

Sophia Bell with Professor Wang Ming

**RED
DUST**

**GOLDEN
LIGHT**

紅塵，金光

HIDDEN TRUTHS IN CHINA

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Hidden Truths in China

Author: **Sophia Bell** with Professor **Wang Ming**

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In terms of writing style, while editorial adjustments have been made where needed, the original tone and expressive spirit of the storyteller have been preserved as much as possible, out of respect for the source and to maintain the authenticity of the narrative.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The journey recounted in these pages belongs entirely to Professor Wang Ming. My role, as the writer, was to work in close collaboration with him, listening to his experiences and helping to transform his extraordinary story into this book. Although this book was formed from our collaboration, the narrative, recollections, and profound truths presented here are his alone.

- **Sophia Bell**

THE LIVES MEDIA

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PREFACE

I was once a man who believed solely in science. As a medical professor and an entrepreneur, I viewed the world through the lens of logic, evidence, and tangible perception. I thought I had a firm grasp on life—on success, on the limits of human potential. That summer's trip to China began as a simple curiosity about traditional medicine and the changes in my ancestral homeland after many years away. I was completely unprepared for what was to come.

The door to another world opened for me, not in laboratories or university lecture halls, but in tranquil teahouses, on misty mountain peaks, in small towns where time seemed to stand still, and through the eyes of ordinary people who possessed extraordinary wisdom. I met hermits, healers with strange methods, and people who could perceive things far beyond the scope of science. The solid worldview I had built my entire life began to shake at its very foundations.

But the journey to discover the wonders of ancient Eastern culture also led us—my wife, Qing Ling, and me—into another reality, a dark and brutal one hidden behind China's modern facade. We stumbled upon a

path of genuine spiritual cultivation, a spiritual discipline based on the principles of Truthfulness–Compassion–Forbearance, which brought light and hope to millions. And for that very reason, we came face to face with the stark reality of a senseless persecution, a brutal suppression of faith that few in the outside world knew about.

This book is a record of that tumultuous seven-month journey—from a skeptical scientist to a seeker of truth, from a curious traveler to an unwilling witness to both great compassion and extreme evil. This is not just my story, but a story of perseverance, of the power of faith in the face of adversity, and of the unquenchable light of hope even in the deepest darkness.

I write these things not to persuade, but to share an experience that completely changed my life. Perhaps, somewhere in this journey, you too will find something for yourself—an insight, a flicker of light, an answer to the questions you have always carried in your heart.

I invite you to join me on a journey to where the East truly shines.

Wang Ming

CHAPTER 1: AN UNSCRIPTED MOMENT

The Peculiar Invitation and the Otherworldly Space

I stood silently before the dark wooden door numbered 603.

The room was tucked away in a secluded corner at the end of the ground-floor hallway—a place that seemed to have been forgotten by the pale fluorescent light of the convention center. I could still feel the coolness of the brass room number plate, tarnished with time. Under the

dim light, the number seemed to vibrate softly, a vague sensation, as if it had been waiting for me.

About ten minutes earlier, I had been sitting in the main hall on the third floor, where PowerPoint slides displayed complex charts, flashing incessantly like the frantic pulse of a global healthcare industry in a perpetual race. Then, a sudden impulse reminded me of a tiny slip of paper, something I had intended to toss into the trash on the first day of the conference, still lying dormant in my vest pocket.

It was nothing eye-catching. An ivory-white slip of paper, bearing only a single, simple line of printed English:

“Ancient Healing Arts and Uncharted Possibilities”

And a name: Zhang Feng – from China.

Location: Room 603.

I remember a small smirk touching my lips. Partly because the title sounded somewhat cliché, like an advertisement for a weekend meditation retreat in some remote countryside. And partly, perhaps mostly, because I was a man of numbers, of peer-reviewed studies, of clear-cut data analysis. My wife, Qing Ling, with the subtlety of a linguist, often quipped that my thinking was as precise and exact as the mechanism of the Swiss

watch I always wore. I usually just stayed silent, taking it as a tacit compliment to my steadfastness.

And yet, for some reason, the slip of paper had remained in my pocket for two days, amidst a packed schedule and important meetings. It was as if it possessed an invisible weight, waiting for a certain moment. It wasn't until this afternoon, when a forty-minute gap suddenly opened up in my schedule and my mind was weary from the endless repetition of statistical charts, that my hand seemed to move of its own accord, touching my pocket—and slowly pulling out the slip of paper.

“A quick look couldn't hurt,” I muttered, more a fleeting thought than a considered decision.

And so now here I was, in front of Room 603. The closer I got, the more the clamor and chaotic sounds from the main conference rooms seemed to be filtered out by some invisible wall, then dissipated. I could hear my own footsteps pressing into the thick carpet, each step like a small drop of water slowly falling into an unusually still space, a silence that was almost tangible.

I pushed the door gently. It gave a soft *creak*, like the sigh of old wood.

Inside... was a completely different world.

There were no dazzling projectors. No formal lectern. No cold white lighting or the amplified sound of a microphone echoing from the conference's modern sound system. Instead, the room was illuminated by a soft, warm yellow light, emanating from a few rice paper lanterns hanging near the ceiling. A pure, herbal fragrance wafted gently to my nose—reminiscent of sandalwood but purer and more delicate, which, for some reason, had a surprisingly calming effect on my mind.

Only a dozen or so people were in the room, seated on simple wooden chairs. They sat upright, silent, all facing forward, as if listening to an invisible piece of music, a melody that could only be perceived in the depths of consciousness. No one was looking at their phone. No one was scribbling notes. No one spoke. The silence here was not a mere absence of sound, but a living entity, with form and substance, that enveloped and permeated every corner of the room. It made me hold my breath.

I froze for a few seconds at the threshold. My crisp business suit, my striped silk tie, the gleaming metal name badge pinned to my chest—all symbols of my status and confidence—now made me feel... out of place, like a discordant note in a symphony of stillness. But strangely, no one looked at me as if I were an uninvited intruder. Their gazes did pass over me, very quickly, but with no judgment or prying curiosity—it was more like

the gaze of people who... had seen this, or something similar, before. A silent acceptance.

I took a quiet breath and tried to step in as lightly as possible, choosing an empty chair in the back row. The chair's back was slightly reclined, its fabric worn, but never in my life had I sat down with such reservation and caution.

