you'd better accept it. It doesn't matter what method they use, you're not allowed to resist it. If I see you run back here again, I'll disown you!"

The girl also came out and chuckled on the side. Wang Feng was extremely reluctant to walk back to the courtyard. Wang Mingjun called the girl over and asked her about the situation.

The girl said, "He used his hands to cover himself. He won't let me touch him."

"If he doesn't let you touch him, and you stop touching him, how're you gonna make a living! Use your technique! Let me put it to you bluntly..." when he said that, he glanced at the Madame at the counter, he wanted her to hear, "If you can't get him off, then I'm not gonna pay."

Zhang Dunhou seized the opportunity to grab the girl's butt, his face distorted by greed, and he said, "My nephew is still a virgin, probably only one out of one hundred of the guys who comes here is like him. Count yourself lucky that we're not going to charge you for the privilege."

The girl walked back to the courtyard, while another girl waited outside for other customers. Wang Mingjun and Zhang Dunhou smiled at the Madame. The Madame returned the smile. It wasn't clear what their grins meant; they were all a little strange. The Madame said to Wang Mingjun, "You're very good to your nephew."

But Wang Mingjun sighed, "It's hard to be a man, it's a life and death fight to make a little money. You women can take a man's money by just spreading out on a bed. I don't understand it at all. When men are comfy, so are you, but men's losses are still bigger than yours. Why do you still make men fish out their money for you?"

The Madame replied, "Don't ask me about this. Go ask God, this is his plan."

Wang Feng returned just as the Madame made that comment. His head was stooped as he walked to Uncle, and he stood in front of his with his head hung low. He

didn't say anything. He didn't seem well, and it looked like he was shaking.

Uncle asked, "What's up, are you finished?"

Wang Feng picked up his head to look at Uncle. He twisted his mouth and suddenly started to cry. He opened his mouth wide and wailed, tears flowed down in a complete mess. As he cried he said, "Uncle, I'm ruined. I've become bad, I've become a bad man...." He abruptly ran over to Uncle and buried his face in his shoulder, sobbing even harder.

Uncle was startled, caught off guard by his nephew's embrace. But he quickly understood what was happening, it was the boy's first time doing something like this, and he didn't find it any less traumatic than a girl would have. He held Wang Feng in his arms, patting him on the back and consoling him, "It's nothing, hey, don't cry. If you want to be a man, sooner or later you have to experience this type of thing. Once you've done this then you'll be considered an adult. Don't think so much, just act as if your Uncle was giving you a wife." While consoling him, he unconsciously thought of his own son, as if he were hugging him rather than his nephew. He couldn't help but feel a little moved, but his expression stayed cold.

The girl was probably frightened by Wang Feng's wailing, and she hid in the back, not daring come out. It wasn't clear why, but the Madame shook her head. Zhang Dunhou flashed a grin and said to Wang Feng, "Why the hell are you crying? You just slept with a woman, why're you so upset?"

Wang Feng wouldn't stop sobbing, "Uncle, I'm ashamed to look at anyone, I don't want to go on living, I wish I was dead, I'm...."

At once Uncle pushed him away, admonishing him, "Go and kill yourself,

you're a loser! I can see why you wanna die. You don't know what's good for you!"

Wang Feng collected himself, he stopped crying and just sniffled.

(14)

The three of them returned to the mine and saw two people kneeling at the mine owner's office, a man and a child. The man didn't seem too old, not more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight. He was a cripple with a broken leg. His right leg was so crooked it was like the knee he was kneeling on was missing. A knot was tied at the part of his pants that was empty. The missing leg had a peg that stood on the ground, probably to help maintain his balance. His right hand held a crutch. The child was a boy who looked to be about five or six. He stiffened his upper body, kneeling very straight, but his eyelids were continuously drooping, and he didn't dare look up at anyone. He carried a dirty cloth bag that was sliding off his back. Wang Mingjun walked over to them, but right as he was about to get a look at them someone walked out of the office. He waved his hands at them to leave, "It's none of your business." That man wasn't the mine owner, but he looked like someone who managed the owner's affairs. As they walked over to the dorm, they could hear the manager berating the cripple, "Didn't we compensate you already? Go do something else! Leave, before I break your other leg!"

