Finding Bull

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Back when I was a schoolkid, the first thing I did any time I went back out into the country was go look for Gû. Back then we might as well have been roped together. That's what our other aunt said. Right from the start, she was cool to the idea of me hanging around Gû. "Gû ain't into school," she'd always say, when I was around. She didn't want his ways rubbing off on me. But I always felt the grown-ups were unfairly prejudiced against Gû. They didn't understand him.

Gû wasn't his real name, but he was built like his mother, also my aunt. He was heavyset and flat-out big. The ground shook when he walked. Standing next to him was like standing next to a bull. People called him Gû — *Bull* — even when we were little. Only our grandmother called him by his real name, Hiông. She loved him truly.

Gû played hard, always. That's what roped us together. As I saw it at the time, Gû was as learned as my English teacher, geography teacher, and history teacher put together. Take cricket-fighting. Gû could tell if a cricket could fight just by how it *sounded*. Now I had always thought *sih-sut-á* — that's what we called crickets — went see-soo, see-soo. But Gû said they went kiri-coo, kiri-coo. He did an experiment, to show me. He tickled a cricket's rear end with a blade of grass. It started chirping and chirping. I listened close. At first I couldn't tell, but then I heard it. It really was kiri-coo, kiri-coo … not see-soo, see-soo. For good measure, Gû told me that's exactly why they're called crickets in English. City kid that I was, in spite of my experience with crickets, I had not known that. That's when it hit me on a deeper level: Gû was a man of live intellect. Somehow he had even come by a superior command of English. He just wasn't into school, because school was lifeless.

Gû's knowledge of geography was pretty formidable too. It showed when we went "cricket-flushing," to try for the *tō-peh-á*, the giant crickets. Oftentimes I couldn't find the *tō-peh-á* hole. He would poke the ground with a branch one time like it was nothing and the hole would be right there. "I'm going to flood this hole," he'd say. "You

go wait by that hole. Snatch him up as soon as he sticks his head out. Don't let him duck back in." For whatever reason, the *tō̍-peh-á* of Mattau always listened to Gû. Once they'd drunk their fill, they'd bumble mindlessly out of the other hole and be there for the taking. Unfortunately, the strategic secret to Gû's success was closely guarded. He never shared it. He had the upper hand in cricket-flushing for the longest time, till the end of junior high school, when his secret got out.

When it came to catching dragonflies, I held my own. Uncle Chhiong, the goldsmith in the shop, had improved my technique. We kids used to snatch little dragonflies, tie them to a long blade of grass, and wave and whirl them around and around to lure the big ones. Uncle Chhiong had experience catching dragonflies, since a lot of *bûntàn* pomelo trees grew in their *the̍h-á*, in the yard around their house on the farm. He taught me to catch the little ones alive and leash them by the tail with a blade of grass. That's all you had to do. They'd circle on their own. The big ones would get hungry and come for a bite, and when they bit, they didn't let go.

With this hack, we were set. Gû was so delighted with my so-called invention that he gifted me his second best cricket, Tōa Chhùi — *Jaws*. But I knew I'd never beat Gû at cricket-fighting. Gû may have opened my ears to kiri-coo, kiri-coo, but I still couldn't tell the strong from the weak, nor did I know how to train crickets. Gû would give me good, strong crickets to bring home, in grass-lined matchboxes with a hole up top for air. Somehow they'd stop singing and preening after a few days; in a week or two they'd be dead, and I'd be counting the days till I could go find Gû out in the country again.

Gû wasn't into school, as they say. He didn't sit the university entrance exams, towards the end of high school. I went up to North City Tâipak for more schooling. We saw less of each other. Then I went abroad. Almost thirty years would go by before I could come find Gû again.

Gû was now married with children. His parents had passed, leaving the shop in his hands. The storefront seemed darkened. There was no goldsmith on site, and visitors were few. Business probably wasn't too good. Gû's wife Hēng told me these were dark days for jewellers. There were robbers, and frequent visits from tax bureau agents with too little to do. The signage for the gold shop had been

taken down, to rein in the unwanted attention. Hēng gestured to the steel shutter and the police-style cap on the shelf. “And that’s why Gû joined the Civil Defense Brigade.”

I asked her if that helped.

“It helps some,” she said. “With that cap there, it makes the foul ones think twice.” She made it sound like a talisman from the temple, pasted at the doorway for protection or whatever. Now Hēng came from way out in the country, from Koa͘ Tiān. It didn’t sound like she feared the tax bureau, though. “And our boy is almost due for military service,” she went on. “We’re better off not getting caught up in anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like when the Democratic Progress Party is campaigning, we hold the firecrackers. They say if a family gets noticed for the wrong reason, the boys are apt to get pushed around and worked over pretty bad in the service.”

I didn’t know how true all this was, but Hēng was a local girl, someone whose words meant something. Not one for fairy tales.

