

## 被遺忘的烈士

### The Martyr<sup>1</sup>

By G. K. Yuan

Translated by Susan Wilf

In the north-west corner of Tianshui Village, there was a tiny, weed-choked court-yard with a ramshackle gate that sagged like a man on his last legs. Inside, a moldy haystack stood beside a crumbling mud-brick house, its roof overrun with tassels of dead grass shuddering in the wind.

Many years ago, a mother and son and their black wolf-dog had lived in this desolate place. A man—the boy’s father—had also lived there briefly, but he had died before his son was born. Middle-aged villagers still remembered them, a family too poor to paper their window, light a fire in winter, or buy any furniture except a low *kang* table.

The villagers called the boy ‘Sootface’ because he was the dirtiest child in the village. His toes and heels protruded from the holes in his shoes, which were held together with wire and squeaked when he walked. All year round he wore a hand-me-down pullover of his father’s—faded, misshapen, and slick with grime.

But what stood out in people’s memories was the unsettling glint in his eyes—bold yet wary—like the gaze of a wolf cub coming down from wintry mountains to prowl for food.

His mother was an ageless alcoholic with matted hair and threadbare clothes, who passed her days lying on the haystack in the court-yard, smiling

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘The Martyr’ is a selection from G. K. Yuan’s unpublished anthology *Guanyin de haizi* 觀音的孩子 [Children of the Bodhisattva], a volume of eight interwoven stories using a haunting blend of the real and surreal to explore the hidden inner lives of the inhabitants of an impoverished fictional hamlet in northern China.

and murmuring as she stared at the sky. Most of the villagers believed she had lost her mind, but some, notably Chunfen the livestock keeper, thought she was crooning a song of eternal love.

\* \* \*

Sootface's father had been a blacksmith named Qin Changlin, from a place called Qin Village. One day, at the age of twenty-two, he had driven a borrowed horse-cart to the commune market fair to buy horseshoe nails and a few treats for the upcoming Chinese New Year. There, in the teeming crowd, he had spotted a girl choosing embroidery thread with her friends. She was an ordinary farm girl, not exactly pretty, but she had a perky gaze and an attractive smile. Mesmerized, he forgot his errands, and found himself irresistibly drawn to her side, wordlessly paying for all of the thread she was about to buy. Her girlfriends immediately burst into hoots of derision, like drops of water skittering across a hot griddle.

Giving them all a ride home, he learned that the object of his affection was named Chuntao. After that he often picked her up in his cart at the edge of her village and took her for drives in the country. They rode in relative silence, enjoying each other's presence like a pair of birds in a nest.

Their families opposed the young couple's union, maintaining that their horoscopes were incompatible: she was born in the Year of the Rooster, and he in the Year of the Dog. But the sweethearts, now inseparable, dismissed their elders' misgivings as superstition. When Chuntao's family began to plan an arranged marriage for her, she fled to Qin Changlin's house, and they, like countless lovers before them, decided to run away.

But there was nowhere they could go. They drifted from place to place—a Buddhist temple, an abandoned brick kiln, a dry spot under a bridge—until Qin Changlin finally remembered a kindly uncle he had once met, who lived about a dozen miles away in a place called Tianshui Village. He decided to find the uncle, an old bachelor who spoke with a toothless hiss, and beg him to take them in.

But when the couple finally got to Tianshui Village, they found that the old man had recently died. Chuntao, visibly pregnant by then, flopped down onto the ground and burst into tears.

Someone brought the village head, a fellow whose masculine sideburns and jutting jaw belied a soft, womanly heart. After listening to Qin Changlin's tale,

he looked at Chuntao weeping on the ground, paused to think, and nodded toward the uncle's decrepit mud-brick house, granting the exhausted runaways permission to take shelter there. They thanked him profusely, and Chuntao clambered to her knees on the ground and kowtowed.

The uncle's house, like all the dwellings in the village, had an altar to the goddess Guanyin, where the unmarried mother-to-be knelt every day to pray for her unborn child and her family.

