

ONE

My village got its name in a very special way, through a dream. There is a spot near the stream that flows past the vegetable field where, if you stand at the right time of day and in the exact spot, you can see, in the mountain face, a depression shaped like a tiger's paw.

A priest two hundred years ago dreamed of a white tiger. A curious tiger. If it had wanted to, it could have swallowed us, the houses, the brick fence around the village, the crops, the fields, everything. Instead it paced its emperor feet through our lanes, its long striped tail swaying gently and carefully so as not to hit anything, and peeped in the doors which the villagers didn't have time to close. The tiger soon came to the house of the priest and entered. This was the priest who was dreaming the very dream. The tiger came and left in peace. It walked to an open space in the village and disappeared into the mist of the mountains. A visit of blessings, this trail of its generous footprints. In its honor, the creature that sought us from the mountains, that we may never forget the source of the spring, we took on the name of the tiger. The biggest village in the south became Da Hu, the middle-sized one in the north, Zhong Hu, and my village, at the foot of the mountains, the smallest one, Xiao Hu.

Not many things are named after dreams, but everybody has a name. It is only natural and only necessary. The Nan

ISBN 978-981-08-7754-5

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First published in 1994 by EPB Publishers.

Second edition published in 2011 under the imprint Ethos Books by

Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd

65 Ubi Crescent

#06-04 Hola Centre

Singapore 408559

www.ethosbooks.com.sg

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Produced by Pagesetters Services Pte Ltd

Printed and bound in Singapore

family across the village compound has two cows and they became “Small Cow” and “Big Cow.” We only have one cow and she is always Moo-cow. Even families with one child have a name for the child to distinguish their child from the others. So when they call out their names near dusk, the air will part, recognizing that name, and it reaches out to that child, claiming, “You’re mine.” Even gods have names, the “Old Man in the Sky,” the “Earth God,” the “Goddess of Mercy”—Kuan-yin. How beautiful it is to have a name that means something, not just anything, but something.

My friend Xiao Hua, her name means “Little Flower.” Her parents must have known what she’d become when they named her. They must have had secret dreams for her when they held her in their careful arms and named her after beauty. With a name like that, you cannot go wrong. Her skin is pale as water-lily, her cheeks round as oranges, the color of dusk, as if evening sprinkled on her face.

I turn my face towards the sky. In the sugarcane field, sharp leaves crisscross one another, cutting into the sky, so it’s hard to see the blue. Especially if you’re smaller than the sugarcane, and you disappear as if you aren’t there.

“Xiao Hua, if you were to name me, what would you call me?” I ask my friend with the lustrous eyes.

She turns from the sky, her cheeks dimple. She hugs her knees to her chest. Or is she shrugging? She thinks. Very hard. It is difficult to find a name for me. Where can you begin?

“I was born under a starry night,” I say, to help her.

“How do you know that?” she asks.

“Almost every night in the first month of the year is bright and starry.”

Amazing. This girl catches the light of the sun in her eyes, even as the light leaves everything else.

“Yes, yes. You were born under a starry night. When the Old Man in the Sky had swept everything away and

painted new stars. Yes, yes. Shouldn’t you be named Little Star?”

I consider.

“Or what about Bright Star?”

I wonder.

“Night Star? Star Bell. Clear Star.”

Beautiful Star. Flowing Star. Winter Star. Moon Star. All these names we throw out and about, for one to land on me.

“Shi Ying! Shi Ying! Rotten child, where are you?”

The words fly away. I cover my mouth. Xiao Hua becomes stiff.

“Shi Ying!”

I stand up, whisper goodbye to Xiao Hua who squeezes my hand, and walk out of the sugarcane that hides me. As my feet touch the sandy ground near the gate of the village, Mother shouts, “Where did you go? Why must I call you so many times? Are you deaf?”

I pretend I’m still too far away to say anything, and I try to hurry as slowly as I can. She does not wait for me to answer, I’m glad, and says, “Next time I’m not going to call you so many times. Then you don’t have to come back for dinner.” She frowns at my effort. “Quickly! Father has to go out to sea.” She turns back to the house, too impatient to wait for me. “This girl, don’t know what she thinks about every day, must knock her head a few times...”

I leave Xiao Hua behind, finally, but her thoughts run after me, wordless, enfolding me like mist.