At the front, sitting on a plain wooden chair, slightly lower than the others, was a man. Zhang Feng, I presumed, based on the name on the paper. The yellow light from the nearest lantern cast a slanted beam across his cheekbone and one of his temples. His face, at a glance, might not have seemed remarkable—but it held something that made it impossible for me to look away. His gaze was not piercing, nor was it scrutinizing. It simply was—as placid and deep as an autumn lake without a ripple, embracing and serene.

I could not say I understood what was truly happening here.

I no longer remembered what I had expected upon deciding to enter this room. An erudite lecture on traditional medicine? A colorful demonstration of esoteric qigong? Or worse, some clever pitch for an unverified therapy?

The atmosphere here suggested nothing of the sort. Everything felt... strangely real. So real that I, a man who had always prided himself on his ability to control and analyze, began to feel a bit... disoriented.

I sat there, my hands resting on my thighs, trying to slow my breathing, to make it as light as possible so as not to disturb the almost sacred stillness that filled the space. Each minute passed as heavily as lead. A strange feeling, an unprecedented curiosity, crept into every corner of my mind—as if I were inadvertently standing on the edge of something vast, a world I had never known, a truth... that had never been named.

I shifted slightly in my seat, trying to merge with the thickening silence. My gaze drifted involuntarily toward the man named Zhang Feng, and I waited.

Waiting for what, I myself did not know.

The Serene and Mysterious People

I chose a discreet seat in the back row, trying to make myself inconspicuous, like an accidental spectator who had wandered into a pantomime already in progress.

Not a sound. Not a word. They just sat there—remarkably upright and natural—as if the posture were an extension of their very being. Their backs were straight, yet their shoulders were completely relaxed, their hands resting calmly on their laps. An inner stability, without a trace of effort or pretense.

I began to observe each person more closely.

Nearest to me was an elderly woman—perhaps in her sixties—wearing a simple, dark-brown garment, her silver hair tied neatly in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were not closed, but her gaze seemed to pierce through some ethereal mist, fixed on an indeterminate point far beyond the back wall. In another corner, a rather young man—his eyes bright yet tranquil, devoid of prying curiosity—possessed the solemnity of one who had weathered many storms, though he was likely not yet thirty. And in front of them, an old man sat at ease, his back resting lightly against the chair, his expression so placid that I thought he might have dozed off.

No one exchanged glances. No polite smiles, no subtle nods, not even a fleeting raise of an eyebrow. And yet, the presence of each person was... full, substantial.

I did not sense cold indifference, much less the air of "just being here for show" so common in other settings. They were truly *there*, completely present in each

moment, in each breath. A peculiar feeling crept over me. It was as if something invisible—without sound, without form, immeasurable by any instrument I knew—was gently pervading the air. Could this be a form of energy that our science had yet to define, or was it merely my own illusion in this unique space?

I did not know where they came from, what they did for a living, or what their daily lives were like. I did not know if they knew one another. But here, in this room, they were like ancient, solemn stones in the midst of a great river: not seeking attention, yet possessing an unyielding stability and wordless secrets.

Once again, the feeling of being out of place washed over me. The designer suit, the prestigious professorship, the research papers cited hundreds of times in international journals—all the things that had once been my pride—now seemed to carry no weight at all in this room.

A silence... descended. But it was not emptiness. It was as if I were standing at the mouth of a deep, ancient well, a vague sense of anticipation stirring within me, as though some mystery was waiting to be discovered from its depths.

At the front, Zhang Feng still sat motionlessly, having not yet spoken a word. But then, he moved slightly.

Just a slight tilt of his head—like a breeze rippling across a still lake—and the entire room seemed to shift with him. I saw every gaze turn toward him in unison, slowly, naturally, without hurry or pressure. An unspoken agreement.

I, too, found my gaze drawn to him. Not entirely out of curiosity, but as if by some invisible force that left me no other choice.

The Encounter with Zhang Feng

After that slight tilt of his head, Zhang Feng remained silent for a few breaths. The room grew even more still. Then, without a word of introduction, without a single superfluous gesture, he began to speak.

His voice was deep, warm, and enunciated every word with a clarity that was neither fast nor slow—completely different from the eloquent, crowd-controlling style of the professional speakers I knew. He spoke in Chinese, a Mandarin with an ancient, rustic cadence, as if passed down from an era when people conversed with sincerity rather than through microphones or polished PowerPoint slides.

He spoke of *qi*. Of the invisible flows of energy within the body. Of the connection between the beat of the heart and the subtle fluctuations of the universe. Of the manifestations of the pulse—the silent signals sent by the body. These were all concepts I had skimmed through in books while researching Eastern traditional medicine, but had never truly taken seriously. Through the lens of a Western-trained medical professor, “*qi*” was as vague to me as “a courageous spirit” or “a passionate heart”—beautiful, evocative metaphors, but how could they be quantified, how could they be brought into a laboratory?

But the way Zhang Feng spoke was entirely different. He did not present a theory. He told stories. Stories of ancient physicians who cured incurable diseases, sometimes just by adjusting the patient’s state of mind before even resorting to medicine. Stories of complex cases where the pulse manifestations revealed things more profound than the most advanced modern blood tests. I listened, at first perhaps only out of politeness, but then found myself drawn in—not because I believed, but because I could not help but listen. There was something in his voice, in his calm storytelling, that truly held me.

Then, abruptly, he stopped.

The already quiet space now seemed to thicken, to congeal. An almost absolute stillness, without a single cough or a heavy breath, descended upon everyone.

He slowly swept his gaze across everyone in the room. And then—that gaze came to rest on me, the only stranger present.

There was no prying curiosity. No knowing, “I-see-right-through-you” look. Just a direct, placid, yet profound gaze. A strange sensation ran down my spine. Under that gaze, I felt that the things that defined me—the expensive suit, the diplomas—seemed to lose their meaning. Even the hidden corners of my mind, which I thought I had locked away securely, felt as though they had been touched.

He smiled faintly, a barely perceptible smile at the corner of his mouth. Then he spoke—his voice still even, not raised, carrying no hint of warning or judgment. Just a single sentence, uttered in the stillness, as if he were gently touching a hidden wound that I myself had intentionally forgotten.