Gû and I stepped outside for tea under the *têng-á-kha* — the arcade — in the evening after dinner. Gû made a pot of winter oolong from Chúilí, in Lâmtâu. It was a thick, rich tea. In the cup it was the tint of liquid gold, and it spewed aroma. On the tongue it was sweet, *kam* fineness; the spit glands gushed, helpless. Flowing down-throat, it bathed the body like a hot spring. The pores snapped awake in unison.

Smoking a short ivory pipe, Gû motioned to the shop sign and said, “This stuff of mine treats high blood pressure and diabetes best. If only your aunt were still around. This stuff would’ve saved her from passing so early.”

Gû’s mother — my aunt — had died kind of young from diabetes and a hemorrhagic stroke. I looked at the sign. It said 森源靈芝製藥麻豆總經銷 (*Sim-goân Lêng-chi Chè-io̍h, Môa-tāu Chóng-keng-siau*): Sim Goân *Lêngchi* Pharmaceuticals, Exclusive Mattau Distributor. So Gû was selling *lêngchi* mushroom. I had heard of this stuff when I was a kid. It was some kind of magical cure-all.

Gû said, “These work great for hemorrhoids. If only my old man could’ve taken this stuff. He wouldn’t have needed surgery.”

Gû's father was a short man, modestly built. He died at eighty while getting surgery for piles. I didn't answer Gû. I was unfamiliar with the medicinal properties of *lêngchi*. I only nodded to sympathize with what happened to Gû's father.

Gû dealt me a gold-embossed business card. "My stuff was formulated by this Japanese-educated Ph.D. from Tâilâm. They applied for a United States patent too. We'll be exporting pretty soon…." I nodded again, to show approval of his business acumen. "Now if the liver stiffens," he went on, "you can get well taking this stuff alone. Just be sure to take it every day. You'll see results in just a few months. If only you could see how much of this stuff I sell every month." I didn't bother to nod anymore. "Above all, this stuff is best for those in good health. It promotes the circulation. It nourishes your bones. Look at me: I've only been taking it for a few months. My complexion is outstanding. And I barely have any gray hairs. Look at the two of us sitting side by side. Who would know we're the same age?" He punched himself in the arm as he spoke, to show how in shape he was.

The more he spoke, the less faith I had in the *lêngchi* mushroom. After all these years, I had so many fond recollections and things that happened abroad that I wanted to talk to Gû about, but Gû seemed to feel and remember nothing. He went on and on about *lêngchi* all night till I could barely believe he was physically still capable of speech. A few times I asked about the time before his mother passed, or Chhiong, but he would swerve right back to talking about his stuff….

I didn't get it. Well, the other day, when Gû wasn't there, Hēng told me Gû had lost several hundred thousand playing the lottery. Was that why money was tight? Had the pressures and burdens of daily life led to this one-track obsession with making money, never mind old times and the friends we had been? Or was this just what had become of this society of ours in this time of economic progress and modernization? Was I just too out of touch from my long absence to understand the changes that had taken place? A darkness crept over me on the inside as I sat there thinking in silence. It was like a formless gray cloud had gotten between Gû and me and grown, cutting him off from me, cutting then off from now.

It was past midnight. It was just the two of us under the arcade. Cup after cup of that luscious, fragrant, *kam* oolong had me fully awake

still, far from thoughts of sleep. The lamps of the arcade were high and faint. I took in the sight of Gû sitting on his stool brewing tea, shoulders hunched in concentration. He was still huge, but in truth he did not look well. His face was sallow. His hair was half grayed out, in streaks and splotches. He had a crew cut, like the Civil Defense Brigade member he had become.

Gû once lived to play, hard. Nowadays Gû at most played the lottery. He had changed, entirely.

Afternoon of the next day, Gû brought me to the bus stop. He had brought a paper bag. "Here's some *lêngchi* for you to bring home to your father in Canada. If it's lung cancer, this stuff could cure him." He went on. "Don't worry. If it helps him get better, call me and I'll send you more."

I got on the bus and sat down. Suddenly I heard it. Kiri-coo, kiri-coo. I opened the bag and looked inside. Sure enough, there was a little box on top with a hole in it, and a cricket inside. I quickly turned. Gû was still standing there. I picked up the box and waved it for him to see. He waved back — and kept waving, with more and more conviction. A child's unguarded smile spread across Gû's broad face. His lips parted wide in laughter. He gave a thumbs-up and said something, but I could not hear him.

The bus began to move. The dust rose and swarmed thickly at the rear, veiling my line of sight. Now a rainbow splendor flooded the sprawling back windshield. The last light of the afternoon country sun had burst through the bank of reddish-gold clouds over the far western horizon! My heart pounded with happiness, for the Gû of old had blasted back from the past to see me off from good old Mattau.

I stepped off the bus at Háiliâu. I opened the box. A shiny black cricket squinted up at me from within, preening with aplomb. I bent down and let it out of the box. It stood still for a moment before bounding towards the expanse of grass and weeds by the road. Going, going.... I stood where I was for a moment, then got back on the bus. The driver shut the door, and I no longer heard kiri-coo, kiri-coo.