And the sugarcane echoes, “Poor Shi Ying, the lost child.”

After dinner, Father and the fishermen in the village meet by the village gate, stretching themselves in the coming moonlight. By the doorway of the house, I can only see shapes and angles, a foot or two, faces in shadows, then they

leave for the sea, to cast nets deep, near the mountains, and to sleep in the boats and wait for dawn.

I lie on the bed, boards creaking if I move too much, and stare at the moonlight falling through the doorway of the living room. A breeze glides through and smooths the dust. If the wind picks up, it'll wrap sand around houses. A wind that casts shapes about, carves buildings out of sand. But only when the wind is big and artful.

When we are asleep, our soul leaves our bodies and roams the earth and sky. It becomes part of the wind, invisible, even to spirits and ghosts. It seems scary, this sleep, sometimes a little welcoming, because I get to go somewhere else, become someone else. It's real, I know it, because I cry and laugh--quietly, always quietly. And that makes it real, doesn't it, as real as this here. Maybe one day, I will disappear from this here and appear in another, as someone else, a bird, a spirit? Then I am just a guest here, maybe all of us are, to stay one day, maybe longer. And when a soul gets trapped in a world, caught in the worlds of other souls, the only way to leave is to die. Just a pretence though, just to escape to somewhere else. Some people may not succeed and their soul is torn apart between going and staying, and they become crazy. Others who succeed, they lie contentedly with a smile.

TWO

Xiao Hu is a lucky village. Da Hu in the south and Zhong Hu north both lie like open hands in the land. They have no mountains close enough to lean against. Xiao Hu sits right at the foot of the Tiger Paw mountains, protected from harsh winds and storms. Beyond the village is the wide sea, with its own misty mountains. "The sea is our lives, the mountains our backs," Grandmother says. With the New Year coming, she says it more often, to remind us how lucky we are.

Yi Fen, who lives opposite me, wants to play some games before we start doing chores for the New Year, so she gathers most of the children at the open ground near Xiao Ling's house to play catch. When we are both out and waiting for the next game, Yi Fen nudges me and says, "Let's compare heights, see how much everyone has grown!"

I frown at her, but before I can say anything, she calls everyone together. Yi Fen likes to do compare heights because everyone in her family is tall. The only person she doesn't compare heights with is Xiao Ling who is the oldest girl in the village, at sixteen, and taller than any of us. I am not too enthusiastic about it. Yi Fen had a game once, where everyone had to guess what somebody else's name meant. Mi Mi was the easiest, meaning "honey sweetness." Someone said "secret." That's not too bad. When it came to me, nobody

had any trouble guessing what my name means, because it is a tag, like a sign in the market that says, "For sale," not a real name. So I don't like Yi Fen's suggestions much. This time, when Yi Fen compares heights with me, she says, "It's very interesting to compare heights with you."

I scowl. She is taller than me by half a hand. "Why?"

"Because," she turns around and grins, "we never really know how tall you'd grow. There isn't anyone in your real family to compare you to, see. Like me, I'll be at least as tall as my mother."

Ah Kang, one of the youngest and one of the nosiest, stares at me and asks, "You don't even know when you were born. Does that mean you never grow up?"

"Ha, ha," Bo Wen laughs. "That's right!"

I scowl more. "I was born sometime around the New Year. I know that! So of course I grow up!"

"Of course," someone says. Xiao Ling is smiling, leaning against the wall of her house. "We get older every time New Year comes, no matter when our birthdays."

Bo Wen shrugs. I smile triumphantly at him and glance at Xiao Ling shyly. She is still smiling, with her eyes, and I smile back with mine. Secretly, with the help of Xiao Ling, though she doesn't know, I am born. New Year's day becomes my permanent marking point, an auspicious date to make up for guessing. What can be better, such a significant date?

Only older people get special things to eat on their birthdays. They have white noodles with an egg, noodles that stretch from their mouths to the ground if they'll let them, blessing long life. For me, for the New Year, the celebration starts the day before, on the Eve, at the end of the old, welcoming the beginning of the new. Every family member comes to the reunion dinner on New Year's Eve. I get to eat nice-smelling white rice, instead of the old sweet potato porridge with bits of soggy rice, and there is also pork and vegetables, not the salted kind, but fresh fried ones. And

more! Maybe, on New Year's Day, I'll get some new clothes and set off firecrackers.

