

V I N T A G E

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eBooks



THE CRAZED

HA JIN

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# THE CRAZED

A NOVEL

HA JIN

VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL

Vintage Books

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New York

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*FOR LISHA*

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## International acclaim for Ha Jin's

### THE CRAZED

“Spare yet radiant. . . . Beautifully layered. . . . Deliciously ambiguous. . . . Jin works his magic over the reader.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“[Ha Jin] produces work of extraordinary moral and aesthetic lucidity. . . . [*The Crazyed*] displays some of the most vivid writing of his career. . . . Jin's attention to the minutiae of daily life has earned him comparisons to Balzac and Dickens, but in the darkness of his philosophical vision he is far closer to Camus.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Stunning. . . . Masterfully spare. . . . Compelling. . . . [Written] with Dickensian deftness. . . . *The Crazyed* gives new context to ancient conflicts, making the struggles between youth and age, innocence and experience, thought and action, not only purposeful, but profound.”

—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Immediate and spellbinding. . . . Years from now, I would not be surprised to find Jin's name listed among the winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature, such is his gift for finding the humanity that unites us all.”

—Kathryn Milam, *Winston-Salem Journal*

“Poignant. . . . Sharply rendered, stirring. . . . Summons a deep, affecting bitterness. . . . [Ha Jin has] a gift for conveying an earthy, immediate sense of Chinese life.”

—*The New York Times*

“Powerful. . . . Lean, taut, deeply felt . . . distinguished.”

—*San Jose Mercury News*

“Impressive. . . . Jin is a thoughtful stylist. . . . [His] writing is crisp and careful, at once simple and elegant. His descriptions of China are visceral but fast-paced.”

—*Rocky Mountain News*

“A blistering moral scrutiny of some of the effects of the Cultural Revolution. . . . Fierce, raw, but nuanced. . . . [Ha Jin] is a brave, resourceful technician. . . . *The Crazyed* carries the Chinese novel

English to an exceptionally high level.”

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—The Globe and Mail (Toronto)

“Another superb and deceptively simple performance.”

—*USA Today*

“Ha Jin is a skilled and clever storyteller. . . . He makes the reader feel the full weight of the Communist regime. . . . Jin skillfully re-creates the chaotic atmosphere [of] the Tiananmen Square uprising. . . . The violence is surreal in its suddenness and intensity.”

— *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“American literature is dominated by sprinters (as opposed to milers) and professors (as opposed to writers). But Ha Jin’s new novel proves him a laudable exception to this rule. [He] has perfected prose that is accomplished without being ostentatious. His characters are credible precisely because they are as benevolent as they are flawed and confused.” — *BookPage*

“Poignant and brave. . . . *The Crazy* unfolds gracefully, patiently, and with deceptive simplicity. . . . [It] delicately evokes the build-up of tensions that exploded in Tiananmen Square.” —Minneapolis Star Tribune

“Jin’s simple, elegant writing style works a kind of magic. . . . Reading [him] is like getting caught up in a well-told campfire story.”

—The Plain Dealer

“Dramatic and vivid. . . . The primacy of storytelling over style, in [Ha Jin’s] literary universe, obliges a prose as plain-spoken, humble and utilitarian as Shaker furniture. . . . [He] has given us much to ponder.”

— *Newsday*

“Intriguing. . . . Jin has always written with a sort of elegant, original simplicity. He is exotic but not esoteric, subtle but not obscure, intense and precise. . . . His touches of realism . . . are worth a dozen novels of another writer’s work.”

—*St. Petersburg Times*

“Another remarkable narrative from an author whose work amounts to an act of historical testimony. . . . [Ha Jin’s] fiction offers perhaps the most subtly articulated and damning depiction we have of the Orwellian existence endured by China’s billion-and-a-quarter souls.”

—The Toronto Star

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Everybody was surprised when Professor Yang suffered a stroke in the spring of 1989. He had always been in good health, and his colleagues used to envy his energy and productiveness—he had published more than any of them and had been a mainstay of the Literature Department, directing its M.A. program, editing a biannual journal, and teaching a full load. Now even the undergraduates were talking about his collapse, and some of them would have gone to the hospital if Secretary Peng had not announced that Mr. Yang, under intensive care, was in no condition to see visitors.

His stroke unsettled me, because I was engaged to his daughter, Meimei, and under his guidance had been studying for the Ph.D. entrance exams for the classical literature program at Beijing University. I hoped to enroll there so that I could join my fiancée in the capital, where we planned to build our nest. Mr. Yang's hospitalization disrupted my work, and for a whole week I hadn't sat down to my books, having to go see him every day. I was anxious—without thorough preparation I couldn't possibly do well in the exams.

Just now, Ying Peng, the Party secretary of our department, had called me to her office. On her desk an electric fan was whirring back and forth to blow out the odor of dichlorvos sprayed in the room to kill fleas. Her gray bangs were fluttering as she described to me my job, which was to attend my teacher in the afternoons from now on. Besides me, my fellow graduate student Banping Fang would look after Mr. Yang too; he was to take care of the mornings.

“Well, Jian Wan,” Ying Peng said to me with a tight smile, “you’re the only family Professor Yang has here. It’s time for you to help him. The hospital can’t provide him with nursing care during the day, so we have to send some people there.” She lifted her tall teacup and took a gulp. Like a man, she drank black tea and smoked cheap cigarettes.

“Do you think he’ll stay in the hospital for long?” I asked her.

“I’ve no idea.”

“How long should I look after him?”

“Till we find somebody to replace you.”