“Your pulse,” he said, his eyes still on me, “is somewhat deep, and there is a blockage. Like a stream with a boulder in its path, preventing the water from flowing naturally. Your *qi* and blood are therefore stagnant. But more telling is the knot in your heart. An old matter that

has not yet healed, an unnamable pressure, is making it difficult for the energy in your body to return to its natural state of balance.”

My entire body went rigid. A ringing filled my ears.

I had not spoken a single word to him. Not even a nod of greeting. And obviously, he had not come near me, had not used his slender fingers to touch my wrist—he had not “taken my pulse” in any way I had ever learned or known in all my years of medical research.

So... what had he just done? How did he know?

My inherent skepticism, the instinct of a scientist, immediately surged in my mind. Could this be just a sophisticated psychological trick? A well-prepared “cold reading”? Or had he taken the trouble to “investigate” me before this talk?

But no. How could he? What he had just said... how could a stranger possibly know? These were things I held alone in my heart, or at most, things my wife, Qing Ling, might have vaguely sensed. There were even things so private that not even she, the person closest to me, had ever heard me confess.

I sat there, my hands on my thighs, trying to keep them from trembling, but my chest was a tangled mess.

The scientific, rational part of me screamed for a logical explanation. But another part—the intuitive part I often dismissed, the part I rarely used—remained silent, observing.

I suddenly felt like a child standing before a giant map of the world for the first time, only to discover that behind the familiar paper lay a second map, with strange lines, with unnamed lands, more complex, more profound—a map without borders or a legend.

Confronted with this borderless map, I suddenly felt how limited my familiar tools of measurement had become. Could there be truths that lie beyond the grasp of scientific quantification?

The Wordless Conversation and the Deep Impression

After that strange remark aimed directly at me, Zhang Feng seemed to pay me no further mind. He continued his talk naturally, as if there had been no interruption, his voice as gentle and steady as the patter of fine rain on the eaves.

I remained seated in my spot, but my mind, however, could find no peace.

Every word, every idea he spoke of afterward—about the connection between *qi* and the mind, about the harmony between the small human being and the vastness of heaven and earth—now seemed like nothing more than sounds floating past my ears. My entire focus was spinning around a single, unanswerable question: How did he know those things about me?

I tried to maintain the calmest expression possible, not to reveal the turmoil within. But I knew my face must have been somewhat stiff, unnatural. Occasionally, when I looked up, I would catch his gaze sweeping past me, very quickly. In that gaze, there was no hint of an explanation, no flicker of apology. Only a... presence. Quiet. Profound. It was as if he could fully sense the small tempest swirling within me—and simply accepted it calmly, without judgment.

The feeling when our eyes met was hard to name. It wasn't like a normal conversation, nor was it a deliberate attempt to persuade. It was more like a silent perception, a connection that needed no words, very vague, yet palpable.

I was not one to easily believe in spiritual matters. But in that moment, I knew something was reaching me—not

through logical reasoning, but through that very silence and that penetrating gaze. It did not cause a great shock, but it was slowly etching a deep mark on my consciousness.

And perhaps, a part of me no longer wanted to resist that strange feeling.

When the talk concluded, the room maintained its astonishing stillness. Not a single round of applause. No one rushed forward to shake the speaker's hand. People rose one by one, gave a slight bow toward Zhang Feng, and then departed quietly, with a solemnity and familiarity—as if this were not a special seminar, but an intimate gathering, a daily routine among people who seemed to have known each other for a long time... on some plane of consciousness I had not yet reached.

I found myself lingering, though I wasn't sure why. When only a few people remained in the room, I instinctively stepped forward.

Zhang Feng looked at me, his eyes as calm and luminous as before.

"I know you must have many questions," he said softly, his voice holding no surprise, as if he had anticipated this.

I just nodded slightly, not initially intending to say anything. But then the pent-up questions tumbled out, albeit hesitantly: “The matter of my... pulse... and also... how did you know those things...”

He smiled faintly, not interrupting my question, nor rushing to answer. After a few seconds of silence, he spoke slowly, his voice as light as a breeze:

“That is merely a rudimentary understanding of the intimate connection between a person’s body and mind. Your modern science has achieved extraordinary feats in understanding the body’s tangible structure, but perhaps it is still a bit bewildered when faced with the invisible aspects, the subtle energy flows.”

I remained silent, listening.

He continued, his voice still slow, but his eyes looked directly at me, holding something profound:

“There are things that cannot be explained thoroughly in a short talk. If you truly have the heart to understand more deeply—not through theories in books, but through your own experience—then perhaps, China is the place you should go.”

My heart skipped a beat.

He paused for a moment, then spoke his final sentence, his voice calm but heavy with weight, as if closing a familiar door while simultaneously cracking open an entirely new path:

“If you dare to embark on that journey, you may no longer be the same person you were before.”

He gave me another slight nod, and then, with a strange placidity, he blended in with the few remaining people and left the room. His figure vanished behind the door so quickly that I thought I might have witnessed an illusion.

I stood alone in the room, which was beginning to feel cold. The wind from outside Tokyo had begun to seep through the crack in the door.

But in my heart...
something had just been truly stirred. Very gently. But enough that I could no longer ignore it.

An Invitation to a Journey

The last of the figures had vanished behind the door. I stood there, in the middle of the empty room, trying to sort through my chaotic thoughts. Mr. Zhang Feng's

invitation to China, though vague, continued to echo in my mind. An inexplicable urge made me walk quickly out into the hallway, hoping I might see him again.

Fortunately, he had not gone far. He was standing alone at the end of the hall, near the exit, with a pensive look, as if waiting for something—or perhaps, for me.

He looked at me as I approached, his gaze retaining that same calm and profound quality, as if my seeking him out were entirely natural.

"Mr. Wang Ming, is there something more you wish to discuss?" His voice was low and even, like the wind rustling through leaves in a silent garden.

I just nodded slightly. "Indeed, there is much I wish to understand better. But... I don't know where to begin, what to ask."

Zhang Feng smiled, a rare but sincere smile. "You don't need to try to 'begin' so formally. Sometimes, it is enough to simply let things 'continue' naturally."

I fell silent, feeling my own smallness in the face of his words, which seemed simple yet held a layer of meaning I could not fully grasp. It felt like standing before a dense, ancient forest where all familiar maps had become useless.

"What I was able to share in the talk just now," he continued, his voice still even, "is truly like a few drops on the surface of a vast ocean. If you truly want to understand, to feel, you need to step into the current yourself."