The week before New Year, Mother and Grandmother and I wash everything in the house, all the bowls, pots, spoons, knives, pails, earthen jugs, and what I hate most, the ugly square wooden things in the corner of the bedrooms. It's my job anyway, to empty the containers into pails once every two days or so and carry the slops to the fertilizer pit a little ways from the oat field, except when New Year rolls around, I not only have to empty the stinks, I have to drag them outside and douse them with water and try to get them clean. It's actually impossible. Time after time, I watch the water run off into the fields, into the poor plants, and it's never entirely clear. A certain brownness has soaked its way into the wood, and the smell stays in my clothes even after I wash them.

The other children are working too. When I am hanging up wet clothes on the lines, I see little Ah Kang lugging a pail across the compound, water sloshing all over his legs, his trousers becoming a second skin. He disappears behind his house and soon comes out again with an empty pail. Yi Fen sits on her doorstep darning some trousers, all five fingers in one hand holding the needle and stretching the thread over her head. She has a pile of clothing beside her.

"Shi Ying!" Yi Fen calls when she looks up to rest her eyes. She beckons me. I leave the clothes and run up.

"We are going to Da Hu for the reunion dinner on New Year's Eve. My uncle invited us. Isn't that exciting?" Yi Fen says. I glance down at the dark trousers on her lap, the stitches big and loose, lined up side by side like cut sugarcane. She continues, "We are staying overnight too, till New Year's Day. I think they might even have big firecrackers. Isn't that exciting?"

I nod, and the inevitable question comes. "What are you going to do for reunion dinner?" she asks.

"What do you mean?" I say, irritated. "We do what we

do every year. Have reunion dinner at the house.”

Yi Fen runs her fingers over her stitches. “Don’t your folks ever have you over for reunion dinner?”

“What do you mean my folks?” I frown. “I always have dinner with my folks. Who do you think Father, Mother and Grandmother are?”

“I mean your folks in Zhong Hu,” Yi Fen says.

“What do you know about my folks in Zhong Hu?”

“Your uncle and his family,” Yi Fen says.

“Oh, you mean them.” I shrug. “I don’t know if they are coming or not. I have to ask Father.”

Yi Fen nods, picking at her stitches.

“I have to go,” I say and run off, eyes on the ground just ahead of me.

I slap the wet clothes on the line, straightening out the crumpled collar, the bunched up sleeve. Stupid things, they’ll dry crumpled anyway, the lines sloping to the ground like heavy dew, and the clothes slide into each other, crowding. There’s no space on the lines for straight clothes. I can hear Ah Chang whistling in the house, maybe working, maybe not. I try to whistle, but my mouth is stiff.

“Shi Ying!” Mother calls. “Go get some water from the well after you finish with the clothes.”

The piercing glee rises higher. I try to match it--my mouth prunes up. I go and get a yoke and two buckets by the house where the little ducks and chickens and geese are fenced in. Their cackling when I approach makes me laugh because I know I have nothing for them. The well is by the sweet potato field. I know where it is, my mind knows, it sees the squat brick circle in the middle of the ground and the bucket and burning rope, a deep mirror below, dark and thick, depths unknown, silently waiting.

The bucket falls flat into the water in the well. The sound that should have echoed up the gray stone is instead absorbed greedily, so what comes up is dull. I have already filled the

buckets. There is more I need. The sugarcane encloses me, and the sky is inviting.

“Why are you sad?”

It is Xiao Hua. I glance at her with heavy eyelids.

“Is it Mrs. Li again? Did she say nasty things again? Don’t care about her. She talks rubbish.” Xiao Hua puffs herself up and says, her voice pulling her chin down, “How do you like being pinched, Mrs. Li? Like a fat pig chopped up? Chop! Chop! How dare you say that Shi Ying is plain? Look at your own children. Not much better at all. Waa, your nose is as big as a cow’s, no wonder you cannot keep out of people’s business.”

I start to smile. Xiao Hua dimples.

“Xiao Hua, remember when you told me that you’ve been mistakenly exchanged at birth and that your real family is very rich and they will come for you one day?” I ask.

She nods.

