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Stone Village

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Stone Village

Every year, on the fifth of April, an elderly woman walked up the stone steps of Drum Mountain to place a plate of roast duck on her late husband's tomb. Her name was Xue Jin, and she came from an unnamed farming village lying atop the hills overlooking the Min River. This year, as she stepped beyond the sparse huts lining the mountain's twisting paths with the addition of a sizable jug of rice wine, she noticed suddenly that she had trouble walking. Her legs felt weak and her hands barely supported the weight of the duck and the alcohol. Forced to stop, she limped towards a bench beneath a swaying willow tree and closed her eyes.

In the town below, informally monikered "Stone Village" by the younger locals, a parade was driven to its premature end by signs of an oncoming storm. Indeed, a large and obtrusive cloud seemed to droop forward from the sky by the weight of its rain, and a sharp gale, which had begun as a light and airy spring breeze, began to shake and bang hideously the wooden shutters of the village huts. Yi Zhen, a thirty-year-old fisherman living with his wife and two sons down by the riverbank, began to lead his family away from their home and up toward the hills. Prior to his marriage, he had lived with his parents further down the road, in Min An, though his family also resided by the water then.

"We are men of the river," his father had said. "The Yi clan will never move beyond the riverbanks; we live off the water—it nourishes us and makes us strong. Your grandparents and the men before them—they all lived beside the water. The day we leave is the day we perish."

True to his words; they never left. Even after a brutal flash flood killed Yi Zhen's mother and younger sister—leaving himself and an elder brother

(who later drowned himself from depression; his father would die months later of pneumonia), they continued to live beside the Min River. And when Yi Zhen married, he told his wife that they could move, but they had to stay close to the waters, where his ancestors had always been. However, unlike his father, he knew all too well that the river was dangerous during flood time. Unwilling to see any of his family in peril, he somberly marched them into the raised village.

Perhaps a geographer would find it appropriate to split the village up into three distinct sections: the first section, which lay low beyond the rocky riverbanks, was made up of a sparse procession of stone huts beside the dirt road, trailing off into a concrete highway. The second was the town, placed comfortably atop the hills, and this was where the shops and the markets were located. The third portion of the village, commanding a birds-eye view of the aforementioned from the foot of Drum Mountain, contained the gravesite, the temple, and several plots of farmland, where the bent-over silhouettes of men and women worked side-by-side in the fields. These separate constituents, when combined, made a rather impressive picture of Chinese rural life in the Fujian province. For each segment seemed to form a continuation of a singular scene: here was the elderly woman, holding a plate of roast duck, walking up from her riverside hut into the market-town. There, she saw a rather impressive jug of wine listed at a fair price, and remembering her husband's adoration for alcohol, she bought it and carried it up towards Drum Mountain, where she sat, eyes closed, catching her breath. And we could do the same for anyone, too: a farmer brusquely stuffed his wares into his bag and ran back up the hills and into his home. An elderly man in the town looked up into the sky, shook his head, and walked back into his hut. Three young girls with jovial expectations of the festival walked into the town from their riverside huts to hear firecrackers and eat candied olives. Once there, they found nothing. But the girls were unwilling to go home, so they walked further up into the mountains.

"Granny! Granny! What are you doing here?"

Xue Jin opened her eyes. Initially, she saw nothing but the colorful blurs of three young girls standing before her. This was a common occurrence nowadays, as her eyesight was blurring from age. This was troublesome for her—not so much because she was gradually losing the beautiful visions of life, but rather because she couldn't afford not to see. How was a blind woman supposed to sew clothing for her grandchildren? How was she to cook? These questions plagued her very existence, especially now, as she sat there rubbing her eyes.

Two of the girls giggled as they waited for Xue Jin to focus her vision; the third, a more serious child, stood staring at the elderly woman in consternation.

"What's wrong, Granny?" she asked, a stern note of innocence in her voice.

"Oh nothing," Xue Jin replied. "I'm just old, is all." She squinted. Slowly, the silhouettes began to sharpen and features began to form on shadowy faces.