I frowned slightly, trying to picture what he meant.

"This is not about you coming to study a subject," he went on, seemingly reading my thoughts. "Nor is it about learning a new theory to add to your store of knowledge. It is simply about living—living fully, for long enough—in a place where the things you are searching for are still present in the very breath of daily life."

With that, he slowly took a small slip of paper from his vest pocket. It looked as if it had been torn from an old, faded notebook. He handed it to me. On it, in clear handwriting, was an address in Guizhou province, China, along with a phone number.

"If you can find the time, this summer might be suitable," he said. "There is no need to inform me in advance. Just come, if you truly wish to in your heart, and if you feel the time is right."

I took the slip of paper, my palm vaguely sensing its fragility and the warmth left behind by his hand. A

dozen questions were on the tip of my tongue, but something kept me from voicing them.

"You might consider bringing your wife along," he added, his gaze still on me, a look that seemed to see right through me. "I have a sense she has a very natural connection to traditional culture. There are things there that she might well grasp even faster than you, without needing logical explanations."

I looked up sharply, trying not to reveal the astonishment rising in my chest. He knew about Qing Ling. How was that possible? In just a few short minutes, how could he know such private things?

Zhang Feng seemed to pay no mind to my expression. He straightened up slightly. He was not a tall man, but as he adjusted the lapel of his jacket, I felt that his silhouette held an unusual strength.

"This will not be an ordinary trip, Mr. Wang Ming," he said in a final, clear, and solemn tone. "Nor will it be a scientific experiment for you to verify. Consider this a fated beginning, an opportunity. The rest... depends entirely on your choice."

He gave a slight nod in farewell, then blended into the bustling Tokyo crowd outside, vanishing as quickly as if he were merely a fleeting thought in my mind.

I remained, alone in the hallway that was beginning to fill with noise again.

The small note with its handwritten address lay in my palm, strangely warm. The ink at the end of a line was slightly blurred.

I had not yet made any decision. But a sense of unease, a faint call from a distant place, seemed to have begun seeping into the deepest corners of my soul.

* * *

CHAPTER 2: THE FIRST STEP ONTO STRANGE LAND

The Decision to Go

That evening, I left Room 603 with a strange feeling, like someone waking from a brief, daytime dream. The main hall of the convention center was still brightly lit, the sound of microphones still echoing steadily from adjacent presentation rooms—but all those familiar sounds seemed to be pushed far away, becoming faded and less real. In my vest pocket was the small slip of paper Mr. Zhang Feng had given me. No company logo, not a single job title, nothing but a handwritten address

in Guizhou province, a phone number, and an unnamable resonance left over from the unusual encounter.

Returning to the hotel, I entered the luxurious room as usual, but the feeling was no longer the same. The room—with its warm yellow lights, its neatly arranged wooden furniture, the fresh fruit tray on the table—felt unusually empty tonight. The usually comfortable silence now seemed only to amplify the vague, inexplicable things stirring within me.

I took the slip of paper from my pocket and placed it on the table. I turned it over and over. Just a few simple lines of text. And yet, my eyes were drawn to the unfamiliar place name, an indescribable feeling, as if it were a half-open door to a place I had never known.

I felt the need to share this with someone, if only to find some balance for my jumbled thoughts. I picked up the phone and called Qing Ling.

“Hello, my love. How was your conference today?” Her voice came from the other end of the line, as familiar, gentle, and full of warmth as ever.

“Everything is fine... but something rather strange just happened... and I think you should hear about it.”

I began to recount everything—slowly, trying to keep my voice calm, without embellishment or exaggeration. I told her about the unusual meeting room on the ground floor, about the silent people with their indescribably placid demeanor, about a man named Zhang Feng. I tried to describe his gaze, the “remote pulse reading” without any physical contact, and his words about my condition—things I believed no one else could possibly know, except for me, and perhaps, Qing Ling.

The other end of the line was silent for a long moment. I could picture her thoughtful expression.

“...Are you sure you didn’t imagine it, Ming?” she finally asked, her tone not one of sharp doubt, but more like a linguist trying to find a precise definition for a new concept. “Maybe you’re just a bit tired after several days of intense conferencing?”

“No, I was completely awake, Ling,” I replied, my voice firm. “And you know me—I’m not the type to easily believe in things without a scientific basis. But... this, it felt too real. And honestly, I don’t know where to file it within everything I’ve ever known or learned.”

I went on to tell her about the strange feeling of having a wordless communication with Mr. Zhang Feng—a connection that bypassed rational analysis and seemed to come from some deeper level of consciousness.

"And he invited me to China, perhaps this summer," I said, trying to keep my voice as normal as possible. "A rather remote place, in Guizhou. He didn't say specifically what I would do there, or whom I would meet, only that... if I truly wanted to better understand what I experienced, I should go there."

Qing Ling fell silent again. This time, the silence lasted a little longer.

I knew she loved Chinese culture, was well-versed in ancient classics, and had even taught courses on Eastern philosophical schools. But concepts like *qigong*, spiritual cultivation, or unlocking latent abilities had, for her, always belonged mainly to the realm of literature, of the history of thought—never a reality to be experienced or a practical belief in daily life.

"Do you think... he's some kind of cultivator?" Qing Ling asked, her voice a bit hesitant. "With no clear information, no verifiable background? What if... what if it was all just a cleverly staged performance? Some special kind of psychological influence?"

"I've considered all of those possibilities," I admitted honestly. "But what makes it impossible for me to just dismiss it all is—what he said about my condition. No one could guess with such accuracy. And his eyes... they were truly unlike anyone I've ever met in my life."

I did not try to convince her. I was still trying to understand it myself.

Qing Ling was a very cautious person. Her caution had saved me from unnecessary business risks more than once. But I also knew she was profound enough not to hastily dismiss something just because it fell outside conventional explanations.

"From what you've described," she said after a long, pensive pause, "it does sound... strange. I don't easily believe in mystical things, you know that. But I'm also curious. Guizhou? That region holds many mysteries in the old cultural stories... Alright," her voice suddenly became more decisive, "if you really want to go that badly, I'll make arrangements to go with you. We can consider it a field trip to learn more about cultural aspects that books might not have fully captured. But we need a careful plan, and perhaps we should only go during our summer break, alright?"

I smiled softly, a warm feeling spreading through my chest. With her by my side, I felt much more at ease.