Soon after Qin Changlin had settled down and begun work as a blacksmith, the autumn rains began leaking through the roof and muddying the floors of the old house, and he decided to do some repairs. When the weather cleared, he borrowed a cart and went to quarry stones in the mountains a dozen miles away, accompanied by a villager who needed stones to rebuild his pigsty. He soon returned with his first haul, which he piled around the haystack in the court-yard. A few days later he needed to go back for more, but he had no companion this time. Chuntao anxiously urged him to wait until he found someone, but thinking of his coming baby, he made up his mind to go alone.

Just when he was turning homeward with his loaded cart, he spotted a big, perfect foundation stone perched on a nearby slope, and decided to try to wrest it free, but he lost his footing and tumbled down into the ravine below. A wood-cutter discovered his body the next day, and Chuntao was told the bad news.

Three months later she gave birth to their son, but soon afterward she started to show signs of losing her grip on reality. She would stare blankly into space, oblivious to her baby's wails, and forgot to cook meals. People overheard her muttering as she lay on the haystack in her court-yard.

'Didn't I tell you to wait until you found someone from the village to go with you? Why were you in such a hurry?' Sighing softly, she shook her head and fell still, her gaze fixed on a single spot in the sky.

Out of pity, the village head assigned her light work to help her make ends meet: keeping the colts and calves from slipping out of their pen and eating the nearby crops. The village women begrudged her this favour: after all, she was an interloper. But even this easy task was too much for Chuntao, and the frisky young animals kept escaping.

Chunfen the livestock keeper always rushed to Chuntao's aid, still wearing his soiled pig-slopping apron. Dragging his lame leg, paralyzed in a childhood bout with polio, he scrambled through the fields retrieving the runaways,

his shrill voice echoing in the air like a mother calling her children home from their outdoor play. When the village head learned of Chuntao's lapses, Chunfen would intercede for her, and even tried to take the blame, claiming that he had been too slow in closing the gate on his way out. The village head had his doubts, but he reluctantly let Chuntao keep her job.

\* \* \*

One day when Sootface was five, the whole village was invited to a wedding feast. Chunfen offered to watch the young livestock for Chuntao so that she and her son might have a decent meal. But the sight of the happy newly-weds triggered one of the young widow's muttering episodes, which tempted the man beside her to mischief: he goaded her into downing a cup of potent sorghum liquor. Chuntao had never touched a drop of alcohol in her life, and it went straight to her head. She plopped her face down onto the table and started to wail, angering her host, who had her immediately removed from the premises. She was carried home and dumped onto the haystack in her court-yard.

When she finally awoke, she lay still and gazed at the sky, eyes glowing. Then, suddenly brightening, she announced that she could see her son's father. He was alive, she said, and still trying to find his way out of the mountains.

'I know you're there,' she called softly, her face still rosy with spirits. 'Hang on, I'm coming to save you.'

As she continued to stare at the sky, she found herself reunited with Qin Changlin in another world. She watched, burbling with laughter, as he embraced his son in delight, grabbing him by the earlobes and playfully turning his head from side to side.

Once she had discovered her alcoholic paradise, nothing could tear Chuntao away. She neglected her personal grooming, her child, and her house, but she had found bliss. One by one, she took her household possessions to the general store to exchange for liquor.

The storekeeper Wuten, a bald man with huge eyes, always felt an uneasy pang at the sight of Chuntao—now known in the village as 'the crazy lady'—bringing her worthless possessions, but he would calmly take her dirty flask and refill it from the white ceramic jug under his counter. She would grab the flask and leave right away, her face blank, not even suspecting that Wuten had watered down the liquor in the jug specially for her, making it unfit for sale.

At first many people—especially Chunfen the livestock keeper and some of the older villagers—pitied the mother and son and brought them food. Eventually Chuntao lost her job and ran out of money. Since Sootface was still a child, the village head gave them a tiny donation during the customary year-end distribution. Most of the villagers refrained from comment, but some were indignant: it was time, they said, for ‘the crazy lady’ and her Sootface to leave Tianshui Village. They were outsiders, with no right to snatch food from the villagers’ mouths.