The cripple said in a weeping tone, "What can I do with the little money you gave me? It wasn't even enough to get a fake leg. Now I'm disabled, even my wife divorced me. How can my son and I move on? Have pity on us!"

"So your wife divorced you, what does that have to do with the mine? Weren't you going to file a complaint? So go off and sue us, all right? To tell you the truth, we'll give the money to the people filing the paperwork, but not you. It won't matter where

you file the complaint!”

“I’m begging you, give my son a bite to eat, he hasn’t eaten in a day. I’ll bow to you, I’ll bow to you...”

They had just entered the dorm and lay down on their beds when they heard people shouting outside and the hound’s cry. A man was screaming for help. They rushed outside. The other miners also ran out to see what was happening. Parked at the entrance to the coal yard was a rumbling truck loaded with coal. Two muscular men pulled up the cripple and went toward the coal truck to toss him on it. The cripple was writhing, struggling with all his might. He shouted until he was blue in the face, “Let me go! Let me go! My leg, give me back my leg! My son! My son!”

His son sobbed and howled, “Daddy! Daddy!”

The hound barked wildly, its large body thrashed back and forth, rattling its shackles again and again.

The two men carelessly tossed the cripple onto the truck as if they were loading a half-filled sack of coal. Then they placed the boy on the truck. With one spurt, the truck went off. The cripple grasped the cracked coal and threw it about, “You’ll all die a violent death.”

The wind from the truck blew off the cap from the boy’s head. The cap fell to the ground and rolled a few times before stopping. The boy stood up to look at his cap but the cripple pulled him back down.

From start to finish, the mine owner didn’t show his face.

The miners were silent as they returned to the dorm. They all wore grave expressions. That old miner who had explained the magic wood to Wang Feng said, “A

man who has to die should go cleanly. You mustn't break an arm or a leg. People become cripples and even dogs are disgusted with them. The rest of your life is just hardship."

Quietly, Zhang Dunhou told Wang Mingjun, "We'd better be merciless with this mine owner."

Wang Mingjun understood. Zhang Dunhou wanted him to hurry up and kill their prey. He didn't say anything, he just turned to look at Wang Feng. Wang Feng was already sleeping, but his face appeared a bit pale. The boy was probably licking his wounds in his dreams, his eyelashes were damp, and from time to time he took a deep breath.

When the sun fell over the mountains in the afternoon, they walked over to the hound and again went down into the pit. This was their fifth shift at the mine. Usually, Wang Mingjun and Zhang Dunhou had already dispatched their prey. By now the workers at the mine generally knew that Wang Feng was Wang Mingjun's nephew. This was the first step. Their work had gained the trust of the mine owner who thought their skills weren't bad. This was the second step. Even the hound accepted them. It showed no interest in them as they went in and out of the mine. This was the third step. It looked as the requirements for their work had all been completed. The conditions were ripe, they just had to get the money from the mine owner after putting away their prey.

The mine shaft had the right type of concealment. The atmosphere was prime and suitable for murder. They had their pickaxes, the rocks, and the gathering darkness. Everything was ready. It seemed as if even the foul air was just right, they only had to wait for the right moment to hit their prey. But as the seconds went by, the coal cart had

already made several trips and Wang Mingjun still hadn't gone to work.

Zhang Dunhou couldn't wait, and he kept looking at Wang Mingjun over and over, using his glances to signal him to get it over with. He probably thought the glances weren't enough, so he used his lamp instead, shining it in Wang Mingjun's face. He fiercely flashed the beam of light. His meaning was clear, but Wang Mingjun seemed as if he didn't understand, and he didn't move closer to their prey.

Zhang Dunhou said, "Brother, if you're not gonna do it then I'll do it for you." He smiled as he said this.

Wang Mingjun didn't utter a word.

Zhang Dunhou thought that Wang Mingjun had given him tacit approval, so he dragged the pickaxe behind him as he drew closer to Wang Feng.

