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THE WAVES LAPPED AGAINST THE NEW SHORE, MUFFLING THE baby's cries. As the water advanced, it threatened to swallow the wicker basket resting on a spur of limestone. The river, now a growing lake, crept up the fields inch by inch. Now the ripening ears of wheat disappeared, their spikelets resisting the current before being pulled under.

The baby in the basket squeezed her eyelids shut and cried. It was a plaintive cry, like the sound of gulls circling above misty waters on a steel gray day.

The last inhabitants had cleared out several hours earlier. In the morning, there was a light rain, and the couple moved quickly. They loaded their furniture onto the boat, leaving the rickety beds behind. By early afternoon, the kitchen pots and pans, a handheld radio, *po-chai* pills, and tiger balm had found their way into the nooks and crannies of the wooden vessel. The fog hovered in the valley, casting a ghostly pall on the outlines of the man, woman, and boat. When the river rose up to the mooring, the man released the little ark, his wife took one last glance at their unharvested vegetables, and they sailed away.

But the baby remained. She was swaddled in a wool sweater, bundled twice over with the man's old cotton trousers. She lay in the basket, sleeping soundly, lulled by the sound of the waves swirling closer to the rocky outcropping.

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The wailing began when the baby's slumber wore off. Dusk was approaching, and she was hungry. A cold mist descended on the land, smoothing away the peaks and terraced hills in a miasma of gray. Even the little nubs of broad bean shoots poking out from higher ground looked gray. But the creature was too young and too closely bound in her swaddling cloths to seek nourishment.

The river rose steadily, crawling uphill at a centipede's pace. In the faltering light, it found the dirt path to the old house. Still the swollen river advanced, until the water leapt up and played against the cradle. The baby's cries turned shrill and inconsolable, like those of a wailing widow unable to summon the spirit of the recently departed.



LIU RENFU KNEW THE TERRITORY WELL. HE STOOD ON THE promontory overlooking the terraced slopes of Emerald Gorge. He had watched the couple darting like little mice between their house and boat. Now the village was completely deserted, and soon it would be submerged by the vast and growing reservoir that crept up the riverbank.

Over the past few days, the river had risen more than forty feet, and the fast-flowing current became slack. The lower villages were no more, having surrendered every remaining brick, stone, and swath of fertile land to the Yangtze's new dam.

In the abandoned houses and shacks, Liu would find a forgotten trinket or a salvageable jug, and if he was lucky, he might come across hidden savings, perhaps for a wedding or a flock of goats. The ghost villages were eerily quiet, with the residents gone and the pigs and chickens long ago sold. On occasion, he would find a dog wandering around the fields, whimpering.

Liu made his way downhill on lanky legs, skirting boulders and shrubs on the slopes, bounding across the leveled plots where radishes, spinach, and red peppers grew in neat rows. He stopped by an old banyan tree to survey the last family's plot. The house stood some two hundred yards away, its roof stripped of tile and covered with a patchwork of tarp. If he moved briskly, he would have just

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enough time to comb the interiors before the water claimed it.

As he drew closer, he heard a baby's cries. They pierced through the fog in shrill gasps. Picking up his pace, Liu turned toward the wooden shed across from the house. He kicked aside a broken shovel and rounded the corner.

There the baby lay, crying so fiercely that her face was red and contorted. The makeshift crib rocked from the commotion.

"A little kitten," the scavenger muttered, shaking his head. "Left for the river god."

He had a sudden urge to light a cigarette, but the river licked his toes. He knew he had little time left. He scooped up the baby bundle and trotted along the path to the house. Only twenty paces. The baby squirmed, crying louder. The wind had picked up, rattling his trousers and seeping through the holes in his shirt. He was determined to reach the house before the water did.

A low shrub snagged his pant cuffs, but he tore on, all the while holding onto the infant with a bony hand. The louder she cried, the more tightly he clenched the bundle against his ribs. The wind streamed against his face, forcing him to pick up his knees and dig his toes into the loamy soil.

The river showed no mercy. It swallowed the landscape in slow, heaving gulps. The surrounding fields had all but disappeared, digested over the course of the day in a pulpy mass. An odor arose from the surface of the new reservoir, a slightly sour smell resembling fermented cabbages.