By “somebody” she meant a person the department might hire as a nurse’s aide. Although annoyed by the way she assigned me the job, I said nothing. To some extent I was glad for the assignment without which I would in any case go to the hospital every day.

After lunch, when my two roommates, Mantao and Huran, were napping, I went to the bicycle shed located between two long dormitory houses. Unlike the female students, who had recently all moved into the new dorm building inside the university, most of the male students still lived in the one-story houses near the front entrance to the campus. I pulled out my Phoenix bicycle and set off for Centre



Hospital.

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The hospital was in downtown Shanning, and it took me more than twenty minutes to get there. Though it wasn't summer yet, the air was sweltering, filled with the smell of burning fat and stewed radish. On the balconies of the apartment buildings along the street, lines of laundry were flapping languidly—sheets, blouses, pajamas, towels, tank tops, sweat suits. As I passed by a construction site, a loudspeaker mounted on a telephone pole was broadcasting a soccer game; the commentator sounded sleepy despite the intermittent surges of shouts from the fans. All the workers at the site were resting inside the building caged by bamboo scaffolding. The skeletonlike cranes and the drumlike mixers were motionless. Three shovels stood on a huge pile of sand, beyond which a large yellow board displayed the giant words in red paint: AIM HIGH, GO ALL OUT. I felt the back of my shirt dampen with sweat.

Mrs. Yang had gone to Tibet on a veterinary team for a year. Our department had written to her about her husband's stroke, but she wouldn't be able to come home immediately. Tibet was too far away. She'd have to switch buses and trains constantly—it would take her more than a week to return. In my letter to my fiancée, Meimei, who was in Beijing cramming for the exams for a medical graduate program, I described her father's condition and assured her that I would take good care of him and that she mustn't be worried too much. I told her not to rush back since there was no magical cure for a stroke.

To be honest, I felt obligated to attend my teacher. Even without my engagement to his daughter, I'd have done it willingly, just out of gratitude and respect. For almost two years he had taught me individually, discussing classical poetry and poetics with me almost every Saturday afternoon, selecting books for me to read, directing my master's thesis, and correcting my papers for publication. He was the best teacher I'd ever had, knowledgeable about the field of poetics and devoted to his students. Some of my fellow graduate students felt uncomfortable having him as their adviser. "He's too demanding," they would say. But I enjoyed working with him. I didn't even mind some of them calling me Mr. Yang, Jr.; in a way, I was his disciple.

Mr. Yang was sleeping as I stepped into the sickroom. He was shorn of the IV apparatus affixed to him in intensive care. The room was a makeshift place, quite large for one bed, but dusky and rather damp. Its square window looked south onto a mountain of anthracite in the backyard of the hospital. Beyond the coal pile, a pair of concrete smokestacks spewed whitish fumes and a few aspen crowns swayed indolently. The backyard suggested a factory—more exactly, a power plant; even the air here looked grayish. By contrast, the front yard resembled a garden or a park, planted with holly bushes, drooping willows, sycamores, and flowers, including roses, azaleas, geraniums, and fringed irises. There was even an oval pond, built of bricks and rocks, abounding in fantailed goldfish. White-robed doctors and nurses strolled through the flowers and trees as if they had nothing urgent to do.

Shabby as Mr. Yang's room was, having it was a rare privilege; few patients could have a sickroom solely to themselves. If my father, who was a carpenter on a tree farm in the Northeast, had a stroke, he would be lucky if they gave him a bed in a room shared by a dozen people. Actually Mr. Yang had lain unconscious in a place like that for three days before he was moved here. With infinite persuasion, Secretary Peng had succeeded in convincing the hospital officials that Mr. Yang was an eminent scholar (though he wasn't a full professor yet) whom our country planned to protect as a national

treasure, so they ought to give him a private room.

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Mr. Yang stirred a little and opened his mouth, which had become flabby since the stroke. He looked a few years older than the previous month; a network of wrinkles had grown into his face. His gray hair was unkempt and a bit shiny, revealing his whitish scalp. Eyes shut, he went on licking his upper lip and murmured something I couldn't quite hear.

Sitting on a large wicker chair close to the door, I was about to take out a book from my shoulder bag when Mr. Yang opened his eyes and looked around vacantly. I followed his gaze and noticed that the wallpaper had almost lost its original pink. His eyes, cloudy with a web of reddish veins, moved toward the center of the low ceiling, stopped for a moment at the lightbulb held by a frayed wire, then fell on the stack of Japanese vocabulary cards on my lap.

"Help me sit up, Jian," he said softly.

I went over, lifted his shoulders, and put behind him two pillows stuffed with fluffy cotton so that he could sit comfortably. "Do you feel better today?" I asked.

"No, I don't." He kept his head low, a tuft of hair standing up on his crown while a muscle in his right cheek twitched.

For a minute or so we sat silently. I wasn't sure if I should talk more; Dr. Wu had told us to keep the patient as peaceful as possible; more conversation might make him too excited. Although diagnosed as a cerebral thrombosis, his stroke seemed quite unusual, not accompanied by aphasia—he was still articulate and at times peculiarly voluble.

As I wondered what to do, he raised his head and broke the silence. "What have you been doing these days?" he asked. His tone indicated that he must have thought we were in his office discussing my work.

I answered, "I've been reviewing a Japanese textbook for the exam and—"

"To hell with that!" he snapped. I was too shocked to say anything more. He went on, "Have you read the Bible by any chance?" He looked at me expectantly.