Wang Feng had already picked up on how to dig up coal. He surveyed the wall of the cavern for a moment, touching it with the palms of his hands, looking for veins in the wall, and used the sharp end of the pickaxe to dig along the vein. He didn't know how the veins had been created. He thought to himself, since coal had been formed from trees, those veins were probably the patterns from the tree bark. He picked out a small notch along the vein, and then turned over the pickaxe and used the hammer shaped end to pound the wall. This pounding shook the wall loose, and then he started to dig. The wall came apart as lumps of coal began to fall out one after the other. Wang Feng was drenched in sweat. As soon as the fine pieces of coal fell onto his body they became stuck to his sweat. He became a black man, or a human-shaped chunk of coal. But, the sweat on his back ran through the coal dust, creating rivulets alongside one another. If you magnified Wang Feng's back it would look like a shoal with quite a few gurgling streams. The black parts would be the banks of the streams, while the light

parts would be the water from the stream. The streams were so broad, just like the river course of the shoal. The groove along Wang Feng's back was clear. Wang Feng didn't strip naked as Uncle and Uncle Zhang did, their bare bodies covered in sweat. He continued to wear his underwear. It was a shame, it was already impossible to tell what the original colour of his underwear was. It had become black. Moreover, there was a large rip in the back, and every time he dug into the coal the hole became larger, like the mouth of a dying fish gasping for breath. This was our first year high school student. He was originally named Yuan Fengming, but now he was called Wang Feng. He should have been with his classmates, sitting in a classroom listening to his teacher explain a lesson, listening to a teacher lecture on math or Chinese, or studying music or art. When class was over, he should be going to the roomy playground with his classmates, to play basketball, balance on the parallel bars, or playing some other game. But, because of life's burdens, he had instead come to a bottomless cavern unknown to anyone, to look face to face with life's menace.

Zhang Dunhou was already behind Wang Feng. He brought the pickaxe in front of him. He deftly held it in one hand while his other hand grasped it. You could see he wanted to raise it up....

At that moment, Wang Mingjun shouted out, "Wang Feng! Watch the roof!"

Wang Feng jumped at the sound, breaking away from Zhang Dunhou's striking range. He really thought there was something wrong with the roof so he shone his light on it.

After Wang Feng jumped Zhang Dunhou was left exposed in the open area. The hands that gripped the pickaxe relaxed and he dragged the pickaxe along the ground. Although his plan had not been revealed and Wang Feng was still naïve in guarding

against danger, he was still a little frustrated and became impatient. He felt it wasn't the right time for Wang Mingjun to call out to Wang Feng. Otherwise, with one strike of the pickaxe their catch would have been finished. He went so far as to believe that Wang Mingjun had deliberately called out to Wang Feng at that critical moment. That he wanted to warn Wang Feng to get out of the way. The warning to avoid the roof was a ruse, and he really wanted him to dodge the strike. He couldn't understand why this would be. Why? Could it be that Wang Mingjun didn't want to be replaced? Perhaps Wang Mingjun didn't want to cooperate with him, or maybe Wang Mingjun wanted to betray him. He fidgeted and paced around in two circles. He lividly leaned against the side of the tunnel before sitting down. When he sat down, he furiously struck the ground with the sharp end of the pickaxe. The ground was composed of stone, and clusters of sparks went flying every time it was hit. Fortunately there wasn't much gas in that area. If there had been a lot of gas, the sparks would have triggered an explosion in the pit. All the workers working down below would immediately be fried.