"Thank you," I said, my voice sincere.

"I just don't want you fumbling around alone in a strange place with such vague things. Besides..."—on the other end, her voice lightened, with a hint of

teasing—"I'm also really curious to know what mysterious man could leave the famously rational Professor Wang Ming so flustered."

The call ended. Outside the large glass window of the hotel room, Tokyo was brilliantly lit up, but in my heart... it seemed another kind of light had just been lit—not dazzling or ostentatious, but smoldering, persistent, and warm enough to illuminate the next step.

I found myself gazing out the window, toward the distant horizon where the night sky of Tokyo blended with the faint stars.

A trip to Guizhou. With Qing Ling. The thought kept circling in my mind.

The Journey to Tongren

Though the scientist in me relentlessly posed a series of questions about the peculiar invitation and the mysterious man named Zhang Feng, a certain curiosity, a vague belief, had been quietly growing within me. Finally, after many restless nights, the decision to go to China was made. The trip was planned to last about three months, starting in the early days of summer. Qing

Ling, with her fluency in Chinese and profound understanding of Eastern culture, was naturally an indispensable companion. She helped me a great deal with all the arrangements, and although she maintained a necessary caution, I could sense in her eyes a quiet eagerness, a desire to explore the cultural and spiritual aspects that books could never fully convey.

In early summer, as the characteristic humidity of the East began to spread, we took a long flight to Shanghai—the city where Qing Ling had spent her childhood years. It was my first time setting foot in mainland China, and though I had mentally prepared for a vast country with thousands of years of history, the modernity and scale of Shanghai still truly surprised me. The enormous, bustling international airport, the proud skyscrapers soaring in the city center, the complex yet smoothly running urban transport system... all testified to a remarkable development, an astonishing vitality.

"Shanghai has changed so much, hasn't it?" Qing Ling said, her voice tinged with nostalgia as we sat in a taxi leaving the airport. "This is just a very small part of China today. This country is vast, and you will see many more differences, especially as we go deeper into the interior."

What impressed me most, as someone with a background in technology, was the efficiency and

modernity of China's high-speed train system. From Shanghai, we boarded such a train to travel to Guizhou province. The train sped along, smooth and silent, gliding past endless green rice paddies and rolling tea hills. Gradually, the flat plains gave way to limestone mountains that began to appear on the distant horizon. I felt as if I were truly entering another land, a place where time seemed to slow down and the pace of life grew more unhurried.

The deeper we went into Guizhou, the more majestic and indescribably pristine the scenery became. Endless ranges of limestone mountains, cloaked in a lush, green carpet of vegetation, often appeared faintly through layers of mist that drifted like soft white silk ribbons carelessly dropped by creation, painting a vast, living ink wash landscape. This was indeed a very different China from what one typically sees in modern metropolises.

After reaching a larger city in the province, we continued our journey by car to Tongren (铜仁)—the small town whose address was written on Mr. Zhang Feng's slip of paper. This leg of the trip took us through winding mountain roads, through dense, untouched forests, and along cool, crystal-clear streams. The nature here truly astonished me with its majestic beauty. There were sheer, towering cliffs and deep, fathomless valleys that seemed to hold the secrets of millennia. At one point, from a great distance, we even caught a glimpse of the majestic

peak of Mount Fanjing, partially hidden in the lingering mist—a sacred mountain local lore claimed was the abode of enlightened beings.

Along the way, the car occasionally passed through small villages where stilt houses made of wood or bamboo, with classic curved yin-yang roof tiles, nestled peacefully at the foot of the magnificent mountains. The smoke from evening cooking fires curled up from the simple roofs, and terraced fields, golden with ripe rice, stretched across the hillsides. The people here, with their sun-tanned skin and gentle smiles, had a rustic simplicity, a world away from the hustle and bustle common among city dwellers.

"It's so quiet and peaceful here, isn't it, Ming?" Qing Ling remarked softly, her eyes following a herd of buffalo grazing leisurely by the roadside. "I never expected Guizhou to have such rustic beauty and such fresh air."

I nodded in agreement. Accustomed to the incessant noise and pressure of the modern world, I found the clean air, the tranquility of the mountains, and the somewhat slower pace of life here created a distinct feeling—both captivating and slightly alien. It made my mind quiet down, giving me space to think about things other than work or pending business projects.

Finally, we arrived in Tongren. It was a much smaller town than I had imagined, nestled peacefully in the embrace of rolling mountains. It was said to be not far from the famous Fenghuang Ancient Town, yet it possessed a quiet, profound stillness, as if untouched by the currents of mass tourism. Unlike the splendor and modernity of Shanghai, Tongren wore a classic, solemn beauty, imbued with the spirit of the mountains. Small flagstone streets, worn smooth by time, and houses with traditional architecture and moss-covered, curved tiles were interspersed with local markets that were bustling but not noisy or chaotic. The characteristic scent of dried herbs from traditional medicine shops, the aroma of rustic dishes from small roadside stalls, and the gentle dampness of the river and mountains mingled in the air, creating a unique atmosphere.

We got out of the car at an intersection near what was considered the town center, with little more than a few light backpacks and the slip of paper from Mr. Zhang Feng. Instead of heading straight for the address, Qing Ling and I decided to find a temporary place to stay first—partly because we needed rest after the long journey, and partly, to be honest, because I wanted more time to get a better sense of the rhythm of life, of the people here, before any meetings.

Qing Ling, with her language skills and dexterity, took the lead in talking to some locals to ask for directions

and find a suitable inn. Though she had lived in Shanghai, Tongren was clearly a different world—a place where people still called to one another in warm, rustic local dialects, and greeted strangers like us with eyes that were at once gentle, curious, and a little reserved.

Eventually, we turned onto a small stone-paved street running alongside a river, where a few old-style inns with yellowed, whitewashed walls stood modestly under the shade of sprawling ancient trees. At that moment, I had a truly vague feeling—as if I were about to step into a story whose ending I could not possibly know.

The Atmosphere and People of Tongren

The car finally came to a stop in Tongren, the small town noted on Mr. Zhang Feng's slip of paper. The moment I stepped out and took my first breath, I felt as if I had passed through an invisible threshold into a completely different world.

The air here was unusually pure.

There were no blaring car horns like in Shanghai, no flashing electronic billboards or brilliant neon lights sweeping across the glass facades of high-rises.