"Yes, but not the unabridged Bible." Although puzzled by his question, I explained to him in the way I would report on a book I had just waded through. "Last year I read a condensed English version called *Stories from the Bible*, published by the Press of Foreign Language Education. I wish I could get hold of a genuine Bible, though." In fact, a number of graduate students in the English program had written to Christian associations in the United States requesting the Bible, and some American churches had mailed them boxes of books, but so far every copy had been confiscated by Chinese customs.

Mr. Yang said, "Then you know the story of Genesis, don't you?"

"Yes, but not the whole book."

“All right, in that case, let me tell you the story in its entirety.”

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After a pause, he began delivering his self-invented Genesis with the same eloquence he exhibited when delivering lectures. But unlike in the classroom, where his smiles and gestures often mesmerized the students, here he sat unable to lift his hand, and his listless head hung so low that his eyes must have seen nothing but the white quilt over his legs. There was a bubbling sound in his nose rendering his voice a little wheezy and tremulous. “When God created heaven and earth, all creatures were made equal. He did not intend to separate man from animals. All the creatures enjoyed not only the same kind of life but also the same span of life. They were equal in every way.”

*What kind of Genesis is this? I asked myself. He’s all confused, making fiction now.*

He spoke again. “Then why does man live longer than most animals? Why does he have a life so different from those of the other creatures? According to Genesis it’s because man was greedy and clever and appropriated many years of life from Monkey and Donkey.” He exhaled, his cheeks puffing out and his eyes narrowed. A fishtail of wrinkles spread from the end of his eye toward his temple. He went on, “One day God descended from heaven to inspect the world he had created. Monkey, Donkey and Man came out to greet God with gratitude and to show their obedience. God asked them whether they were satisfied with life on earth. They all replied that they were.

“ ‘Does anyone want something else?’ asked God.

“Hesitating for a moment, Monkey stepped forward and said, ‘Lord, the earth is the best place where I can live. You have blessed so many trees with fruit that I need nothing more. But why did you let me live to the age of forty? After I reach thirty, I will become old and cannot climb up trees to pluck fruit. So I will have to accept whatever the young monkeys give me, and sometimes I will have to eat the cores and peels they drop to the ground. It hurts me to think I’d have to feed on the leavings. Lord, I do not want such a long life. Please take ten years off my life span. I’d prefer a shorter but active existence.’ He stepped back, shaking fearfully. He knew it was a sin to be unsatisfied with what God had given him.

“ ‘Your wish is granted,’ God declared without any trace of anger. He then turned to Donkey, who had opened his mouth several times in silence. God asked him whether he too had something to say.

“Timidly Donkey moved a step forward and said, ‘Lord, I have the same problem. Your grace has enriched the land where so much grass grows that I can choose the most tender to eat. Although Man treats me unequally and forces me to work for him, I won’t complain because you gave him more brains and me more muscles. But a life span of forty years is too long for me. When I grow old and my legs are no longer sturdy and nimble, I will still have to carry heavy loads for Man and suffer his lashes. This will be too miserable for me. Please take ten years off my life too. I want a short existence without old age.’

“ ‘Your wish is granted.’ God was very generous with them that day and meant to gratify all their requests. Then he turned to Man, who seemed also to have something to say. God asked, ‘You too have a complaint? Tell me, Adam, what is on your mind.’

“Man was fearful because he had abused the animals and could be punished for that. Nevertheless, he came forward and began to speak. ‘Our Greatest Lord, I always enjoy everything you have created. You endowed me with a brain that enables me to outsmart the animals, who are all willing to obey and serve me. Contrary to Monkey and Donkey, a life span of forty years is too short for me. I would love to live longer. I want to spend more time with my wife, Eve, and my children. Even if I grow old with stiff limbs, I can still use my brain to manage my affairs. I can issue orders, teach lessons, deliver lectures, and write books. Please give their twenty years to me.’ Man bowed his head as he remembered that it was a sin to assume his superiority over the animals.”

“To Man’s amazement, God did not reprimand him and instead replied, ‘Your wish is also granted. Since you enjoy my creation so much, I’ll give you an additional ten years. Now, altogether you will have seventy years for your life. Spend your ripe old age happily with your grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Use your brain wisely.’ ”

Mr. Yang paused, looking pale and exhausted, sweat glistening on his nose and a vein in his neck pulsating. Then he said dolefully, “Donkey, Monkey, and Man were all satisfied that day. From then on, human beings can live to the age of seventy whereas monkeys and donkeys can live only thirty years.”

He fell silent, but was still wheezing. I was bewildered by his version of Genesis, which he had poured out as spontaneously as though he had learned it by heart. As I was wondering about its meaning, he interrupted my thoughts, saying, “You’re puzzled by my story of Genesis, aren’t you? Without waiting for my answer, he went on, “Let me tell you its moral.”

“All right,” I mumbled.

“Comrades,” he resumed lecturing, “entangled with Monkey’s and Donkey’s lives, Man’s life cannot but be alienated from itself. In his first twenty years, Man lives a monkey’s life. He capers around and climbs trees and walls, doing things at will. This period, his happiest, passes quickly. Then comes the next twenty years, in which Man lives a donkey’s life. He has to work hard every day so as to carry food and clothes to his family. Often he is exhausted like a donkey after a long, arduous trip, but he has to remain on his feet, because the load of his family sits on his back and he has to continue. After this period Man has reached forty, and human life begins. By now his body is worn out, his limbs are feeble and heavy, and he has to rely on his brain, which has begun deteriorating too, is no longer as quick and capable as he thought. Sometimes he wants to cry out in futility, but his brain stops him: ‘Don’t do that! You have to control yourself. You still have many years to go.’ Every day he presses more thoughts and emotions into his brain, in which a good deal of stuff is already stored, but none is allowed to get out so as to accommodate new stuff. Yet day after day he squeezes in something more, until one day his brain becomes too full and cannot but burst. It’s like a pressure cooker which is so full that the safety valve is blocked up, but the fire continues heating its bottom. As a consequence, the only way out is to explode.”