This paltry handout was only enough to sustain Chuntao and Sootface for a few months. When their larder went bare, he started begging, going to the neighbouring villages to avoid the humiliating taunts of his peers.

Since Chuntao had almost never mothered Sootface, he had no idea of what he was missing, and—in a role reversal—he took over her care by the time he was five. She spent most of her days lying on the haystack and muttering, punctuated by trips to the store to refill her flask. Sootface fed her at mealtimes and helped her inside to bed at night.

Ostracized by the village children, he watched them at play in the poplar grove from his window, noting that their favourite games were make-believe wedding ceremonies and wars. Sometimes they came and lobbed stones and clods of mud through his front gate, even pelting Chuntao on her haystack.

‘Crazy lady! Crazy lady!’ they chanted wildly, stomping their feet in rhythm.

At this point the black wolf-dog, whose name was Commander, would burst out of the house, snarling ferociously and scaring the little ruffians, although not enough to deter them. Their fear was outweighed by their curiosity and the thrill of bullying the lowliest family in the village, and they kept coming back for more.

Time crept by in the little court-yard just as it did everywhere else, although it seemed to go by more quietly here. Chuntao passed the days on her haystack in blissful reunion with her beloved, while Sootface sat on the *kang* with Commander in his arms, gazing out the bare window at the rural panorama: farm fields dotted with trees, peasants hoeing the soil and loading carts, people crossing the little bridge over Snakehead Creek, the poplar grove beyond the village, and the dusky mountain ridge on the horizon. The human figures in the fields reminded him of the ants in his yard: singly or in swarms, all were foraging for food. And the horse-carts, laden with fertilizer and soil, looked like

beetles as they wended their way through the fields, the entire scene set against the familiar background noise of the drivers' shouts.

From his window, the boy observed how the poplar grove changed with the seasons and the time of day. Keenly sensitive to the subtle shifts in the lighting, colours, and smells of the natural world, he had a stronger connection to nature than he did to the village.

How would his life be different, he wondered, if he were a bat, a tree, or a gust of wind, or if he actually belonged in the village, or if his mother could work in the fields like everyone else?

With only a dog for company, Sootface was entirely isolated. His gnawing loneliness fed his imagination as he gazed out his window day after day, year after year, while the trees changed colour in the fields and the hawks circled in the clouds. Quietly, his imagination sprouted, grew, and bore unusual fruit.

In his fantasy world, Sootface was the mighty commander of all the village boys. He rode a powerful chestnut steed with white hooves, and his gaze flashed like lightning as he thundered out orders at his followers. The 'Tianshui Village Youth Corps', as the boys were known in his visions, shadowed him in green army uniforms during repeated charges against the enemy. He led countless battles, each one a smashing victory. Although he was not sure what the names of his adversaries were, he knew the world outside was rife with them. It did not matter to him what the villains were called—Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 and his Guomindang, or the Japanese, or the American imperialists, or landlords, capitalists, rightists, and counter-revolutionaries—any foes would do, as long as he could wreak his vengeance on them.

Even by the time he was eighteen, Sootface had never left the village. The enemies' names were merely words he had overheard at the general store, where the local menfolk gathered in the evenings to shoot the breeze, smoke, and swill cheap liquor. They loved to brag about wars and war heroes of days gone by, as if the heroes' exploits were their own.

Fascinated by these stories, Sootface often went to the store in the evenings and sat on a little three-legged stool in the corner to listen. What puzzled him most was that many of the enemies had once been friends. For example, according to Qingtian the village bricklayer, Mao Zedong 毛澤東 and Chiang Kai-shek—now archrivals—had started out as close as brothers. And the

Americans had allied with China to beat the Japanese in World War II, but then they had turned around and helped South Korea invade North Korea, and even planned to invade China, so China had to fight the War to Resist America and Aid Korea. Qingtian also said that China had called the Russians ‘Soviet Big Brothers’ for many years, but later their relations had soured, and a war of words had escalated into an actual military confrontation over some island in Manchuria. Stranger still was the notion that hostile nations might even become allies against a common foe. Sootface found these stories confusing: in real wars, it seemed, as in children’s games in the woods, one could keep switching sides, and there were no apparent rules.