"If it isn't the Yan sisters!" she practically shouted in joy. She jumped up to give them all a hug, but her knee buckled and she sat back down in shame.

"What's wrong?" Yan Xin, the eldest sister asked. Though she was a fun-loving girl prone to laughter, she knew when matters were serious. She reached over and patted Xue Jin on the back, fearing the woman was suffering from the same attack that took her aunt years earlier. The middle child, Yan Qing, walked forward and sat beside her sister. Only the youngest, the one with a serious disposition, Yan Li, stood watching.

"Oh your father is so lucky to have you girls," Xue Jin gushed. "I'm okay, girls, I'm okay. Oh, your husbands will be so lucky someday, I'm sure of it, such well-behaved girls..."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Yan Li asked quietly.

"Me? Don't worry about me. I just got tired taking this duck and this wine to my husband's grave. I've been there every year since he died fourteen years ago. Can't stop now, can I? Except maybe I was a bit foolish to get the wine—it's a bit too heavy for me, I'm afraid."

"We'll help you carry it!" Yan Qing offered.

"Yes!" Yan Xin added. Though she spoke in a sweet, enthusiastic tone of voice, she was inwardly upset because she hadn't offered to help the woman first. Biting her lip with self-reproach, she turned toward Yan Li and asked why she didn't offer to help.

"Don't worry about it," Xue Jin replied, waving a sun-spotted hand. "She's young, she doesn't know any better. Besides—I can do this by myself. You girls should go down and see the festival parade."

"It's cancelled," Yan Li said, wincing at the fact. She stared down at a lacy leaf, torn and bitten by moths and beetles. "There's a storm coming."

"What?" Xue Jin asked, shocked. She looked up at the sky, which looked to her like a massive block of steely blue. "A storm?"

"Yes," Yan Xin said. "The parade has been cancelled for today. We didn't know why until one of our neighbors, Mr. Yi Zhen from the riverside, told us that a big hurricane was coming. He said he could tell from the clouds."

"We don't think it's true, though," Yan Qing added. "When there's a hurricane, there's rain. But I don't feel a drop of water anywhere on my body."

Yi Zhen and his wife stood side by side in the lobby of Mr. Cheng's tea house, which doubled as a motel of sorts for visiting peddlers from other provinces. His children, Yi Lang and Yi Jia, ages five and three, respectively, slept on a pair of bamboo mats upstairs. Aside from the Yi's and Mr. Cheng, nobody else was in the establishment. This was to be expected—festivals in the village were family affairs. Farmers, butchers, and fishermen alike celebrated in their huts with home-cooked meals consisting of rice, steamed fish, and the rare bowl of boiled eggs or meat. A restaurant like Mr. Cheng's was bound to receive no customers—especially since "Stone Village" was so out of the way and dull that visitors rarely came. However, Mr. Cheng was an enterprising sort of man, and hearing that the parade was cancelled, he developed the idea that the festival was cancelled, too. Thus, he eagerly opened shop, and was disappointed to find that the only customers all day would be the Yi's.

Presently, as he sat by the counter thumping his fingers against the freshly wiped wood, Mr. Cheng, out of sheer boredom, began to hum a non-distinct tune. Yi Zhen's ears perked up at this; he recognized the song. He couldn't remember where or how he'd heard it, but nevertheless, he recognized it, and started walking over toward the counter.

"Hey brother, how's business?"

"Business?" Mr. Cheng snorted. "Look all around you. You tell me how business is."

Yi Zhen blushed. He looked over at his wife, who was gazing down at the floor, mortified. That was a dumb question, he thought to himself. Because his companion had stopped humming (plus his own embarrassment from asking Mr. Cheng such a self-evident question), Yi Zhen quickly forgot all about the song. However, he was eager to continue the conversation he had initiated, and so he continued to speak.

"Sorry, that was stupid of me," Yi Zhen said. Mr. Cheng grumbled. "Why aren't you enjoying the festival with your family then, brother? Not that I'm ungrateful—I'd have nowhere else to go otherwise—but it seems a good day to be with your wife, no?"