Zhang Dunhou sat for a moment, but his anger didn't disappear, it just grew and grew, and his resentment turned into rage. He couldn't stand to look at Wang Feng or Wang Mingjun. He didn't understand how Wang Feng was still alive. How could this bastard Wang Mingjun allow their catch to live? If their catch wasn't dead, then he wasn't happy. It was an obligation that had been left unfinished. With Wang Mingjun being so slow to kill the target, he felt that something must have gone wrong. This would be an obstacle, otherwise working together on their catch wouldn't have been a problem. Wang Mingjun let Wang Feng rest for a moment, and he himself went over to the vein in the wall to dig out coal. He wouldn't let Wang Feng leave his sight as he dug. He taught Wang Feng how to test the roof and said if the mine roof made a solid sound when it was struck, then it showed that it didn't have any problems, but if it gave

off a hollow noise, then it signalled that there was a fissure in the roof, and you had to be extra cautious. He stood up, and used the back of his pickaxe to test the roof. The roof replied with a hollow sound that was a bit muffled. Wang Feng watched Wang Mingjun. Wang Mingjun said right now it wasn't too big of an issue, but they still had to be on the lookout. Zhang Dunhou cursed to himself, "Shit, be on the lookout for what!" He watched Wang Mingjun show such patience with Wang Feng. He had grown suspicious of the relationship between the two of them. Could it be that Wang Mingjun really regarded Wang Feng as his own blood? Perhaps they had secretly formed an alliance and they were uniting to counter him. Zhang Dunhou became alert. Something wasn't right, he had to take care of the target as soon as possible. From then on, he put on a relaxed appearance, once more dragging his pickaxe over toward Wang Feng. He was mumbling, as if he were humming a vague tune. He used the tune to confuse both Wang Feng and Wang Mingjun. He clenched the pickaxe at the side of his body. From the look of it, this time he wouldn't grasp it with both hands, rather he would use the swing from a single hand to strike their catch. In the past, he would normally aim for the crown of the head when he beat their catch to death. That way, if the wound was inspected, they could say that rocks which collapsed from the roof had inflicted the wound. This time it didn't matter, it seemed that if he swung the pickaxe level it would land on the side of Wang Feng's head. Just as he was about to swing the pickaxe Wang Mingjun foiled him again by calling out, "Tang Zhaoyang!"

Calling him Tang Zhaoyang was tantamount to bringing up Zhang Dunhou's last crime. He was stupefied, as if someone had smacked him in the head. His grip on the pickaxe slackened a bit. He didn't reply, rather he asked, "Who're you calling? Who's Tang Zhaoyang?"

Wang Mingjun didn't affirm that Zhang Dunhou was Tang Zhaoyang. He just went over and clutched Zhang Dunhou's shoulder, dragging him to a tunnel outside of their work area. Zhang Dunhou realized that Wang Mingjun was gripping him rather savagely, and he used all his strength to swing away his arm, breaking Wang Mingjun's grip. He cursed at Wang Mingjun, interrogating him as to what he was doing.

Wang Mingjun replied, "We can't break our practice."

"What practice?"

Wang Mingjun was about to clarify what he was talking about when Wang Feng followed them out of the work area. He didn't know what was happening between his two uncles.

Wang Mingjun sternly said, "Why'd you come out? Go back, get to work!"

Wang Feng returned to the work area without wasting any time.

Wang Mingjun explained the practice was they still hadn't let Wang Feng eat a good meal, nor had they let him have a farewell drink.

Zhang Dunhou objected to this and said, "A little shit like him, he doesn't even know how to drink liquor."

"Whether or not he drinks is his business. Whether or not we give him the chance is our business. Men and children, both are still humans. Our practice is the same toward everyone."

Zhang Dunhou wasn't convinced, but Wang Mingjun made sense. He couldn't refute Wang Mingjun. He cocked his head and said, "What if you don't take care of it tomorrow, then what?"

"We can definitely take care of it tomorrow."

“Whose ass are you nibbling on? I can tell you’re still unsure.”

“If I don’t do it tomorrow, then you can kill me, how about that?”

Zhang Dunhou didn’t say anything.

At this point, Zhang Dunhou should have made clear where he stood, indicating he knew that Wang Mingjun was joking, it was dangerous if he said nothing at all. At least that was how Wang Mingjun felt.

Zhang Dunhou sensed the oppressive atmosphere and felt he should crack a joke, but his joke was tasteless, “You’ve taken a fancy to that boy, haven’t you? Do you want to keep him and make him your son-in-law!”