Sootface listened in silence, avoiding eye contact, but he took careful note of every detail he heard. The men paid him no more attention than they would to a dog lying on the floor, and never stopped to wonder what he was thinking.

Sometimes Sootface caught the storekeeper Wuten’s big bovine eyes drilling right through him, and he would shrink in embarrassment. He was used to going unnoticed.

He could never fathom Wuten, who often quietly left food by his little stool in the corner—sweet potatoes or corn-cakes, or even a piece of prettily wrapped penny candy. Sootface would hurriedly stuff the goodies into his jacket on his way out of the store and leave without looking at anyone, even though he could feel Wuten’s gaze boring into him from behind.

Then he would run home and share the treats with his mother and his dog. When there was a piece of candy, they took turns licking it until it was gone.

\* \* \*

Twisted souls share the general human thirst for happiness, but their thirst can burn with an intensity that drives them to extraordinary acts and shocking outcomes, both good and bad.

The wolf-dog Commander was Sootface’s only link to the father he had never known. The dog had attached himself as a puppy to Chuntao and Qin Changlin during their elopement, and Qin Changlin had named him. Actually, from the time Sootface was very small, he had clung to the secret fantasy that this manly dog was his father, and he felt safest sitting at his window with the dog in his arms. Whenever he felt lonely, hopeless, or resentful, he clasped

Commander tight, finding comfort in the dog's warm, furry brawn. Commander was a valiant creature, who kept his chest high and his face stern even when he had nothing to eat.

Sootface sensed early on that he and his mother were terribly different from the rest of the families in the village, and as he matured, he started to understand that this was an immutable fact. Plagued by shame and despair, he retreated to his post at the window, with Commander in his arms. There, in his private fantasy world, he could vent his fury on his enemies, while clutching the dog for dear life, as if to prevent his dreams from slipping away.

At night he peered at the starry sky through the cracks in his dark ceiling. Trembling, he pummelled the *kang* and the walls as he imagined himself galloping across the plains in battle, slaying enemy soldiers right and left, and finally being blown to bits by an artillery shell and dying in a blaze of glory. This violent fantasy, his sole source of pride and satisfaction, gave him the energy to go on living.

Incredibly, Sootface grew to be a strapping young man, and the village head gave him work in the fields when he was barely thirteen. But he was clumsy, and unable to earn even half what the others could. He always seemed like a misfit, although no one could quite articulate the problem, and people liked to tease him. Usually, he turned a deaf ear, but he lost his temper on one occasion when a villager made fun of his father. Jamming his shovel into the earth, Sootface glowered menacingly at the offender, who gasped and found an excuse to slink quickly away.

Sootface almost never made eye contact with anyone. On the rare occasions when he did, his gaze inspired terror. Most of the villagers believed that this strange boy with his head in the clouds was destined to end up just like his mother.

\* \* \*

In the winter of 1978, the year that Sootface turned eighteen, the village was abuzz with news: a unit of People's Liberation Army recruiters had arrived in the area! The young men were all fired up.

One day, Sootface and some other young men were paving a nearby road, when they spotted an approaching army jeep with two uniformed officers inside, heading toward Tianshui Village. Casting aside his shovel, Sootface sprinted homeward, and his fellow workers followed suit.



While all the others ran straight to the village committee office, Sootface stopped at home first. He splashed water onto his hands and face, changed into the used Liberation-brand sneakers and hand-me-down shirt that he saved for special occasions, and then dashed to the village office.

At the main gate he barged right into a short dark man in his early forties, who was on his way out: the chief recruiting officer.

‘When are we leaving?’ Sootface blurted out, as if he had already enlisted.