"Hmmpf," his sullen friend began. "The festival's cancelled, and still there are no people coming in to eat."

Yi Zhen looked back at his wife. "Cancelled?" his wife mouthed back to him, her expression bright with bemusement. Fighting the urge to laugh, he glanced back at Mr. Cheng.

"How're the preparations going for the hurricane, brother?"

"Hurricane? Hmmpf. Don't be ridiculous. You hear any rain? Thunder? Just cause the wind's a bit sharp, people are staying home. Lemme tell ya, if there was a hurricane, my wife would be home screaming into my ear already. 'Board up the windows!' she'd say. 'We'll die!'" He laughed at the image of his

hysterical wife. Glancing up, he saw a worried expression in Yi Zhen's eyes, and jabbed him with an elbow.

"Don't you worry about no hurricane, sir. We'd feel it if it were coming. You want some wine? It's on me."

"Thanks," the fisherman replied. He knitted his brow and licked his lips. Trouble was brewing, and the villagers were too stubborn to see it. He had lived through a storm himself when he was younger, and he knew that nature was not to be tested. Scratching his head, he forced a weak smile at Mr. Cheng.

"Where's your wife anyway?"

"Oh her? She's with her sister down in her family home. It's close to where you live—by the water."

Mrs. Cheng sat weaving a basket beside an American space heater in her sister, Yan Xiu's home. Her brother-in-law, Yan Fang, worked on some calligraphy beside her, rapidly sliding his ink-tipped brushpen across a thin strip of rice paper. Though he received no education in his youth, Yan Fang was tremendously gifted and interested in the arts. "It is through painting and calligraphy that a virtuous man may truly express himself to others. A few lines on a piece of paper, a few trees on a mountain—these are the greatest windows into a man's soul," he had once said sagaciously to Mr. Cheng, after a few cups of wine. And though his grasp of the Chinese language was feeble (he could read and write few words), it was said by all in the village that the fisherman Yan Fang had a great hand, equatable to the Qing masters, and that his poetry could move even men whose hearts were made of stone.

Working quietly, he suddenly felt a spray of water on the bone of his cheek. He rubbed it gently, turned toward the window, and saw now that the shutters had somehow fallen off. He nudged his wife gently, stood up and walked toward the window. A drizzling rain fell gently outside, and the hut's close proximity to the water gave him a decent view of the stirring waves.

"Dear, come over here. The shutters have fallen off."

"Oh! So they have!" replied his wife, who munched nonchalantly on some watermelon seeds. Mrs. Cheng, sitting across from her, smiled and shook her head.

"It's not like it should matter to you two," she said, nodding a great deal. "You have this space heater. Nothing should ever be wet or cold in your home again. The next time your nephew comes to visit from the United States, let him know to bring me one too."

"That I will, sis. Here, have some watermelon seeds. It's a shame Zhang is working today."

"Yes," Mrs. Cheng remarked gloomily. "My husband is always work, work, work."

"Where're the girls?" Yan Fang asked suddenly.

"Oh, they've gone to the festival. You know how it is, girls these days. They have none of our womanly prudence," his wife answered, laughing at Mrs. Cheng.

"It is a shame that you've had three daughters though, sis. You thought of making another one? It might be a boy this time."

"Oh, don't be silly," Yan Xiu replied, blushing. "Besides, I'm much too old. You should work on having some boys yourself, sis. Mr. Cheng needs someone to run that business someday."

"Fang, Fang, when will the girls be back? Are you sure they're at the festival?"

"Oh let them be, brother!" Mrs. Cheng cried out. "They're young, let them have some fun. What are they to do here, with me weaving and you writing? They would be bored to death. Let them live for once!"

"I know, I know." He glanced back out toward the window, where the waves had begun to fling themselves higher against the rocky coast. "It just seems like a storm's coming is all."