When Liu reached the house, the water had already submerged its base. The front door had been torn out and salvaged, but the frame remained intact. Liu hopped over the threshold, banging his shin against the raised wooden ledge in his haste. "Damn," he muttered. He spat into a small eddy on the dirt floor.

Designed to keep out evil spirits, the ledge could do nothing to keep out the approaching deluge. Liu always felt a little pang as he crossed the thresholds of other people's homes. But fate and simple bad luck had taken so much away from him; that was how he justified his living.

The baby fell into muffled sobs. Dusk had cast an ominous

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gloom on the house, whose mud brick walls were crumbling with age. Liu turned toward the adjoining kitchen. The surfaces were blackened with soot. A pile of wood lay stacked against the stove, and wilted vegetables sat on the low counter. A few earthenware dishes remained unwashed.

Beneath the grime Liu could make out the images of blue carp etched into the plates. He felt a sharp contraction in his stomach and grasped the infant a little tighter. His wife used to serve the New Year's meal on plates decorated with fish, which signified bounty and prosperity for the coming year. He wanted to take the dirty plates, but thought better.

The incoming tide shook Liu out of his reverie. The water had risen over the threshold and covered the floor with a slippery, moving carpet. Liu kicked away twigs and debris floating on the water's surface, his toes cringing from the cold. He rummaged through the kitchen for anything of value, but all that remained was a broken table and an odd assortment of items—work gloves, soiled mop heads, old socks used for window insulation.

Liu sloshed back into the common room, his knapsack still empty. The infant renewed her wails, dousing his shirt with snot and tears. With each spasm, she would cry in ever sharper tones as if to admonish Liu for trespassing.

The encroaching lake had risen to his shins. He glanced at the ramshackle door opposite the entrance. It was risky, he knew, to enter. The water was advancing up the walls, charcoal gray in the dim light. He pressed on, feeling the resistance of the tide against his cloth shoes. He yanked the door open and stepped inside.

Here lay two cots, their hard, bare surfaces stripped of bedding. Liu crooked his elbow and held the baby's head against his breastbone, but it was less a loving gesture than an attempt to muffle her cries.

He spied a chest in the far corner. The water tugged at his trousers, but curiosity propelled him forward. Setting the baby down, he bent over the chest and wrestled with the lock. He tore at the rusted hinges until the lid gave way. Inside, beneath layers of crumpled fabric, was a lacquered box with gilded letters on the

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cover. He could not read the characters, but one looked auspicious, like the bold red posters hung upside down during New Year's to chase away evil spirits. He stuffed the small box into his knapsack.

He grabbed the baby, holding her high against his chest. The lapping sound of the waves had calmed her down. But the new lake was gaining ground. The door to the bedroom slammed shut from the outside.

Liu cursed himself, rushed toward the door, clawing wildly at the latch with his free hand. The old door refused to budge. The veins bulged in his arms, sinewy from years of carrying coal. He kicked, then threw his shoulder against the door, but still it would not give. The infant bared her tiny teeth, protesting in furious howls.

The cots were now covered with a thin layer of water. No perch for the baby, except on top of the chest. The river was icy cold, and Liu could not move fast enough. He rattled the window; it was sealed shut. His knapsack scraped against a raw, bleeding spot on his arm.

Fear seized him suddenly. A fleeting image, of a body lying prone, embalmed with river slime. "Prosperity does no good to a drowning man," he muttered. Liu refused to die; he'd lived through too much sorrow to surrender just now. Fate had swept him up in its inevitable tide, had once left him homeless and wifeless. But maybe there were forces even greater than fate.

"Heaven help me," he cried.

And then he seized upon an idea. He plowed through the water, murky in the semi-darkness, and groped his way toward one of the cots.

Liu bent down and pushed, aiming the corner of the cot toward the door. The wooden legs scraped against the floor, wobbling slightly. He breathed hard, grunting and praying, steeled by the will to live.

"Heaven help me," he groaned, slurring the words between breaths.