There were only narrow flagstone streets, a jumble of moss-covered roofs aged by time, and a distinctive damp scent of the mountains, of the earth, carried on the evening breeze.

Qing Ling took a deep breath, then turned to me, her voice tinged with surprise.

“The air here... it’s so different. It reminds me of places I’ve read about in classic novels. But this feeling... it’s strangely real.”

The small town was nestled peacefully amidst ranges of limestone mountains. Each small street here seemed to lead into a different layer of space—there were market streets that looked quite bustling but were not at all noisy or chaotic; the people on the streets seemed far less hurried; every small eatery, traditional medicine shop, and craft stall had a slow-paced, somewhat old-fashioned air but exuded a warmth and intimacy. The scent of star anise, the aroma of dried teas, the smell of old damp wood, and the familiar scent of cooking smoke wafted from the houses, mingling in the air. Nothing was spotlessly clean or gleamingly modern—but it was all incredibly authentic.

I found myself pausing countless times just to watch an old man diligently arranging medicinal herbs under an old wooden eave, or a group of students in faded uniforms happily cycling through a small, mossy alley.

Tongren made no attempt to "impress" visitors. But perhaps it was precisely this natural, unadorned appearance that touched something very real and very peaceful within me.

As planned, Qing Ling took the lead in finding an inn. Fluent in Chinese and with a certain understanding of the local culture, she quickly made inquiries with a few locals. Before long, she led me to a small stone-paved street running alongside a river, where a three-story inn with a wooden facade stood. It didn't look new, but it was very tidy and seemed cozy.

The innkeeper was a stout woman of about forty with a kind, benevolent face. She welcomed us warmly, her manner eager but not at all pushy or insistent. When she learned that we were university professors of Chinese descent now living in the US, here to learn more about traditional culture, she just smiled knowingly.

"Our town has preserved many ancient things, esteemed guests. But not everyone who comes here has the fated connection to see them."

Her words startled me. I wasn't sure if it was because of the profound implication hidden in her words, or simply because of the utterly genuine, rustic tone of her voice.

The room we rented was on the second floor, with a small balcony overlooking a low, tree-covered hill in the distance. The doors and windows were the sliding wooden type. The furnishings were extremely simple—a sturdy wooden bed, a small bamboo tea set, an electric kettle, and a small bookshelf in the corner. There was no flat-screen TV. No multilingual rule signs.

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked out the open window. The pale yellow light of dusk fell on the eaves of a house across the way, where a silver-haired old man was unhurriedly using a ladle made from a coconut shell to water some potted flowers.

“I think this is a very suitable place for us to stay, Ming,” Qing Ling said softly, after having inspected the room.

I nodded slightly. Not just because of the adequate amenities or the reasonable price. More importantly, it was because here... I felt I could truly ‘settle’.

Not to write a scientific report. Nor to map out a detailed itinerary for the coming days. But to try and listen, to see

what this simple and somewhat foreign world wanted to whisper to me.

That night, for the first time after many days of exhausting travel and mental turmoil, I had a truly deep sleep. No dreams. Not once did I wake.

There was only the sound of the night wind gently seeping through the cracks in the wooden door—and a very light, peaceful feeling... as if I were slowly, gradually stepping into something that could not be named.

The Simple Abode of Zhang Feng

After three days in Tongren, having grown accustomed to the slow pace and characteristic tranquility of the mountainous region, Qing Ling and I decided it was time to seek out the address Mr. Zhang Feng had written on the small slip of paper. I had hesitated for the past few days—not out of doubt, but perhaps because I wanted to give myself more time to truly settle, to prepare for an encounter that I sensed would be unlike any I had ever had. But the peaceful, serene atmosphere of this land only made me think more of him, of the

impressions and unanswered questions left from our brief meeting in Tokyo.

We followed the directions into a small flagstone alley, where the moss-covered walls of ancient houses stood modestly under the shade of lush, old trees. The afternoons in Tongren always seemed deeper, quieter than other times of the day. The sound of our footsteps echoed softly on the stone, like stray sounds inadvertently awakening a space that had long been asleep.

Finally, a wooden gate appeared before us—a simple gate, darkened by sun and rain, covered in green vines, so old that it seemed a natural part of the landscape. I took a deep breath, then raised my hand and knocked lightly three times. The sound was not loud, but it was enough to make my chest vibrate with a slight tremor.

It was a Saturday. We had not called ahead, but we silently hoped he would be home.

A moment later, the wooden gate creaked open. A petite, elderly woman with silver-white hair tied neatly in a bun stepped out. Her face was kind, radiant with the countless wrinkles of time, and her eyes shone with a compassionate clarity, like a cool, fresh stream. She smiled at us—a warm smile, without a hint of formality or scrutiny.

“Please come in,” she said in a warm local dialect, after Qing Ling had greeted her and stated our names in standard Mandarin. “My husband is waiting for you in the tea room.”

We followed her through a small courtyard. The space within opened up like an entirely different world—not in a metaphysical or wondrous way, but in a manner that felt... very still. Very light. And full of life.

A lovely little garden appeared under the shade of leafy trees, with a small pond holding a few colorful koi, various kinds of wildflowers in bloom, and the gentle, gurgling sound of water from a small rockery made of pebbles. Nothing here seemed to follow any particular design school, nor did it look intentionally manicured. It was like a space that had formed itself, arranging itself according to the rhythm of its inhabitants over many years—a very natural, very real harmony.

The main house was a simple, traditional structure, with ironwood pillars that had gained a patina, whitewashed walls, and a reddish-brown terracotta-tiled corridor that wound around the garden. There were no modern technological gadgets on display. No luxurious, superfluous decorations. Only simple wooden furniture, polished to a sheen from long use, bearing the deep imprint of time and life.

Zhang Feng was sitting there, in a small room overlooking the garden, where the afternoon sunlight slanted through the window lattices, casting pale yellow streaks on the shoulders of the dark brown shirt he was wearing. He looked up as we entered, his eyes still bright and clear, his face retaining its placid, serene expression—as if he had known this moment would come for a very, very long time.

“Ah, the two professors have arrived,” he said, his voice still deep and calm, as he slowly stood up. “Welcome to my humble home.”

We bowed our heads slightly in return. There were no elaborate introductions. No polite pleasantries. Just a warm and surprisingly comfortable space, enough for us to feel we could sit down without needing to say another word.