The rain continued to fall as Xue Jin and the Yan girls neared the Drum Mountain gravesite, where all the village's deceased had been interred. It was a small plot of land, expandable if necessary, with several irregularly placed headstones adorned with offerings from the fortunate and living. Behind these, a limp willow tree swung beside an illegible engraving carved into the mountainside.

Standing before her husband's tombstone, Xue Jin poured the rice wine into the grass and placed the roasted duck beside a blossoming daisy. She reached forward and touched tenderly the rock which represented her life's love, swept away the dampness of the rain, and felt within herself a deep chasm that she thought she should never cross in her lifetime.

"We'll meet again soon," she whispered, kneeling forward and bowing her head with womanly grace. The Yan sisters, standing behind her beneath the crooked awning of a pavilion, wept freely into their hands. They knew this was inappropriate, for one was taught that the dead wished us to be happy, and that we should never cry for them. Yet they couldn't help it—never before had they experienced such feelings of beauty and loss.

Yan Li, who was but nine, trembled as she looked before her at the hunched-over silhouette of the widow. She quickly wiped her eyes dry, attempting to stand stern and serious as per usual. However, one should note that she still clung hard to her sisters, twisting their shirts and marking them

with her nails. Suddenly, Xue Jin rose. The elder Yan girls turned the other way, trying to mask their tears.

“Are we going back?” Yan Li asked.

Xue Jin walked slowly toward the pavilion, trying not to stumble over the other graves. She held her hand out and looked up toward the sky. “Let’s hurry. It’s starting to rain harder.”

By twelve in the afternoon, everyone in town knew a storm was coming. It was self-evident; the sharp winds, the drenching rain, the tumultuous waves. Yet, as people tend to believe themselves entitled to stumble upon great fortunes, the villagers, in all their honest simplicity, concluded that nothing serious should result from the coming tempests.

Yi Zhen paced back and forth along a row of tables while Mr. Cheng, ever the active fellow, boarded up the windows of his tea house with several stray strips of timber. Yi Zhen’s wife was sleeping upstairs with the children, and while the thought of their safety brought him comfort, he conceded inwardly that the incoming storm was certain to destroy their riverside home. He stopped suddenly, and roamed sorrowfully through all his belongings. Yes, they had remembered to bring all their money. The family jade, yes—oh, but they forgot to secure his fishing supplies so they wouldn’t get washed away. He frowned. Should he run back to his hut? He wouldn’t be able to work without his fishing nets—the neighbors might offer to lend him one but how shameful would that be...

He looked up at Mr. Cheng, who stood grumbling beside a window.

“All this timber could’ve been firewood...It’s gonna be all damp and rotten. No use at all, no use at all...”

“Where’s your wife, brother?”

Mr Cheng glared at the fisherman, as if he had mentioned something completely disagreeable. “She’s at home,” he answered brusquely.

“Home?” Yi Zhen walked toward his muttering companion. “She’s home? Brother—there’s a hurricane coming! She’s gonna—”

“She’s gonna what? Nothing’s gonna happen to her. She’ll just make more noise up here. ‘Oh, I told you there’d be no customers today.’ Some shit like that. She’s a woman, and they’re absolutely disagreeable when it comes to a man’s ambition. Now your wife, she’s quiet. She’s good for a man. Takes care of the kids, cooks—”

“A hurricane’s coming,” Yi Zhen practically shouted.

Mr Cheng stepped forward, glowering at him. “And then what? What’s that to do with me? If you wanna get her so badly, why don’t you run down in the rain? Why do you think no one else is worried about the damn storm? I’ll tell you what—you’re...”

Yi Zhen bolted out the door before the shopkeeper finished speaking. Running through the rain, he thought of his mother and his sister and his brother too. His hair and his shirt clung to his body like seaweed, and the spiraling gales blew into his face so that he couldn't see. He didn't think as he made his way down the hill toward the riverside—the only thought that flashed in and out of his mind was an image of his mother, his sister, and his brother.

Once he reached the lower section of the village, he started banging against all the doors of the huts.

“A hurricane's coming! It's going to flood! Run to higher ground, run! Run!”