His aim was true. The door splintered on impact, and a heaving wave of water swept through the cavity. Like a great sea monster, it washed over the chest and threatened to devour the baby. She

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screamed, and Liu shuffled back through the water, now above his knees, to fetch her. With the infant in his arms, he leapt through the broken door into the front room, and scrambled over the cursed ledge. The baby's shrieks became hoarse, and even she seemed weary of complaining.

Outside, Liu caught the sweet fragrance of citrus trees. But the landscape was awash in fog, blurring the edges where water met land. He tried to run, but the mud beneath his feet threatened to suck away his shoes.

Night was falling, and he felt the chill traveling up his legs. The wind picked up from behind and propelled him through the water. But the lake was a greedy monster, reluctant to let him and the baby go. At length, he emerged with his trousers dripping onto a patch of dry land. He was exhausted, but he feared that the lake would soon consume the hillside above him. He drew in a deep breath, slung the baby higher up on his shoulder, then marched up the hill, stumbling on wild grasses and crumbling rock. On the slopes, the prickly shrubs of gooseberry tore at his clothing. He forged on, knowing that he could only stop when he reached the promontory. The baby hiccupped, and Liu patted her on the back.

When at last he reached the top, the sky had turned indigo, but a heavy fog kept the stars from view. Liu stumbled toward a sturdy tree, collapsing against the trunk with the baby beside him. He stared back down the hill, but the hazy darkness had devoured everything below him: the house, the hungry lake, the exposed slopes waiting to go under. His numbed feet came back to life, and as he stretched out his legs, he fell fast asleep.

Sharp gusts blew across the ridge, and the baby tossed her head as if wasps were stinging her. She whimpered, longing for the warmth of mother's milk, and her cheeks were wan and lifeless.

Liu awoke to a rustling sound in the trees, not knowing how long he had slept. The night was damp and chilly, and he checked to see how the baby was faring. He pulled off a damp cotton layer, but the old wool sweater beneath had kept her dry. Concerned she might be cold, he took off his trousers and stuck the infant into the cavity. The trouser legs flapped against her tiny head.

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A smile crept over his face. “Little scarecrow, scare away the river birds.”

His delight was fleeting, now that he was sufficiently alert to assess his surroundings. His moped, left at the top of the ridge, was nowhere to be seen. His search yielded nothing, only more scratches on his bare legs. He would have to wait until morning. He curled up beside the baby, all belly and no legs in his tattered trousers, as the night wind whistled up the rising lake.

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STREAKS OF SILVER LIGHT STREAMED ACROSS THE YANGTZE RIVER valley. The jagged shapes of boulders stood like sentinels on the flat ridge where Liu had made camp. He found his moped nearby, behind a thicket of rhododendron.

He stared at the sleeping baby and wondered what he should do with her. He had found a few valuable items over the past few months, but he never expected to come across a baby. He was not surprised, however, as unwanted girl infants were left on more than one occasion near roadsides and market stalls when the farmers came into town.

Liu had almost been a father, but when his wife died, the unborn child died with her. That was a year and a half ago, just before the lunar New Year. He hadn't known whether the baby was a boy or a girl, but it didn't matter to him the way it would have to his parents. Liu shared his wife's excitement about the baby, but he knew that the carefree life he once lived was over. He felt a sense of duty as a new father, and he worked harder so that they could save some money before the child was born. As a day laborer, he hauled coal from the shoreline to ships docked in Fengjie's harbor. He found extra work inland making deliveries for local merchants.

Traditional work was becoming scarce in the river towns. New highways were being built, and the coal-carrying jobs that Liu was suited for—tough, gritty jobs that required neither skill nor schooling—were disappearing. After the sudden death of his wife, Liu was

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rudderless for some time, taking the small amount he had saved to the old town of Wushan. It was a seedy place, but unlike the other laborers, he didn't spend half his earnings on prostitutes.

Liu was a resourceful man, and a diligent one under the right circumstances. He learned about the building of the Three Gorges dam and found a new job for himself, combing through deserted houses when villagers moved to higher ground. Scavenging was not officially sanctioned, but it filled his belly. He knew where to find his pickings as each of the villages and towns along the Yangtze became vacated. A local official had tipped him off on the schedule of evacuations.