The officer was dumbfounded. Who was this tall youth who was ready for action, no questions asked? The officer, a hard-bitten Korean War veteran, scrutinized him and was amazed to detect in his eyes qualities he usually saw only in soldiers who had grappled face-to-face with death: firm resolve, coupled with a cool indifference to his own mortality. The officer could not understand why he was sensing such unusual traits in the young man. It was obviously impossible.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked, without replying to Sootface’s question.

‘Sootface!’ came the instant reply. The recruiter could barely stifle a laugh.

‘What kind of name is that?’ he demanded, composing himself. ‘Stop kidding around, boy! What’s your real name?’

Sootface bit his lip in silence. One of the villagers explained to the officer that Sootface was the only name the young man had ever used.

The officer frowned.

Someone stepped forward from the crowd. It was Chunfen the livestock keeper, who had stopped by the village office on business.

‘Sootface has a real name,’ he announced shrilly. ‘It’s Qin Baoguo!’

Everyone started talking at once. Chunfen stepped closer to the officer and explained that before his untimely death, Sootface’s father Qin Changlin had chosen this name for his son.

‘Qin Changlin was sure his child would be a son, and he cherished the hope that his son would join the army and defend our homeland. So he chose to name him “Baoguo” because it means “protect the nation”. He told me this one day a long time ago, while he was shoeing horses in the livestock shed.’ Chunfen’s voice rose as high as a woman’s when he was agitated.

The villagers were astonished. They had never heard the name before, and it seemed too grandiose for the person they had always called Sootface.

After a two-week battery of tests, Sootface ended up—to everyone’s great surprise—as one of the two new recruits selected from among sixteen applicants.

Although the recruiter had hesitated after learning of the young man's unusual family circumstances, he could not shake his first impression: Qin Baoguo had the makings of a top-notch soldier. In a break with precedent, he decided to take him, even though the other candidates were in many ways stronger.

Donning his new army uniform, Sootface went to say goodbye to his mother. She looked at him gently, still smiling and murmuring her perpetual refrain to his father.

Luckily for her, as a military dependent she was now entitled to the care of the village committee.

On the day before he left, Sootface borrowed some money from Chunfen and ran to the commune grocery store to buy a big hunk of meat for Commander. After watching the dog happily gobble it up, he spent the entire night with his arms around him, pouring his heart out as never before.

At the crack of dawn, a big army truck decorated with red paper flowers and streamers arrived at the village office to pick up Sootface and the other young man who had been chosen. Inside the truck stood a number of recruits gathered from neighbouring villages, all sporting red cloth corsages. Before sunrise the village head had summoned the entire village over the PA system to send the recruits off with gongs, drums, and chanted slogans. Enlisting in the army was a major life event in the Chinese countryside, even more important than weddings and births. As an honourable form of national service, it reflected glory upon the entire village.

The time had come for Sootface to part with Commander. Tethering him in the house for the first time in his life, he entrusted him to Chunfen's care. Before he left, he cut off a lock of Commander's fur and stuffed it into the pocket of his army uniform. Sensing that something was afoot, the dog whimpered dismally.

Just as the excitement at the village office reached its peak, and the truck roared into motion to carry off the new recruits, Commander suddenly hurtled into view. Howling like a wolf, he tried over and over to leap onto the truck carrying away his master, but only managed to crash his head against it and fall back down. Then he ripped the decorations off the truck and dragged them onto the ground. No one could bring the berserk animal under control.

Standing in the truck with the other new recruits, Sootface did not dare look back at the only living creature who had accompanied him throughout his eighteen-year life. He was trembling all over, but he kept his face turned

stubbornly forward. Finally the truck started along the dirt road out of the village, and then onto the paved thoroughfare to the county seat. Commander ran after it, barking furiously, until both truck and dog vanished in swirling clouds of dust.

Commander did not return to the village that day, or the next, or for the two days after that. He reappeared toward evening on the fifth day, but he was gaunt and feeble, his fur mangy and his spirit gone. Refusing food and water, he lay on the *kang* in the same spot where he had gazed out the window with his master all his life. For the first few days he kept lifting his head to whine, but then he stopped. Chunfen came to check on him, leaving food and water within his reach, but Commander was too listless even to sniff at it. Once a majestic creature, he was now mistrustful and despondent. All he could do in his weakened state was stare out the window as still as a statue, fixed to the spot where he and his master had passed their days.