Hands tapped from fastened windows, fingers waved out from half-open doors. Still, he screamed and shouted, running through the storm like he had lost his mind.

But would divine providence favor such a man? Would this simple fisherman, with a wife and two children and the honest intention to rescue his kin from disaster—could he perform a miracle and get people to listen?

“Mr. Yi, have you lost your mind? What are you doing? Come in here!”

Yi Zhen turned toward the source of this voice, covering his eyes from the violent gusts. Peering carefully out at him from a half-closed door was Mrs. Cheng.

“Mrs. Cheng, you have to run. I'm not kidding. I'm not kidding, Mrs. Cheng. The hurricane's coming.”

“Mr. Yi, have you lost your mind?” she repeated.

“Close the door! The rain's leaking in,” a voice shouted from behind her.

“Mrs. Cheng, please. Please. I'm begging you. Run to your husband's tea shop. The hurricane's coming. It's going to flood. Please, I'm begging you.”

“What's the matter now?” a voice called out. It was Yan Fang.

“Mr. Yan, please listen to me. A hurricane's coming—please run—get your wife and your daughters and run to Mr. Cheng's tea shop. It's safer there. You're gonna die here.”

Yan Fang stared at the fisherman, his eyes soft and mellow. Looking into Yi Zhen's face, he suddenly realized that he was staring into a man unselfish in his intentions; a man wholly desperate in his intentions to save. A fire seemed to spark between them, a fire more rewarding than romantic and familial love—it was the complete and total understanding of one man to another.

“Mrs. Cheng. Pack your things. Tell my wife I'm going home to get our belongings. I trust that Mr. Yi is telling the truth. We must seek higher ground.”

Xue Jin and the Yan sisters stumbled down the road into the town, blasted by an unforgiving wind from every direction. They clung to one another, linking their arms so tightly together that the younger girls felt quite invincible in the storm. The elderly woman clenched her teeth tightly; the gales had become entirely unbearable to her in her old age, and she thought momentarily that if God decided she should die, then she would have done so willingly. Yet, urged on by her stronger willed companions, she moved on, weathering through the tempests.

Yi Zhen climbed up the steps into the town with a long line of villagers behind him. With help from the respectable Yan Fang, regarded by all as a man infinitely wise, he had managed to convince most of the townsfolk to seek higher ground in the storm. Though his face was grim, his triumph had sent his heart aflutter. At the top of the hill, he looked up from the ground and saw in the distance several strange, stumbling silhouettes, linked arm-in-arm. He walked toward them and started gesturing at the tea house.

“What is that man doing?” Yan Qing asked, looking up.

“Isn’t that Mr. Yi?” Yan Xin said.

“Oh! Mother and Father, too!” echoed Yan Li.

Mr. Cheng beamed as he walked from table to table, offering hot tea and dried towels to all the villagers who had come to his shop in the storm. He felt rather clever now in his decision to keep the tea house open during the festival, and thought that he would do well with a massage from his wife tonight. The Yan sisters, who were still together with Xue Jin, sat chattering with their mother in a corner beside a crackling fire. Yan Fang looked at them and nodded. He walked toward Yi Zhen, who was then sitting at a table, his hands clasped around a cup of tea.

“Thanks for your help,” the fisherman said. “They would’ve never listened to me.”

“It’s nothing. If you didn’t come down there, screaming and shouting and making a fool of yourself, then I wouldn’t have come up here either.” He chuckled. “And my daughters are here too. What are the odds? I knew they were in town, but they might’ve been staying with one of the...”

Xue Jin stood up from her seat. “I’m going to get some more tea,” she told her younger companions. Stepping away from the fire, she walked toward one of the windows. It was obscured and fixed into place by several pieces of timber, but she could still hear the storm raging ceaselessly through the glass. Standing on the tips of her toes, she looked out from an uncovered

space toward the mountain and saw nothing but a great expanse of spiraling gray. Sighing, she stepped backward and saw, through her blurry vision, a pale and fragile butterfly. It was hovering frantically about the room, wishing for nothing but to flutter outside and into the storm.