I was amazed by his wild interpretation—it was as though he’d been talking about his own life and about how he had gone out of his mind. He tilted his head back and rested his neck fully on the pillows; he was exhausted, but seemed relieved. Silence fell on the room.

Again I thought about his biblical story, whose source baffled me. Probably he had made it up himself, combining some folktale with his own fantasies. Why was he so eager to tell me it? Never had he shown any interest in the Bible before, though in secret it must have occupied his mind for a long time.

He began snoring softly; his head drooped aside. I went over, removed the pillows from behind him, and slid him carefully back into bed. He moaned vaguely.

Soon he sank back into sleep. I picked up my Japanese vocabulary cards and started to review them. Despite not enjoying Japanese, which sounded to me like ducks' quacking, I had to fill my brain with its words and grammatical rules for the Ph.D. candidacy, which required a test in a second foreign language. My Japanese was weak because I had studied it for only a year. English was my first foreign language, in which I was much more proficient.

A bent old nurse came in to check on Mr. Yang. She was a mousy woman with a moon face, and her bony hands suggested gigantic chicken feet. She introduced herself as Hong Jiang. Seeing that my teacher was sleeping, she didn't feel his pulse or take his temperature and blood pressure. I asked her if he could recuperate soon, and she said it would depend on whether a blood clot in his brain could be dissolved. If not, no treatment could really cure him. "But don't worry," she assured me, leaning down to pick up the spittoon by the bed-post. "Lots of people have recovered from a stroke. Some have lived more than twenty years afterward. Your teacher should be able to get well."

"I hope so," I sighed.

"For now, what's most important of all is to keep him calm. Don't disturb him. If he gets too excited, he may break a blood vessel in his brain. That'll cause a hemorrhage." Holding the white spittoon with one hand, she with her other hand piled together the soiled plates, bowls, and spoons on the bedside cabinet, then placed a pair of lacquered chopsticks on top of them. I stood up to give her a hand.

"Don't bother. I can manage this," she said, and unwittingly tilted the spittoon toward my belly. I stepped aside and barely dodged a blob of the yellowish liquid that fell to the wood floor.

"Whoops! Sorry." She grinned and lifted the stack of bowls and plates carefully. With a stoop she gingerly turned to the door. She was so skinny, she reminded me of a starved hen. I opened the door for her.

"Thank you. You're a good young man," she said, shuffling away down the hall. I took a mop from behind the door and wiped the blob off the floor.

Her explanation of Mr. Yang's stroke consoled me to a degree. I used to think a brain thrombus was caused by a ruptured blood vessel. Thank heaven, his case was merely a blockage.

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Once again I bicycled to the hospital to relieve Banping Fang. Thanks to the scalding sun, the asphalt street had turned doughy; automobile tires had left tracks on its cambered surface, from which bluish vapor rose, flickering like smoke. I felt drowsy, not having slept well the night before. I pedaled listlessly. If only I could've taken a nap at noon as I used to do every day.

On arrival, I heard somebody speaking loudly inside the sickroom. I stopped at the door to listen. It was Mr. Yang's voice, but I couldn't make out his words. He sounded strident, panting and shrieking in fits and starts by turns, as if he were arguing with someone. I opened the door and went in noiselessly. Seeing Mr. Yang, Banping nodded and put his forefinger to his lips, his other hand supporting our teacher's back. He looked like he had just helped him sit up.

“Kill them! Kill all those bastards!” Professor Yang shouted.

Banping's mouth moved close to his ear, and he whispered, “Calm down, please!”

Mr. Yang's head hung so low that his chin rested on his chest. “Why did you interrupt me?” he asked with his eyes still closed. “Hear me out, will you? When I'm finished you can raise questions. He sounded as if he were teaching a class. But whom had he yelled at just now? And who were the people he wanted to wipe out? Why did he hate them so much?”

Banping smiled at me with some embarrassment and shook his head. I sensed the meaning of his smile, which showed sympathy for me probably because of my relationship with the Yangs. He gestured me to sit down on the wicker chair and then turned to make our teacher lean back against the headboard.

The moment I sat down, Professor Yang broke into speech. “All the time he has been thinking how to end everything, to be done with his clerical work, done with his senile, exacting parents, done with his nagging wife and spoiled children, done with his mistress Chilla, who is no longer a ‘little swallow’ with a slender waist but is obsessed with how to lose weight and reduce the size of his massive backside, done with the endless worry and misery of everyday life, done with the nightmare in broad daylight—in short, to terminate himself so that he can quit this world.”

I was shocked. Banping smiled again and seemed to relish the surprise on my face. Mr. Yang continued, “But he lives in a room without a door or a window and without any furniture inside. Confined in such a cell, he faces the insurmountable difficulty of how to end his life. On the rubber floor spreads a thick pallet, beside which sits an incomplete dinner set. The walls are covered with green rubber too. He cannot smash his head on any spot in this room. He wears a leather belt, which he sometimes takes off, thinking how to garrote himself with it. Some people he knew committed suicide in that way twenty years ago, because they couldn't endure the torture inflicted by the revolutionary masses anymore. They looped a belt around their necks, secured its loose end to a hook or a nail on a window ledge, then forcefully they sat down on the floor. But in this room there's not a single fixed

object, so his belt cannot serve that purpose. Sometimes he lets it lie across his lap and observes absentmindedly. The belt looks like a dead snake in the greenish light. What's worse, he cannot figure out where the room is, whether it's in a city or in the countryside, and whether it's in a house or underground. In such a condition he is preserved to live."