“Well, are they coming for you at the reunion dinner?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugs, “They might. I’ll know when I see a cloud of dust in the distance, on the main road from Da Hu. They will come in a big horse carriage, with a mountainous heap of gifts for me. Maybe some for my foster family. Definitely lots for you. Everyone will admire them so much. They will be so clean and nice, even their sleeves are spotless. And definitely, their trousers will have no holes, no mud. Their faces will be shiny and rosy and cheerful, full of smiles. And my mother will have the softest hands in the world.”

It does not cheer me up. I feel much worse. Xiao Hua tries again, “And when they come, you can come with me.” Xiao Hua looks closely at me. “You know, I think we might actually be sisters. Wouldn’t that be wonderful? How can two girls be picked up from the same place if they’re not related. Even if we’re not sisters, we must be cousins, from the same village.”

I look up. She continues, "Yes, yes, of course, that makes all the sense in the world. Don't you think? I mean, most everyone in the villages is related. Sometimes there are three or four different families in the villages, but what a big chance we might be related. Found on the same path. Sure! Don't you see? When my family comes, they'll see how much we look alike, then they'll say, oh, we had two girls, not one. We lost two girls, not one. Can you imagine, we might be twins!"

I laugh out loud. "Do you think they'll come this year?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. They will, sometime, and for now, we have each other. Sister."

She grasps my hand and I hold hers tight. She says, "Let's pray to the Old Man in the Sky to help us and help our family find us, so we'll have the best reunion dinner ever."

We kneel on the sandy ground, close our eyes, and put our hands together.

"Old Man in the Sky, bless us and bring our family to us," we say together.

Father says that Uncle Jing, Auntie Lan and their three daughters will be having reunion dinner with us. We will not have a big feast, but we will have fried vegetables and sweet potatoes, and something special--fried pork and white rice. A whole bowl of white rice each. Every grain puffed and steamed, white against crackled blue, no chunks of sweet potato to fill up the empty spaces in the pot. When we get together with Uncle Jing and his family, Uncle Jing always has many stories to tell--people he has met, gods and goddesses and demi-gods, ghosts. Sometimes he'll tell the story of my finding. Like a children's tale with a happy ending. A story everyone knows. Even with missing parts, they don't care.

When New Year's is three days away, I collect all our blankets and bring them to the stream that runs past the

vegetable field. I squat by the cold waters and start washing. Such a little stream that I can't even see where it comes from from up the mountains. Not so little though. Its currents pull at the ends of the blankets and want to drag me along. I dig my feet into the sloping ground at the edge of the stream, but they slip and I fall hands and knees into the water. I chase the blanket floating away, grab it and turn around to go back to my spot. That's when I see it, in the mountain face, carved out by the sun, dark gray, the footprint of the White Tiger, the footprint of blessings! It is slanted from where I stand. Its oval shape is jagged on the top edge, heavier on the bottom where the heel is. I put out my hand, close one eye and measure my hand against the footprint. It is a huge footprint, must be full of blessings! After that, I don't mind the cold so much.

My arms ache for two days from washing and carrying those blankets. As I clean tables and chairs, even as I mend clothes, every twitch and pull of my fingers run tremors up my arms, and my toes remember nudging the edge of the stream where I watched the grayness sieved from the blankets, swallowed and disappear. I also remember the White Tiger's footprint, solid in rock, and I am glad that my pain is not for nothing, that this year will bring me better luck.

My final job is to wipe the planks of all our beds--first Grandmother's and Ah Chang's, then Father's and Mother's, and lastly, mine, in the smallest room beside the cowshed. When splinters run through my hands and I pick them out with my teeth, I think of Xiao Hua doing the same, so I don't cry. Splinters aren't too bad; once they're out, they don't hurt much anymore.

On the night before New Year's Eve, Father goes off with other village men to fish as usual, and in the morning of New Year's Eve, the women and older boys go to shore and help pick fish from the nets into wicker baskets. Two by two everyone comes back, some hauling baskets of fish, some hauling nets, the long wooden buoys and iron sinkers

swishing against the ground. I help spread the nets on the field right behind the village, near the foot of the mountains for them to dry. Every family chooses a fish or two for their reunion dinners, then Father and the men go off to Da Hu to sell the rest. They don't have to go to sea after dinner tonight, since it's New Year's Eve, so their voices are lighter, free from the nets and rocking darkness of the sea. Fishing is difficult this time of year; the better catch is in the deep, which means going out the whole night and returning in the morning. Soon, in the spring, fish can be caught in the shallow waters, and nets can be set without night watching, tied with rope to stakes on shore, free floating but secure.