Chunfen tried to coax him but to no avail. People saw him pleading patiently with the dog in his high-pitched voice, like a mother cajoling a reluctant child to eat. Then he would limp out of the court-yard, lifting the corner of his dirty apron to wipe away his tears. As the village livestock keeper, he was uniquely sensitive to animals, and he knew there was no hope.

After Commander breathed his last, still at the window, Chunfen buried him directly beneath it, overlooking the broad vista he had known best in life.

Soon afterward, the village committee decided that Chuntao, as a needy military dependent, should be sent to the county mental hospital.

From then on, the only visitors to the little mud-brick house were wind, dust, and sunbeams.

\* \* \*

For a long time there was no news from Sootface. His fellow recruit had mentioned in a letter home that the two of them had undergone three months of boot camp together before being assigned to different companies. Everyone was still wondering why Sootface had been selected instead of some of the other young men, but all agreed he was damned lucky. The army was his ticket to the good life: he would get plenty of respect as a soldier, and later the government would find him a civilian job.

About four months after Sootface left, a pair of uniformed officers pulled up to the village committee office in an army jeep. They brought astonishing news:

Qin Baoguo had died a hero's death in combat on the Yunnan border in the Chinese Counter-Offensive Against Vietnam. He had been designated a War Hero, First Class by the Central Military Commission and the Ministry of National Defense, and proclaimed a Revolutionary Martyr by the government. The officers had brought a large official photograph of him in uniform, its frame draped in black crepe, which they set decorously on the table under the big banyan tree in the court-yard, so that the villagers could pay their respects.

The village head summoned everyone on the PA system, announcing an important, obligatory meeting. He even sent a messenger on a bicycle to bring people back from the fields.

The first cluster of villagers to arrive stood grimly speculating in hushed tones. The news had arrived with such stunning swiftness that they could barely digest it. It seemed like only yesterday that the two young men had rolled out of town with such fanfare. How could Sootface have become a martyr a mere four months after his departure? This was as difficult to accept as the idea that his real name was Qin Baoguo.

The news was a jolt in more ways than one. Many of those present had never heard of the Counter-Offensive Against Vietnam that had claimed Qin Baoguo's life. In fact, many did not even know that soldiers in post-Liberation China might face actual combat.

Gathering in a semicircle around Qin Baoguo's portrait, the bemused villagers stared wordlessly at his face, which was both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. How could this bright-eyed, vibrant young soldier be Sootface, the filthy child who had sat mutely in the corner of the general store, and dreamed his life away at his window with his dog?

As they examined the portrait of the young man they had imagined they knew so well, the villagers were shocked to discover qualities they had never associated with him before. As if transfigured by magic, his face now radiated passion, determination, and confidence. His indomitable spirit seemed to leap right out of the frame at them and take their breath away. Uneasily, they wondered how they could have misjudged him so. There was a world of difference between a dirty, fatherless urchin who lived with his crazy mother, and a War Hero, First Class, and Revolutionary Martyr. The villagers knew they must be guilty of a mistake, a big mistake. But what was it, and who was at fault?

A wizened old lady with bound feet hobbled to the fore, elbowing people out of her way. She touched her trembling fingers to the black crepe on the picture frame, and then to the familiar face in the portrait. Perhaps because of her advanced age, she did not share the general consternation. In her view, the matter was perfectly straightforward: the boy in the picture was still Sootface, no matter what he was wearing, and no matter how extraordinary he was supposed to have become. The brisk spring breeze ruffled her hair, sparse and yellowed like the fur of an old mountain goat. Tears rolled out of her sagging eyes onto her black padded jacket.