I couldn't tell where he had gotten this episode. When did it happen? And where? Was it from a novel, or was it his own fantasy? Since the man's mistress had a rather Westernized name, Chilla, the story might be set in a city. That was all I could guess. Professor Yang was so well read that I could never surmise the full extent of his knowledge of literature. Maybe he had made up the whole thing himself; otherwise he couldn't have poured it out with such abandon.

He interrupted my thoughts, speaking again. "All the time he imagines how to stop this kind of meaningless existence. Mark this, 'all the time.' He can no longer tell time because there's no distinction between day and night in this room. He has noticed some kind of light shimmering overhead, but cannot locate its source. He used to believe that if he could find the source, he could probably get out of his predicament by unscrewing the lightbulb and poking his finger into the socket. But by now he has given up that notion, having realized that even if he identified the source, the light might not be electric at all. He's thus doomed to live on, caged in an indestructible cocoon like a worm." Mr. Yang paused for breath, then resumed: "The only hard objects in the room are the plastic dinner set—a bowl, a dish, a spoon, and a knife. There's no fork. He's deprived of the privilege of piercing his windpipe with a fork. Time and again he picks up the knife, which is toothless and brittle. Stropping it on his forefinger, he grunts, 'Damn it, I can't even cut my penis with this ! ' "

Banping chuckled, but stopped right away, his buckteeth on his lower lip. He straightened up and put his notebook and fountain pen into his breast pocket.

I didn't find anything funny in Mr. Yang's story, which actually saddened me. My throat was constricting as I avoided looking at Banping.

On leaving, he whispered almost in my ear, "Come over for dinner tonight, will you? We'll make dumplings. Weiya's coming too."

I nodded to agree. He and I were classmates and friends of sorts, and his one-room home in a dormitory house near the campus was a place where we often got together. Weiya Su was the other graduate student who had Professor Yang as her adviser. This year our teacher directed only the three of us in our graduate work, though he was on almost every master's thesis committee in the department.

In his delirium Mr. Yang continued making noise. He was unusually agitated today. His head jerked as he went on groaning and gnashing his gums. In addition, the rhythm of his respiration changed drastically—one moment he breathed evenly, and another moment he panted as though running a race. What's more, he seemed frightened by something or somebody, whining piteously every now and again. He mouthed some unintelligible words, which sounded like complaints or curses. His right hand kept rubbing his thigh, and his motion made the bed shake a little.

He might hurt his brain if he continued like this, so I decided to put him into bed, hoping he could

fall asleep after he lay down. I went over and inserted my left arm under his legs, wrapped my right arm around his thick waist, and slowly moved him down. He didn't seem to feel the downward movement and never stopped muttering and squirming.

It took me about five minutes to slide him back into bed. Sitting on the chair again, with my right leg over its arm, I began to review Japanese vocabulary. Hard as I tried, I couldn't concentrate on the flash cards, distracted by Mr. Yang, who seemed to be quarreling with someone now. He sounded bellicose and from time to time gritted his teeth, which I knew indicated he was holding back his temper.

Despite my effort to focus on my work, I couldn't help but observe his sweat-streaked face. Half an hour later, out of the blue, he burst into song. His singing baffled me, because to my mind he was born to teach seminars and deliver lectures. Who could've expected that Professor Yang would be singing this particular nursery rhyme?

*To wear a flower  
You pick a big red one,  
To ride a horse  
You mount a sturdy steed,  
To sing a song  
You praise great deeds,  
To obey orders  
You listen to the Party.*

The song jolted me, and I felt the hair on the back of my head bristling. I hadn't heard it for a long time. In spite of his gusto, Mr. Yang was no singer and sounded more like he was crowing.

No sooner had he finished singing than he added a shrill operatic chant, imitating drums, gongs, and cymbals: "Dong—chang, dong—chang, dong—dong—chang, chang—chang—chang, dong—dong—chang . . ." He then let out a resounding belch, and his stomach growled as he clacked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. He seemed to be enacting a snatch from a Beijing opera, which had no bearing on the nursery rhyme.

I was actually more disturbed than baffled, as I remembered singing the rhyme with other children in the kindergarten over twenty years before. At that time it had been commonplace for us to chant such a song in raptures, but Mr. Yang's singing now was so anachronistic and so out of context that it sounded ludicrous. Luckily for him, nobody but I had heard it.

Then, as if mocking my discomfort, he hit on another song. Eyes ablaze, he boomed:

*The Proletarian Cultural Revolution  
Is good, is good, is good, is good!  
Workers are masters again.  
Landowners, rich peasants,  
Reactionaries, evildoers, rightists  
Have no place to hide—*



He bellowed the whole thing out as if he were under some kind of spell. His ferocious voice seemed to belong to someone else. I couldn't imagine that an equable scholar like him would have anything to do with such a silly song. His singing made my scalp itch as I remembered hearing Red Guards chant it in my hometown. By so doing, those big boys and girls had contributed their little share to the revolution; but that had been two decades before, and now the song was no more than an embarrassing joke.