In the afternoon, when Father gets back, he heads for the bedroom to take a nap. "Must be refreshed for dinner!" he says. Grandmother, who is cleaning sweet potatoes, tells me to sweep the floor. "Make sure it's all clean. I don't want to have to sweep during the first few days of the New Year. I don't want to sweep away any good fortune the New Year will bring."

When I finish with the floor, Mother and Ah Chang come back from the fields. Mother starts gutting the fish, and Ah Chang, like Father, heads for his room to take a nap. I pluck vegetables, rinse them and slosh the water out the front doorstep. By my bedroom wall, where grass bundles are stacked dry and springy, I hug an armful for fire. The dried leaves and stalks of harvests smell of rain and sun.

Uncle Jing and Auntie Lan arrive in the middle of the afternoon, Uncle Jing all smiles and Auntie Lan telling her daughters to behave as they run off to play. Auntie Lan starts helping with the cooking, cutting up the vegetables waiting clean. Uncle Jing sits down and chatters about the absurd prices of meat, rice, buns, fruits, New Year foodstuffs and the shopkeepers who are earning big piles of money this time of year.

"You know Old Qi? He's the second brother-in-law of

my wife's sister-in-law. We are kin, right? And he charged me the same New Year's price for meat like I'm anybody, no discount. I thought he was more kin than that, but obviously business is business, money opens the eyes. Kin, what kin? Money is kin. Kin out of the mouth, might as well be wind out of the backside." Uncle Jing throws up his hands.

"You know that family is so stingy, why do you buy from them?" Auntie Lan says and turns to Mother and Grandmother. "Never listens to what I tell him. The other day, Small Han came to talk to him. He wants to start a little shop and sell dry goods, rice, dried dates, nuts, such things, and is looking for a partner. I told Ah Jing, I said, go ahead and set up a business with Small Han. It's good business. We can put in a share. But this man. Too much trouble, he says, too much pressure, he says. Who's going to help with the land, he says. Aiyoh, have you heard such reasoning? If you have a business, Sister-in-law, you do not need to work so much on the land. Am I right or not?"

"So Small Han wants to start up a business. Not bad. Food is good investment, Brother," Mother says. "People must eat. Of course, it takes a certain mind to do business, a business mind. You can do it. You always sell your vegetables and chickens for a very good price. That pig buyer even pays you more for your pigs than anybody."

"My pigs he can see are better quality." Uncle Jing nods contentedly.

"That husband of mine," Mother points a finger towards Father's bedroom, "he's too honest. Not interested in making money. Too easy going. Everything okay. This kind of person gets cheated easily. So what to do? Can only be a fisherman all his life. And we, his family, cannot do anything." She sweeps a hand towards the bedroom, shaking her head.

"Honest men are good. No bad things will happen to them and their family because he has no guilt, no retribution. Good fortune will come along. Gods have eyes," Auntie Lan says.

"Anyway, health is better than money," Uncle Jing says. "I know, because I was sick last month, and really, money is no use if you don't have health."

"What sick? You only had indigestion. You're as healthy as an ox. If you don't want to do business, then don't. Don't say it's because of what health," Auntie Lan says. "Sister-in-law, you never know, maybe if Ah Jing does it, Brother-in-law may be interested."

"Tigers never change their faces," Mother says.

"Never mind, never mind. Honest men are good," Auntie Lan says, and Uncle Jing chimes in, "Yes, yes, I always say that."

"I know, they just don't go anywhere." Mother gives a little shrug.

Father and Ah Chang wake up a little while later when most of the food is on the table--steaming sweet potatoes, steamed fish, fried pork and vegetables. Father slaps Uncle Jing heartily on the back and Uncle Jing begins telling him about the prices in the market, about Old Qi, except now, Old Qi charged him twice as much as before. Nobody seems to notice.

Soon everyone is sitting around the table, crowded at the elbows, and the dinner begins. I breathe in the scent of white rice until it fills my whole body. Uncle Jing beside me pokes me in the arm, "Don't inhale any up your nose!"

I grin and start eating.

Uncle Jing does not stop. "Ah! You always did like the smell of rice. Even as a baby, you liked the smell of rice water. But that's good, that's good. Eat more and you'll grow even better. I always thought you were a good child, will grow up strong..."