‘How could you disappear like this, Sootface?’ she lamented. She was nearly toothless, her lips shrunken. ‘You were born into a life of such suffering! What did you do to deserve it? It’s a terrible sin, child, that you went to your death ahead of your elders! This should never have happened to you ...’ Shaking her head, she limped away, leaning on her peach-wood walking stick.

The memorial service for Qin Baoguo the Revolutionary Martyr began as soon as all the villagers had assembled, and one of the visiting officers launched into an impassioned speech about the young hero’s exploits on the Yunnan frontier. From his first day in boot camp, the officer said, Qin Baoguo had displayed outstanding ability to endure hardship and an unmatched eagerness to go to the front. When he got his wish, he distinguished himself as the bravest warrior in his company, with the most enemy casualties to his credit. After seizing the lead in a recent battle, he had stepped on a Vietnamese land-mine, which had blown off his legs. Ignoring his mortal wound as a dozen Vietnamese soldiers quickly closed in on him, he had shouted to his comrades behind him to drop immediately to the ground while he detonated his hand grenade, killing himself along with his attackers.

The male villagers listened with rapt attention, while the women sobbed and dabbed their eyes with their hands or their sleeves. Casting nervous, inquisitive glances at their elders, the children studied the portrait draped in black, recognized it as the person they called Sootface, and dimly realized he would never return.

The young men the recruiters had rejected stood in the back of the crowd with undisguised envy on their faces, craning their necks and staring intently so as not to miss a word. A local farm boy, who was by no means their better,

had been transformed overnight into a war hero. Their blood rushed hot as the officer's speech reached fever pitch, and some of them clenched their fists, although there was nothing to punch.

Finally, the village head led the villagers single file by Qin Baoguo's portrait, and they all bowed respectfully as they passed. But quite a few of them went through these ceremonial motions with a sense of bewilderment, feeling vaguely trapped by the abrupt turnaround, as if being sucked to the bottom of a spinning whirlpool.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, on the faraway Yunnan-Vietnam battle-front, a soldier from Beijing named Yang Mai was flat on his belly in a marsh with his comrades, waiting for the order to attack. They had lain there for several excruciating hours, enduring broiling heat and stinging insects. Yang lifted his head to look south, toward Vietnam. As he gazed at the soft outlines of the palm trees in the stark crimson sunset, he remembered his fallen comrade Qin Baoguo.

He had known Qin for little more than a month, but what stood out most in his memory, aside from his luminous eyes, was something he had said:

'Now I'll finally get to fight in a real battle!'

When the two of them were alone, Yang had also noticed the loneliness in Qin's gaze. Once, a soldier had asked him who else was in his family.

'Just a dog named Commander,' he had replied tersely after a long pause, shocking his listeners.

Yang spent the rest of the day uneasily trying to imagine what life would be like with only a dog for company, and wondering why this quiet farm boy was so thirsty for combat. Bookish urbanite that he was, Yang was terrified of death, but nowhere on Qin's face could he discern any such fear.

Sweltering on his belly in the marsh, Yang recalled Qin's final moments. As one of the soldiers following Qin, he had witnessed the entire stunning episode, watching as Qin stepped on the mine and then, in a matter of seconds, passed into oblivion along with the Vietnamese soldiers. Yang knew he would never forget the sight of the young man's face glowing with rapture as he pulled the pin on his grenade and waited for it to blow himself and his enemies up. Incredible as it may have seemed, Qin looked elated, as if fulfilling a lifelong dream.

Perhaps sensing what lay ahead, Qin had spent the entire afternoon of the day before his death talking to Yang, as he had talked to Commander the night before he left the village. After listening quietly to Qin's entire chilling tale of his lonely, deprived upbringing, Yang had the incredible sensation that he and this peasant soldier must have been destined to be friends. Qin concluded his tale with a plea: if Yang survived the war, would he adopt Commander? Yang shook his comrade's hand firmly to signal his assent.

Yang had enlisted as a student a couple of years before to escape his despair and isolation during the Cultural Revolution. At the age of nine, he had watched his parents—both persecuted artists—leap hand in hand to their deaths from the top of a building, leaving him to bear society's stigma all alone. For years he had buried himself in the world of books, before deciding to seek solace in the patriotic self-sacrifice of army life.