He invited us for tea.

The elderly woman had discreetly withdrawn, leaving us to our privacy. Zhang Feng personally brought out a pristine white porcelain tea set, with tiny cups that fit perfectly in the palm of a hand. He unhurriedly rinsed the pot and cups with hot water, then opened a small wooden box containing curled, dark green dried tea leaves.

“This is Snow Shan tea,” he said, his voice gentle. “From ancient trees that grow naturally on the high slopes of Mount Fanjing.”

I silently watched his fingers as he carefully placed the tea leaves into the pot, then poured the water. His movements were slow, unhurried, without a trace of performative formality. It was simply the focus and naturalness of a person who had probably brewed tea thousands, tens of thousands of times—yet with each brew, he seemed to maintain a complete reverence, a full respect for the present moment.

Hot water was poured into the pot. A thin wisp of steam carrying the scent of tea began to spread—a very light, pure fragrance, not at all strong—like the smell of morning dew on leaves, or the scent of clouds on a mountaintop after a shower.

He methodically poured the tea into the small cups, then offered them to us. I carefully lifted my cup, brought it close to my nose to inhale the fragrance, and then took a small sip. The tea was not at all bitter as I had imagined. Nor did it have a strong, astringent taste. It was light, gentle, like a clear, perfectly warm stream, flowing slowly through my chest, bringing an unfamiliar sense of refreshment.

Qing Ling also drank her tea, then quietly gazed out at the small garden bathed in the afternoon sun. She said nothing. But I saw that her gaze was no longer the scrutinizing, analytical look of a professor observing a research subject. It was as if... she were truly listening to something from this silent space.

I set my cup down and asked softly, "Mr. Zhang, have you lived here for a long time?"

Zhang Feng smiled faintly. "I live. But perhaps, not only here."

I waited for him to elaborate, but he said nothing more, just silently refilled his own cup.

A thought flickered in my mind, vague but persistent: Could it be that some people do not truly 'live at' a specific place, but rather 'live in' a certain state of being? And this place, this house, this garden... perhaps they were merely an external manifestation of that state?

I glanced around the simple tea room. There was nothing special to try to explain. Nor was there any mystery to be unveiled.

And perhaps—for the first time in my entire life, after so many years of pursuing logic and scientific evidence—I

felt a strange sense of peace, without needing to understand why.

The First Deeper Dialogues

The conversation flowed naturally, without any pressure or attempt to guide it from anyone. I'm not sure when it happened, but our discussion had quietly slipped into a different current—slower, more profound, and seemingly far removed from what I was used to in everyday dialogues.

I looked at Zhang Feng—the man sitting calmly across from me. He had a somewhat frail build, his hair was streaked with silver, but his eyes were still bright and clear, not sharp, but holding an unusual warmth. Though I guessed he was over seventy, his face retained a bright, keen look, his skin not weighed down by the wrinkles common at that age. His eyes had a peculiar depth that made it difficult to guess his true age.

Sitting opposite him, I suddenly felt that the role of a medical professor I always carried with me no longer seemed fitting. There was an inner urge for me to

temporarily set aside my knowledge, my ingrained preconceptions, and listen with an entirely open mind.

“Mr. Zhang,” I began, trying to keep my voice calm, “at the conference in Tokyo... you spoke of the intimate connection between the mind and body. And also... the way you ‘took my pulse’ that day... to be honest, I still cannot explain it.”

I paused for a beat, took a light breath, and continued:

“With the modern medical knowledge I have learned and taught, everything you said then seems to lie beyond the scope of measurement and empirical verification.”

Zhang Feng smiled faintly, a smile that held no refutation or ridicule.

“Your science is indeed very adept, truly extraordinary, at investigating and analyzing what can be seen with the naked eye, measured with machines, and replicated in a laboratory,” he said slowly, deliberately. “But this world—and we ourselves—do not exist on just that one tangible, physical level. There are more subtle things, belonging to the spirit, to energy, which modern science perhaps still lacks the proper tools to touch and perceive.”

He spoke as if recounting something utterly natural and familiar to him, with no intention of persuading or imposing anything on me.

He revisited the concept of “*qi*”—a wondrous form of energy said to constantly flow within and around each person’s body, heavily influenced by their thoughts, emotions, and entire mental disposition. When the mind is unsettled or anxious, the flow of *qi* can become blocked and chaotic. Conversely, when the heart is tranquil and harmonious, the *qi* will circulate gently and smoothly. I listened, and I recalled the moment in Tokyo—when his eyes met mine, and the sentence that had stunned me: “There is a knot in your heart.”

Qing Ling, who had been listening silently, leaned forward slightly. “Sir, what you’ve just said... it sounds quite similar to the foundational theories of traditional Chinese medicine, doesn’t it? And I believe I have read similar concepts in Taoist and Buddhist scriptures?”

Zhang Feng nodded at her. “Our people’s traditional culture once possessed an incredibly profound and complete system of knowledge. It wasn’t just medicine for curing physical ailments, but could be considered a holistic study of human life—helping people to understand the deep connection between their body, mind, and their very being.”

He did not use the language of an academic researcher or a mere theorist. Every word he spoke seemed distilled from deeply ingrained experiences, from a life of genuine contemplation and verification.

Then he began to tell a story, his voice even, without rising or falling intonation:

“Many years ago, I met a man. He worked in the medical field, had achieved some success, lived by strict principles, and shouldered many responsibilities. On the surface, everyone thought he had a stable life, with nothing to worry about—but deep down, his heart was always heavy with unnamable pressures, with feelings not easily expressed. At that time, a very small tumor was forming in his heart. Modern medical equipment probably could not have detected it, but I could sense its existence—not with my eyes, but through a very vague, very subtle sense...”

He did not look directly at me as he told the story. But every word, every phrase, seemed to be gently knocking on some secret door in my soul, a door whose existence I had never known, or had intentionally forgotten for a very long time.

I suddenly felt a cold chill run down my spine.

My heart skipped a beat—not from physical pain, but from a sudden, shockingly clear realization. I knew he was not just talking about “a man.” He was talking about me.

“You... you really... knew that?!” I blurted out, my voice trembling uncontrollably.

Only then did Zhang Feng look at me. There was no trace of smugness or showing off in his eyes, nor was he trying to create an air of mystery—only a strange compassion and placidity.