"Hnah? What is that?" Auntie Lan says. "I said she would be a strong child, I said. All you said was what to do, what to do."

Everyone laughs. I concentrate on eating, but it's too

late. Uncle Jing's hand, still holding the chopsticks, rests on the table, and his bowl of half-caved rice waits.

"That was one dangerous moment when I found Shi Ying, what with those wild dogs about to attack her and I had to chase them off. There were what, four or five of them, as big as cows. They snarled, showing their teeth, teeth this long, you know... Ah... must begin from the beginning." His chopsticks nip some vegetables for his rice and after some mouthfuls, he begins, his voice the singsong of a storyteller, and in spite of myself I listen, his voice enticing an old familiar wound that on picking will bleed afresh.

"I am a simple man, content with a roof over my head and a meal on the table three times a day, every day. My wife," he smiles, "is a simple woman, who married well, considering her large feet and hands. I don't mind her large feet since she has large hands which means she is a good worker and can cook well. I always say large feet are not as bad as a large mouth. Small Han has a wife with a large mouth. Not only can she eat, she can nag as well. You should hear her! Her voice inside the house is as loud as the fish-seller in the market.

"As I am a simple man, who prays and burns joss sticks and makes offerings of oranges and buns every first and fifteenth of the month, and asks for no more than getting food on the table and having sons to perpetuate my name, I was confused that day as to why the gods put this problem in my hands, which as hands go," Uncle Jing lifts his hands, chopsticks sticking out, "are capable enough. I remember that day well. It was the ninth day of the New Year.

"You see, I must start from the beginning, this is the New Year and everything worth telling must be all told, all out. And also a good beginning is half the work done, I always say. It is a trouble being a little of a philosopher sometimes, for I have some blood from my ancestor, Lu Tong, who was a philosopher much revered. You all heard of him? He lived

over two hundred years ago, so I do not have much of his blood, just some.

"As I have started to say, that morning was very much the same as every other morning I had lived. I got up when the sun was barely waking and sat on the planks of my bed, touching the dirt floor gingerly with my toes. It was cold, as usual that time of year, and the cold ran into my toes, up my legs and tickled my spine. I shivered. My wife had already started a fire in the kitchen, cooking rice porridge and sweet potatoes.

" 'Careful. It is hot,' my wife said, as she does every morning when she sets a steaming bowl of porridge in front of me. Then I heard her waking our little ones. 'Get up, get up, little worms,' she said affectionately.

"After my meal, I took up my hoe, which is five years old, still very new for I look after my properties well. I met few people on the dirt road to the fields east of the stream where I had to loosen soil for new crops. A man was hitching a ride on a cow-drawn cart. It was on its way to Da Hu. I knew the driver and waved.

" 'Good morning,' he said.

" 'And a good morning to you, too,' I replied. He is a good man, though as I have said, his wife is very loud and does not give him much peace. It is not his fault; he probably owed something to that woman in his past life and now he is paying the debt.

"I was nearing the fields and had to step aside to avoid some cow dung. Somehow I tripped over my own feet and down I went. I scraped my hands and my arm got a terrible jarring where I hit my hoe as I fell. I examined the hoe for damage, for as you know, I am a careful man, and hoes are very expensive. It was unmarked save for some dirt.

" 'My precious,' I said as I dusted it. I said this softly so that no one would hear and think I am stingy with my possessions. And then--waa! waa!--it cried! I dropped it in a

hurry, and almost immediately I was ashamed. It could not have cried. It was a hoe." Uncle Jing's daughters go hee-hee-hee. "So I pretended to have been bitten by an ant and scratched my arms." Uncle Jing scratches his arm.

"As I did, my eyes wandered to the bushy area near the stream that runs by the fields and I saw," Uncle Jing holds up his hand, four fingers spread wide, "four black dogs, each the size of a small cow, hovering around something."

Lu Hui, Uncle Jing's eldest daughter, interrupts, "I thought it was three dogs."

"No, no, four, four big wild dogs. I quickly picked up my hoe and started to back away. In the day, wild dogs usually return to their dark earth on the other side of the mountains near Xiao Hu, and it is at night that they prowl the villages for food, so I thought these must be unusually hungry dogs to be here in daylight. I am a brave man, as men go, but I am not a stupid man. I was about to turn on my heels when--waa! waa!--I heard the sounds again. The dogs circled among themselves, as if in a ritual dance of death."