But Qin Baoguo's martyrdom changed everything. As Yang later wrote in his diary:

When Qin Baoguo pulled the pin on his grenade, I saw a look on his face that I had never seen anywhere before and I hope never to see again: one of the wretched of the earth had at last achieved release. He was beatific, like a monk finally reaching nirvana after a lifetime of quiet practice.

What drove Qin Baoguo into battle, and what destroyed him, was not simply war, poverty, or fate. He was silently gnawed away by something much more frightening: numbness of the soul, which lurks in his little village and in every nook and cranny of human existence.

Yang survived the brief war, although there were thousands of Chinese casualties, including many of his comrades. When he was demobilized, he went to Tianshui Village to keep his promise to pick up Qin's dog, Commander. After learning that the dog had died, he spent the afternoon contemplating the rural vista from the window where Qin and Commander had always sat. He seemed to sense Qin's spirit lingering in the grass, the trees, and the wispy white clouds in the sky.

\* \* \*

The local government gave Qin Baoguo's mother a payout in compensation for his death as a Revolutionary Martyr, and the village head—representing

the village committee—delivered the money to the county mental hospital to be used on Chuntao's behalf. When he returned from his errand, he reported that she had not shown any reaction at all to the news of her son's death, and had simply continued to smile and croon her tender refrain.

His listeners shook their heads and sighed.

'She's probably better off that way,' drawled Chunfen's father, an old man in his seventies.

The fame of Tianshui Village, home of Qin Baoguo, spread far and wide. The village head constantly received invitations to speak: at the commune that administered the village, at the county seat, and in neighbouring villages and schools. In public he always said that Qin Baoguo had been a good boy, beloved by all, although he never elaborated on the details. His fellow villagers could not go anywhere without hearing mention of their hometown's favourite son, as if nothing else about their village was worthy of note. They forgot the nickname Sootface as they got used to his real name, which they even came to utter boastfully, as if he were their own child.

But the passage of time and the social change of the ensuing years eroded the memory of Qin Baoguo. The old mud-brick house, ravaged by endless winters, lay abandoned in the far corner of the village like a camel buried in a sandstorm. At one point it was rumoured to be haunted, and someone even claimed to have seen Sootface on his *kang* by the window at dusk, holding his dog on his lap. Fear kept people away, and the unchecked weeds ran rampant.

Nonetheless, the last golden rays of the setting sun still shone every evening on the deserted court-yard, just as they did everywhere else. They cast a long shadow beside Chuntao's haystack, and lit the dusty statue of the goddess Guanyin inside the house with a rosy glow. She seemed to come to life for this moment each day, a lone survivor among the ruins.

Over the next couple of decades, the burgeoning Chinese market economy began to transform the ancestral ways of life in Tianshui Village, and the local people branched out from their sole dependence on tilling the fields. They raised cash crops to cater to the stylish urban consumer market: angora rabbits for their fur, and ducks for their down. Over the years, they amassed more money than their forebears had ever seen. Capitalist consumerism gradually gained hold, most conspicuously among the youth, who—like their peers in the city—sport fashionably tattered jeans and imitation Nike running shoes.



The girls started experimenting with cheap make-up, tweezing their eyebrows, and colouring their hair. Young people with relatives in the city even flaunted MP3 players and miraculous devices known as 'cell phones'.

The young people sometimes dared each other to enter the legendary haunted court-yard. They had heard its tale from their elders, although they dismissed it as merely a hair-raising story. But the villagers old enough to have known the mother and son were still plagued by occasional visions: peeking through the yawning gate, they saw an ageless madwoman with dishevelled hair, blissfully smiling and crooning on the haystack, and a wild-eyed, unwashed boy, sitting at his window with his black dog clasped tightly to his chest, the two of them forever staring spell-bound at their private vision in the sky.

Not long ago, the collapsed remains of the little house were finally bull-dozed. To further diversify the village economy, the village committee had decided to build a cement factory in its place.