How had Mr. Yang learned this piece? I had been told that when the Cultural Revolution broke out he was turned into a Demon-Monster, a target of the struggle, who would not have been entitled to sing such a progressive song together with the masses. Perhaps he had learned it on the sly, or he had heard others chant it so many times that it stuck in his mind.

Eyes shut, he resumed crooning the tune of the song, though its words were now disjointed and garbled. His singing sickened me. I put the flash cards on top of my bag that leaned against the leg of the chair, wondering how to stop him. He gave me the creeps. I looked at my watch—it was just past two o'clock. This was going to be a long afternoon.

“My heart is still good, pure and warm!” declared Mr. Yang. Without a pause he started another song. This time he not only was caroling but also seemed to be dancing around. His body wriggled a little as he mimicked a feminine voice:

*There's a golden sun in Beijing.  
It brightens whatever it shines upon.  
Ah, the light does not come  
From the sky but from  
Our Great Leader Chairman Mao!*

While singing he flexed his toes, heaved his belly a little, and twisted his lips into a puerile smile. The instant he was done, he cried cheerfully, “See, I can sing it as well as any one of you. I can dance to it too. Let me show you.”

I went to him and placed my palm on his forehead, which was sweaty and burning hot. I patted his shoulder, but he turned his head aside and shouted ecstatically, “Don't get in my way! Look, I can dance to it!” His right leg kicked, though he couldn't raise it.

Should I wake him up? Though ridiculous, he seemed happy, grinning like a half-wit and licking his parched lips to wipe away the foam.

I decided to let him enjoy his hallucination for a while and returned to the wicker chair. By now he had calmed down a little, but he went on humming the tune of the song through his pink swollen nose. I remembered that about twenty years ago some kids, who were Small Red Guards and five or six years older than myself, had often performed the Loyalty Dance to this very song at restaurants, bus stops, inns, department stores, and the train station in my hometown in the Northeast. Chanting the words, they capered and sidled about, waving their hands above their heads; they kicked their heels

swung their legs, and bent their waists. Too young to participate, I watched them enviously. In hindsight they looked like crazed frogs wearing red armbands; yet at that time some of the kids were so sincere that, if asked, they would have sacrificed their lives for Chairman Mao without second thoughts. But Mr. Yang was a reactionary intellectual then and must have been forbidden to join the revolutionary masses in any celebration and propaganda activities. Could he really know such a dance? I didn't think so.

"Ah, who can tell I always have a loyal heart!" he said and smacked his lips. "Come, just watch me." He started the tune again, his legs kicking slowly and his arms jerking on the crumpled sheet. Not only the bed but also the floor, whose boards buckled in places, creaked now. He wiggled more and more rhythmically while a radiant smile broke on his face. He seemed beside himself with joy.

"Yes, I can raise my legs higher than that, no problem," he said with a wide grin. "I always love Chairman Mao. For him I dare to climb a mountain of swords and walk through a sea of fire. Why don't you believe me? Why?" His head rocked from side to side.

I was puzzled by his assertion of loyalty to the Great Leader. When he was in his right mind, Mr. Yang had never expressed any deep feelings for Chairman Mao in front of me. Did he really love him? Was this a subconscious emotion that had at last surfaced once his mind failed? Chairman Mao had died twelve years ago; why was Mr. Yang still obsessed with him? Did he really worship him in his heart?

Whatever the truth was, I thought I'd better stop him from hallucinating. He might damage his brain. I shouted, "Hey, Professor Yang, wake up. We're in the hospital now."

He made no response and kept singing and "dancing." I went over, held his wrists, and clapped his hands a couple of times, hoping this might wake him. But it didn't. He paused, then yelled, "Long live the Communist Party! Down with warlords! Long live the New China!" My mind boggled and I let go of his hands. He must have been imagining himself as a revolutionary martyr being dragged to an execution ground by the police like a hero in a propaganda movie. He was hopelessly crazy.

I hurried out, heading downstairs to the nurses' station. I knew Dr. Wu often prescribed sedative or hypnotic drugs for Mr. Yang.

I expected to find Hong Jiang in the office, but the small woman wasn't there. A nurse in her mid-twenties sat on a broad windowsill, her unbuttoned robe revealing her sea-green dress. Her hands were busy embroidering a butterfly on a white tablecloth. On her right, toward the corner and against the baseboard, stood a line of scarlet thermoses containing boiled water, their mouths emitting tiny hisses. She recognized me but didn't budge, as if I were one of the nurse's aides hired to do cleaning. Her large eyes were fixed on the needle-work in her long, rosy fingers; the butterfly, as large as a palm, was still missing a wing. Ignoring her slight, I walked up to her and asked if she was in charge of Mr. Yang's medication.

"Uh-huh," she said without lifting her eyelids. Overhead a fluorescent tube was blinking with a faint ping-ping-ping sound.

“My teacher has gone berserk today,” I told her. “He’s been singing and raving like a madman. Can you sedate him?”

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She only half listened and didn’t respond, so I repeated my request. After a few more stitches, she placed the tablecloth on the sill. She yawned but immediately clapped her narrow hand on her mouth. “I’m so tired,” she said, smiling feebly. “You know what? We tried to give him a sedative pill this morning. I mean your classmate Comrade Fang and I tried, but your teacher thought we were going to poison him and yelled for all he was worth. We couldn’t force him to take the medicine, you know. That would’ve agitated him more.”

“Can you give him another tablet now?” I asked.

“Well, I have no right to give him anything.”

“But Dr. Wu often prescribes drugs for him, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, but he’s not here.”