"The dam will tame the Yangtze," said the official. "From here to Chongqing, the river will become a giant bathtub." The size and reach of the dam was of a magnitude that had never been achieved, that Liu could not comprehend. The residents of Wushan, unlike the villagers, were eager to move to the new town, which was built on the slopes above the old. But after his wife's death, Liu had not cared one way or another. He had nothing to look forward to, or run away from. His forays provided a reprieve from loneliness; as long as he kept moving he didn't have to remember.

But Liu still thought about his wife. In the quiet hours of night, pleasant memories seeped into his thoughts. They had lived a fairly simple life in the town of Fengjie, a short boat ride up the river from Wushan. He called her Fei Fei, from the part of her given name that meant "to fly." Liu always thought of his wife in flight, her limbs graceful and swift like the wings of a cormorant.

It was a clear spring day when he first laid eyes on Fei Fei. Her father's barge pulled into the harbor at Fengjie, and she sprang from the boat without touching ground, it seemed. He was hauling coal in two sturdy baskets he had bought from a village weaver. He could cover the distance from the coal pile to the waiting ships faster than anyone else. At twenty-six, he was in his prime.

Coal portage was a fairly lowbrow profession. But Liu felt a certain sense of pride in his work. The other men who crowded the harbors wore sleeveless shirts, in flamboyant pink, revealing their wiry arms and gnarled muscles, but Liu was more reserved. In the

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heat of midday, the sweat on his back and arms formed rivulets that streaked down his gray undershirt. On a good day, he could make 25 *yuan*, more than his father could ever have dreamed of.

When Liu spotted Fei Fei coming up the dock, he stopped and stared at her. Blood rushed through his temples, his chest and loins. Two bucket-loads of coal weighed down his shoulders, but he did not put his carrying pole down. He saw the way her long hair flew back in the breeze, and noticed that her shoulders were bare. He admired the shape of her figure; she had sprightly but flared hips and legs like a gazelle's, lean and strong. She saw him staring at her, but instead of turning away, she smiled. When at last he had the courage to approach her, he put down his pole, straightened his shirt, and wiped the coal-dusted sweat from his brow.

Their romance was somewhat rocky, though not for a lack of affection between them. Like the treacherous shoals that pulled the Yangtze's barges and sampans under, her parents threatened to sabotage their plans for marriage. Liu managed to win her father over with his hardworking ways, and a certain intelligence that he learned from surviving on his own since youth, although he'd had very little formal schooling. He had left home at seventeen, estranged from his parents, who were farmers in Daxi village.

Fei Fei's mother was more discerning. No man could ever be quite good enough for her flesh and blood. Unlike the parents who prized only their male children, Fei Fei's mother looked out for her daughter's future as much as she did her son's. Liu could never win the approval of her mother, but he was intent on winning Fei Fei's hand, and that depended as much on her free-spirited ways as on his staying power.

"I'll run away with you, if she keeps refusing," Fei Fei declared.

And so it was that she chose to marry him, despite her mother's fervent hope otherwise. They would have six peaceful years together, at least when her parents weren't visiting, before she died. Marriage had rooted him, but Fei Fei's untimely death cut his ties to Fengjie, the place where, for the first time in his life, he had truly found home.

Old Wushan provided a brief respite from the memories. It was

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not so much a home as a roosting spot between Liu's forays into abandoned villages. What he found in those peasant homes, baubles and household items and the occasional heirloom piece, did not fill his coffers or prop up his pillow at night. They merely gave him money for rent and his next meal at Tai's. He would have been content to pitch a tarp of plastic and bamboo by the riverbank. But old Wushan was a lawless place, so he kept an apartment to store the goods before selling them.



NOW THAT LIU WAS IN POSSESSION OF A BABY, HE FELT somewhat responsible for her. He couldn't see treating her as salvaged goods, although she'd be worth something on the black market. But how could he possibly take care of her? Perhaps the child might afford him assistance for poor families. His friend Tai did say, though, that the government program wasn't much help anyway.

In the light of the day, the child appeared to be an apparition, a wild creature he'd encountered in the thick of night, that had somehow possessed him, snatched his trousers, and wrapped them around itself.