Lu Wan, Uncle Jing's second daughter, says, "What happened to their dripping saliva? Their big mouths?"

"Yes, yes. They had dripping saliva and big mouths, like tigers. One dog lifted its ugly head and howled, at the same time with the waa! waa! that went on and on. I squinted my eyes and saw, I could not believe it, a little arm waving its fist at the dogs. I gasped and the dogs turn their mean heads towards me. One came forward and bared its gleaming teeth. Skin flapped at its sides, its ribs protruded hungrily. I have learned from my good wife that to show a brave front will fool things of a beastly nature, and the god of good fortune will favor the bold, so brandishing my hoe over my head like the priest at Gao Shan temple waving his magic sword to exorcise evil spirits, I ran yelling at the dogs." Uncle Jing lifts his arms over his head.

"What did you say?" Lu Wan asks.

"Ahhh!!!" says Uncle Jing. "To my relief, they took flight as I drew nearer, but they stopped when I stood by the little arm. Waa! waa! I looked down at a bundled infant whose mouth opened so wide its gums stood out like teeth and I could see down its throat." Everyone chuckled. "Its face was squeezed into a red, wet, little ball. There was some blood on its forehead and I saw the culprit nearby--a scorpion. Without a second thought, I crashed my hoe down. There was a spilt second of silence when I killed the scorpion, and the dogs, which had stood at a distance, started to growl and advance. The god of fortune left with my courage and I picked up the infant with one hand and ran.

"The dogs followed. I could hear their ragged panting at my heels. The bundle came to life again, crying as loud as it could, probably exhilarated by my fast flight, for I am considered to have the fastest legs in Zhong Hu.

"At the sounds of waa! waa! the dogs stopped their fearful growls, but I wasn't going to be fooled. When a dog's mouth is full of saliva, it cannot bark, can it?" Uncle Jing guffaws.

"I stopped only when I reached the main road, my heart still racing ahead. When I looked back, the dogs were in the fields, silent, black statues, watching."

"You said they followed you till people helped you throw stones at them," Ah Chang says.

"No, no. The dogs didn't dare come to the main road because it was getting bright and they could smell too many humans around--Zhong Hu in those days was already quite a big and busy village. So I was safe. Only then did I look at the bundle in my arm. It was very noisy, its voice strong and incessant.

"Aii! I hit my forehead. I realized I had a problem. The infant was the size of three big potatoes, but what was I to do with it? It was probably an abandoned girl infant, for who would throw away a boy? I had three daughters already.

I could not afford to feed another mouth. What if my wife accused me of adultery and said that this was a burdened child of my blood?" Auntie Lan snorts and Father shakes his head. Uncle Jing's eyes widen. "It would be unthinkable, the smear on my name, for I am an honest man, clean and blameless. And why wouldn't it stop crying? Some people passed me as I walked along the road, Old Wu and his cousin and some others, and gave me odd looks--why am I carrying a hoe and an infant to work?

"So to avoid any more stares, I sat under a roadside tree, facing away from the road, and pondered my fate. As I am a descendent of the house of Lu, respected for our kindness and good-heartedness, I could not throw away the unwanted child and shame our ancestors' names. Then I decided. Do I want to be like Small Han, afraid of his wife, like a mouse? No, I said to myself. I am a man," Uncle Jing slaps his chest, "brave and strong. I am going to bring this infant home.

"At my house, I crept in the door, careful not to make any sound, but my wife, her ears like a rabbit, alert as a fox, called out, 'Why are you home so early?'

"Before I could answer, the noise answered for me. I had never seen my wife run before, but here she came, thundering into the room, holding a ladle coated with rice porridge that dripped down her arm and soaked into the floor.

" 'Heavens!' she cried. 'Where did you get the child?'

" 'First, feed her, she is hungry...' "

Auntie Lan interrupts with dismissing hands, "No, you said, er, ah, you see... and I said, let me feed her first before you tell me anything. Poor thing. How hungry she is. Crying like that will hurt her lungs. She will eat too much wind and get gas in her stomach."

"Yes, yes, all right, that's right," Uncle Jing concedes, "because I was wondering how I could tell my wife in one sentence all that had happened. It's all so exciting, you know. So I followed my wife into the kitchen. She scooped some rice