“Please help me calm him down, I beg you. I’m afraid he’ll hurt his brain if he goes on like this.”

“Well, maybe we can put a pill into his porridge at dinner.”

She squinted her left eye, then winked at me, as if asking, Isn’t this a smart idea?

“But he’s running wild now,” I said. “Dinner’s still three hours away. Can’t you give him an injection or something? Help him, please!”

“You’re a pretty good student,” she said dryly. She came down from the windowsill and went over to the long desk, on which sat a few shiny metal cases and a row of amber bottles containing drugs, all with glass stoppers in their mouths. She picked up the phone and called the doctor.

I felt relieved to see her jotting down a prescription. She hung up, selected two ampules of medicine, and wrapped up an injection kit. Together we headed out. On our way upstairs, she told me that her name was Mali Chen and that she had just graduated from a nursing school in Shanghai. A metropolitan girl, I thought, no wonder she looks frail and anemic.

Opening the door of the sickroom, I was surprised to see Mr. Yang sitting on the bed with one foot tucked under him. Strands of gray hair stuck out above his temples, making his face appear broader. How could he sit up by himself? Had somebody slipped in when I was away? Impossible. He must have done this on his own.

Mr. Yang was still humming something that I couldn’t make out at first. Then lifting his voice, he chanted in gasps, “How powerful the tall cranes are! They can pick up tons of steel easily . . .”

I realized he was impersonating the retired stevedore in an aria from the revolutionary opera *The Red Harbor*, praising the brawn of some newly installed cranes, but his voice was too smooth and too throaty to express the proletarian mettle. I hadn’t known he could sing Beijing opera. He had seldom gone

the theater and must have learned the snatch from the radio.

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“See, the pill is still here,” Nurse Chen said to me and pointed to a small cup on the bedside cabinet. It contained a large yellowish tablet, probably barbiturate.

While she was preparing the injection, I removed the quilt from Mr. Yang’s legs and got hold of the string of his pajamas, which was a long shoelace. He stopped short. Before I could untie his pants, he opened his eyes—only to see the syringe spurting a white thread of liquid. His face turned horribly stricken, though Nurse Chen forced a smile and said enticingly, “Well, Professor Yang, it’s time to have some—”

“Help! Help! Mur-der! They want to poison me!” he screamed, his eyes glinting. He kicked his right leg but was unable to raise his arms. He was gasping, agape like a spent fish.

The nurse looked scared, her eyebrows pinched together. She turned to me and asked, “Do you think we can still make him take the needle?”

I didn’t answer. Mr. Yang kept howling, “Save me! They’re assassinating me!”

“Stop this, please!” I begged him in an undertone.

“Help me!”

“You’re making a spectacle of yourself.”

“Don’t kill me!”

Nurse Chen took apart the syringe, dropped the needle back into the oval metal case, emptied the medicine into the spittoon, and wrapped everything up. “I think we’d better leave him alone,” she said with a toss of her head. “Let him cool off by himself. Every time we try to put him to sleep, we only upset him more.”

I said nothing. Anger was surging in my chest, but I checked my impulse to yell at him.

“Well now, I must be going,” she continued. “Don’t disturb him. It’ll take a while for this one to become himself again.” She put the injection kit under her arm and said to me casually, “Bye-bye now.” She left, her heels clicking away toward the stairwell.

Professor Yang started sobbing; tears leaked out of his closed lids, trickling down his cheeks and stubbly chin. He whimpered something incoherently. I listened for a moment and felt he seemed to be begging mercy from someone, who might be an imagined murderer. He went on wagging his head and grunting like a piglet; his words had turned to gibberish.

This mustn’t continue. I decided to give him the sedative pill no matter how hard he resisted. With a spoon I set about grinding the tablet in the porcelain cup until it became powder. On the cabinet stood an opened bottle of orangeade. I poured some of it into the cup and stirred the concoction for a minute, then sat down beside him. “Mr. Yang, drink this please,” I pleaded and raised the cup to his lips.

lips.

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He opened his eyes and saw the juice. He said, "You want to poison me, I know. I refuse to take it."

"Come on, it's just orangeade. See, I also drink some myself." I lifted the spoon to my mouth and made a gurgling sound as a parent would do to convince a child. "Ah, it's so delicious. Please try just a small cup."

He said, "You slipped ratsbane into it, didn't you? I know your dark fat heart."

"No, you're wrong. Please have some!"

"I won't."

Hesitantly I used the spoon to pry his mouth open, but his teeth were clenched, and the steel scraped them noisily. I was afraid this might hurt his gums, so I stopped, wondering what to do. He jabbed his elbow at the cup in my hand, and a splash of the drink fell on the sheet and left a yellow stain. His mouth was sealed up like a startled clam.

I wouldn't give up and raised half a spoonful of the orangeade to his lips again, begging him. "Please try this. It will do you good. I just want to feed you and won't hurt you."

"No, I won't. You cannot cajole me anymore."

"Please, just a sip."

"No, that will be lethal."

Out of patience, I shouted, "Look at me! You don't recognize me? Do I look like a murderer? I'm Jian, your future son-in-law." I said the last word diffidently, but thrust my face in front of him. His eyes opened a crack, then fully.

"Oh," he muttered, "I didn't know I had a son."

"This is Jian Wan, remember me?"

"I didn't know it was you. What is it that you want?"

"I'd like to feed you. Here's a small cup of orangeade, please open your mouth."

Miraculously, he obeyed me like a well-behaved child. I carefully put the spoon into his mouth and turned it over. Slowly he swallowed the juice, his Adam's apple bobbing.