“I’ll keep him and make him your dad!” Wang Mingjun shouted.

(15)

On their last shift, Wang Mingjun made a false roof in their work area. This so called “roof” was actually a large boulder on an overhang that was unsettled. Wang Mingjun propped up a log to support it so that it wouldn’t fall down. When the time came to drop the rocks, he would use his pickaxe to topple the log. This method was analogous to using a stick as a screen to grab a sparrow. When the sparrow came to land on the stick, you would drop the stick and the sparrow would be caught in the trap below. Now, when the sparrow was caught with the screen it was still alive, but when the rocks beat down, nine times out of ten a person would be smashed to a pulp. Wang Mingjun quietly told Zhang Dunhou what he had in mind. This time no one would have to use their hands, instead they would create a real cave in to crush their mark to death.

Zhang Dunhou joked to him, he thought he was just taking off his pants to fart,

and that the plan was completely unnecessary.

Wang Mingjun had made the false roof well. He just had to wait until after Wang Feng walked in, then he would move back into the safe zone and topple the log. It would all be over. The log was the only thing standing between him and disaster.

While Wang Mingjun took great pains to make the false roof, Zhang Dunhou didn't help, he just looked on at him with a ridiculing gaze. This infuriated Wang Mingjun. After the roof was finished, Zhang Dunhou walked over, aimed his pickaxe at the base of the log and said, "How is it? Let me try it out."

Wang Mingjun was right below the false roof. He would be dead if Zhang Dunhou triggered it. "What are you doing?" Wang Mingjun jumped from under the roof. Right as he did that, Wang Mingjun swung the pickaxe in a blocking manner. He didn't use the blunt end of the pickaxe, rather he used the sharpened end. He swung it at Zhang Dunhou's temple, knocking him over. Wang Mingjun was skilled from digging coal every day, so his aim was dead on. When the blade came away from Zhang Dunhou's temple, a stream of red blood gushed out from the side of his head. This incident went against Zhang Dunhou's expectations, and it also went beyond Wang Mingjun's predictions.

Zhang Dunhou's open eyes were terrifying. His mouth was wide open, as if he wanted to question Wang Mingjun, but he couldn't make a sound. Still, he was struggling, grasping at Wang Mingjun's feet, trying to pull him under the false roof. He kicked at the log to topple it....

Wang Mingjun saw Zhang Dunhou's bid and used all his strength to pull away his foot. But he couldn't get it free. He was frantic and shouted out, "Wang Feng! Quick! Come help me kill this guy, he's the man who killed your father! Come now and

avenge your father!”

Wang Feng was frightened and retreated back, “Uncle, Uncle, I can’t... I can’t do that. Killing someone is against the law.”

Wang Mingjun had given up on Wang Feng, and was forced to swing the pickaxe himself. He brought it down on Zhang Dunhou’s head several times, smashing it to bits.

Wang Feng covered his face as he started to cry.

“What’re you crying for, you dope! You must not cry, listen to me!” Wang Mingjun pulled Zhang Dunhou’s corpse under the false roof, and then went to stand below it.

Wang Feng didn’t dare cry.

“After I die, say we were both crushed to death by a cave in. You need to tell the mine owner that I was your uncle, ask the owner for 20,000 yuan. Then go back home and go back to school. Never leave home again!”

“Uncle, Uncle, don’t die, I won’t let you die!”

“Stay back!”

Wang Mingjun faced the log and gave a kick. The huge boulder of the false roof fell with a loud crash, kicking up dust in every direction. Instantly, Wang Mingjun and Zhang Dunhou vanished from sight.

Wang Feng didn’t tell the mine owner that Wang Mingjun was his uncle. He told him everything he had seen in the pit. Everything he said was the truth. He even said that his real name was Yuan Fengming.

The mine owner gave him just enough money to pay for his ticket home, and then sent him away.

Yuan Fengming carried his sleeping roll and book bag on his back, he hesitantly walked along the road of a vast, barren ridge. Since he hadn't found his father, and hadn't made any money, he didn't want to return home. But if he didn't return home, then where would he go?