"Little scarecrow, who's gonna want you?" Liu sucked on his cigarette, the air hissing through a gap in his teeth. He wasn't sure how he could give her up without arousing suspicion.

He leaned his moped against the small spruce tree where the baby lay asleep, then walked a short distance to relieve himself in the brush. He felt a curious impulse toward modesty, which he'd reserved for his mother-in-law, who balked at the immodesty of coal porters and their kind.

The baby stirred, a yelp escaping from her scabby lips. He had a little water, but nothing to feed her if she awoke. He'd have to get back to town. He lifted her by the folds of his trousers and settled her into the wooden crate hanging from the moped. And then his gaze alighted on the lacquered box.

He fingered the embossed gold character on the lid. He could fetch perhaps 30 *yuan* for the box. Not bad, he thought. A good day's work. Inside was a black and white photograph of a couple,

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and beneath that, an embroidered cloth pouch. The edges of the photo were scalloped and worn with age. The man was perhaps in his mid-thirties, about Liu's age; the woman appeared to be younger. The man was dressed in a drab Mao jacket, but he conveyed a certain dignity in the way he held his chin and braced his legs. The woman had a broad face, and her hair was pulled sternly into a bun. In the blurred contours of black and gray, Liu could make out a pensive look in her eyes. The photograph seemed of a different era; there was a distinct rigidity in their stance, an air of hardship and forbearance.

Liu fingered the faded print, wondering if the man and woman were still alive, if the mementos were indeed forgotten, or cast aside. And the baby—had she been too much trouble to keep? He wondered what kind of folks would leave a baby and a good chest by a rising river.

Lifting the photo, Liu removed the pouch underneath. His pulse quickened in anticipation of a good find. It might be worth another month's rent, and a round of drinks with his friend Tai to spare.

When the clasp gave way, a gold chain fell into his hands. Etched on the thin pendant was a cluster of peaches. He took a deep breath, caressing its rounded surface. It reminded him of pictures of fat, cherubic boys bearing giant peaches who boded good luck and fortune for the New Year.

Liu stuffed the chain back in the pouch, afraid that someone would be lurking in the bushes, ready to steal his good fortune. Sure, such discoveries were exciting, but Liu knew that whatever wealth one possessed could easily be taken away. He would take the gold chain to Ol' Fang, who had brokered some of his more valuable finds.

"No, I don't really trust him," he muttered. "Maybe I'll ask Chen to appraise it."

Liu shook his head. Chen would ask questions. He was a nosy fellow who would divulge secrets to a local Party leader in exchange for a tax break or kickback.

Grabbing his knapsack, Liu climbed onto his moped with the baby in the back. In his distracted state, he'd forgotten he was partly

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naked, wearing only a pair of briefs, stained by dirt and the morning dew. He grabbed the tattered cotton pants he'd unwrapped from the infant the night before. They felt a little snug, and the stitching barely held together between the patchwork of holes. But he didn't want to take back his own trousers, lest he awaken her into a crying spell.

Setting off for Wushan, he pondered his next move, where to take the baby. She rocked in her makeshift cradle as the moped skidded over rocks and bumps on the mountainside trail. Liu made his way to the main road, going more slowly than usual. Old trucks and construction vehicles shared the road, but they did not seem to notice him.

The wind whipped through Liu's hair, still tangled with brush and burrs from the night before. The barrel-tiled roofs of farmhouses flew past against the jagged outlines of the deep gorges. Barking dogs guarded the growing fields of wheat and corn, while sun-browned men struck the earth with plows, and elderly women hunched under the weight of babies on their backs. Liu felt a sense of ease as he sailed through the countryside. In these moments, little weighed him down. Old memories and longings retreated like shadows.

He gunned the bike to pass a slow-moving truck, sending up a wave of dust behind his rear wheels. The baby stirred a bit, but remained asleep in sun-induced stupor. Absorbed in the motions of life swirling by, the sensation of moving through space, Liu's ruminations ceased. He knew what he needed to do.

He'd keep the gold chain for now, and take the baby to Ol' Fang. The old broker had connections, even if he couldn't be completely trusted.