"I like the tangy flavor. It tastes excellent," he said.

"Sure it does," I agreed.

"What did you put in it?"

“Nothing.”

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With less than ten spoonfuls I emptied the cup. I told him, “Don’t be afraid. I’m here with you and I won’t let anyone hurt you. Now you should have some sleep.”

Shamefacedly he watched me as I tried to move his half-paralyzed body; he even tried to shift his hips a little to facilitate my effort. Still, I had to exert myself hard. When I had finally put him back into bed, I was huffing and puffing.

A few minutes later he went to sleep.

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I didn't expect that Banping and his wife, Anling, would make flounder dumplings. This was the first time I had eaten this dish, which my host told me was a delicacy in some coastal areas for celebrating spring. The stuffing was juicy and toothsome, tasting like prawn. It made me miss the fat catfish, long pike, and stout carp from the lower reaches of the Songhua River in the Northeast, where my parents lived.

While we were eating, Banping bragged about his cookery. He had prepared the filling, seasoned with leeks and crushed sesame seeds. He even described to us how to debone the large flounder, how to peel its skin, and how to get rid of its blood so as to reduce the fishy taste, but Anling accused him of "cooking only with his mouth."

"Come on, don't be so mean," Banping said to her. "Didn't I work the whole afternoon?"

"You help only when we have good stuff to cook."

"That's because I'm like a chef."

"So I'm just a kitchen maid who only chops vegetables and does dishes in this home?"

"Uh-oh," I stepped in, "you're both chefs, of the first rank, all right?"

We all laughed.

"Don't you have other music? This is too loud," Weiya said to Banping, referring to the Beethoven that his cassette recorder was playing. I too felt uncomfortable; the symphony was so overpowering it seemed to be urging us to compete in wolfing down the food. Banping worshiped Beethoven and regarded Romain Roland's *Jean-Christophe* as his bible. Inspired by the biographical novel, he often talked about the joy of life. To my thinking he was too optimistic.

He got up and put a tape of popular songs into the player. Things eased up immediately.

I noticed that under the washstand, welded of iron bars, sat a new electric stove, at least 1,500 watts strong, which was strictly prohibited in the dorms because of the drain on the electricity. In fact, a school official, Vice Principal Huang, was in charge of catching users of electric stoves, teapots, immersion heaters, and cookers. He would personally spot-check dormitory houses and buildings, especially in the late afternoons.

"Boy, you want to appear on the honor roll again," I said to Banping, alluding to the list of "electricity thieves" often posted on the bulletin board at the front entrance to campus.

"I told him to be more careful," Anling picked up.

“As long as they don’t fine me, I won’t mind,” Banping said, exhaling smoke.

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“My roommate was caught last Friday,” put in Weiya.

“Was she fined?” I asked.

“No, she’s a first-time offender.”

In reality, Banping was afraid of being caught. On the back of his right foot was a burn scar in the shape of a tangerine segment, caused by a splash of boiling broth. One afternoon the previous fall, he was stewing chicken and taros on an electric stove, suddenly somebody had pounded on the door. “Open it!” came Vice Principal Huang’s raucous voice. Hurriedly Banping hid away the stove under his bed, pushed the window open, then went to answer the door. The leader stepped in, sniffing the meaty air. At the sight of the wire and plug on the floor, he bent down and pulled the whole thing out from under the bed. The pot overturned. “Ouch!” Banping yelled, hopping on one leg; some broth had splattered on his foot. Chunks of chicken and taros were scattered on the concrete floor, and the room at once became steamy. Though the “electricity thief” was in pain, the vice principal dressed him down and confiscated his stove. Later Secretary Peng interceded for Banping with Huang’s official saying his scalded foot was already an indelible lesson to him; otherwise, by rule, he’d have been fined fifty yuan.

Weiya sat opposite me at the square table and looked pensive. Throughout dinner she seldom smiled; her mouth closed without showing her eyeteeth as she would do when she was happy. Her luxuriant hair, held by two orange barrettes, was slightly tousled. Her egg-shaped face had lost its usual pink, though she was wearing a cherry-red shirt that should have given her cheeks more color. I had never seen her eyes so lazy. She had a high nose and almond-shaped eyes, which usually were vivid and bright but today were bleary with sadness. Even her voice sounded cheerless and rather whispery. Our teacher’s stroke must have affected her deeply. Although already thirty-one, she looked to be in her early twenties; some people in the Literature Department often referred to her as an only maid; I often wondered why she didn’t have a boyfriend and why she never seemed in a hurry to look for one. With her looks and intelligence, she should have had no difficulty in finding a suitable man.

Upset as we all were, we felt lucky in a way, because we were going to graduate soon; if not, with Mr. Yang hospitalized, the three of us would have been transferred into other professors’ hands as “foster children.” We also talked about the prognosis in Mr. Yang’s case. Banping said that normally it would take a whole year for a patient with cerebral thrombosis to convalesce, that most stroke victims couldn’t recover completely, and that some had to move around with the aid of a crutch for the rest of their lives.

After we were done with the dumplings and cleared the table, Banping brewed a pot of jasmine tea. We started talking about the possible causes of Mr. Yang’s stroke. We believed that apart from his pathological condition, something else might have set off his collapse. We all offered our guesses. Weiya suggested something I hadn’t thought of before. She told us that Secretary Peng had pestered Mr. Yang continually ever since he had returned from Canada. “I’ve heard that the school demands he pay the money back,” she said rather mysteriously.



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