“It was just a small sense, Mr. Wang,” he said, his voice still gentle. “It’s not any special supernatural ability. It’s just that... when a person’s mind is sufficiently tranquil, they can sometimes see things that are difficult for the naked eye to perceive.”

“And you shouldn’t worry too much about it...” he continued, his voice like a word of comfort. “I sense that you and your wife have a great fated connection with the ancient teachings on cultivating the body and mind. That is the main reason I sincerely advised you to make time for this journey. A time will come, perhaps not too long from now... when someone else, another path, will help you both to truly heal your body and mind.”

I was completely silent, not knowing what to say...

He calmly poured more tea into our cups, then said softly, as if to himself:

“People seek out spiritual cultivation not primarily to gain supernatural abilities. More importantly, it is to find and return to the purest, most benevolent part that lies deep within them.”

He gazed out at the small garden, where the evening breeze gently stirred the green leaves.

“Fan ben gui zhen,” he softly chanted the four words, then explained. “It means to return to the root, to one’s original, true self, the most authentic origin of a being’s life.”

I listened, but I confess I could not immediately grasp the full meaning. Not because the words were too difficult or complex. But because... I felt that their true meaning did not lie merely on the surface of the text.

It was like the echo of a temple bell from a distant place—not too loud, not insistent—but its sound lingered, spreading, and resonating softly in my mind, refusing to fade.

Qing Ling also remained silent for a long time. I knew that as someone who researched and taught Chinese culture, she had read countless books on “cultivating the

mind and nurturing one's nature," on the hermits and true cultivators of ages past. But perhaps, this was the first time in her life she had met a person—in the flesh, right before her eyes—who was living and embodying the very things she had previously only seen in ancient books.

I glanced over at Qing Ling and saw her eyes welling up with tears. She quickly turned away, as if to hide a sudden surge of emotion.

Our conversation continued until almost noon. The atmosphere in the tea room remained light and serene. No one tried to reach a final conclusion on anything. No "right answer" was asserted. It was simply one who had lived and experienced, sharing with two who were still on the path of seeking.

Zhang Feng had us stay for lunch. It was an incredibly simple meal—just white rice cooked from a fresh batch, a plate of verdant, boiled garden greens, and a bowl of tofu soup with shiitake mushrooms. There were no rich, complex spices. No formal, polite invitations to eat. But for some reason, I found it more delicious than most of the sumptuous banquets I had ever enjoyed in fine restaurants.

When we stood up to take our leave, the sun had begun to reach its zenith. Zhang Feng did not try to keep us

longer, nor did he set a specific date for another meeting. He only walked us to the gate, then gave a slight bow—like a silent nod to a seed of fate that had just been sown.

Leaving that vine-covered wooden gate, stepping back into the small stone alley, neither Qing Ling nor I said a word to each other.

We both remained silent. As if our minds were still lingering in that quiet, warm space, with the lingering aroma of tea and words that had not yet cooled.

* * *

CHAPTER 3: THE HERMIT ON THE MOUNTAINTOP

Preparations and the Journey to a New Place

Before we left Tongren, Mr. Zhang Feng had mentioned that our journey had really only just begun. He didn't provide a specific itinerary, but he did suggest a few people we "should meet," if we had the fated connection. Among them, the nearest was a monastic said to be living as a recluse on a small mountain, about thirty kilometers from Tongren. It wasn't a famous scenic spot or a pilgrimage site that attracted tourists, and the local people rarely seemed to mention it—but from the way

Mr. Zhang Feng spoke, I had a feeling the place held something special, an opportunity for further exploration.

Our days in Tongren thus concluded like a gentle prelude to a longer journey. Through two meetings and conversations with Mr. Zhang Feng, I truly felt that this land of China, with its profound ancient culture, still concealed countless secrets—enough to spark a strong interest in me, compelling me to continue this journey, even though I honestly had no idea where it would lead.

We decided to stay in Tongren for a few more days to prepare for the trip up the mountain. Qing Ling tried to ask for opinions from a few locals in the neighboring villages. Most people knew of the mountain area—a place with vast bamboo forests, a few small year-round waterfalls, and some old trails leading to higher ground. Some said they had gone there to pick mushrooms or bamboo shoots. Others had vaguely heard about a potential eco-tourism project being surveyed by the government. But when Qing Ling tactfully inquired about someone living as a recluse on the mountain, almost everyone shook their heads: “If there’s someone up there, they must be deep in the forest. We only ever go around the foot of the mountain.”

No one expressed doubt or outright denial. It was just that... the matter seemed never to have truly captured their attention.

We went to the town market to buy a few necessities for the trip: a better pair of hiking boots to replace my sneakers, a lighter backpack, some easy-to-carry dried food, and a few sets of light clothing in case of sudden rain or sun. I still tried to maintain regular contact with my associates in the US, checking emails daily and joining a few short online meetings in the evening—work could not be completely set aside, especially with important projects underway. But outside those fixed work hours, I deliberately let my mind be more at ease, to think less.

I don't know when it started, but I began to notice myself paying more attention to the small, simple things happening around me—a sudden cool breeze slipping past my cuffs, a pristine ray of early morning sun slanting across the wooden eaves of the inn, or the solemn tolling of a temple bell from some distant mountain monastery, echoing through the morning mist. Though I couldn't completely shed my old habits, I felt I was gradually learning to live more slowly, to temporarily let go of the need to control everything—and to try letting the natural flow of life guide me.

We left Tongren in the early morning, when white mist still lingered around the mountain peaks. A local car we had hired beforehand took us along fairly smooth paved roads. It was only when we turned onto a smaller road leading towards the foot of the mountain that the surface became rough with gravel—stretches of red basalt soil, some quite rugged and slippery, but still manageable enough for the car to move slowly. The sparse fields of rice and corn gradually gave way to gentle hills and dense patches of forest.

After more than an hour, the car could go no further. We got out, put on our backpacks, and looked at a narrow trail, almost lost beneath overgrown weeds and forest vegetation. Not a single signpost. Not a trace of modern intervention.

“Are you sure we’re going in the right direction?” Qing Ling asked, her voice a bit hesitant, her eyes looking at the trail with doubt. “It looks... a bit like a scene from an adventure movie.”

I chuckled softly, though I was no more certain than she was. “To be honest, I don’t know either, Ling. But for some reason, I have a feeling... this is the right way. Not for any logical reason, but purely... a kind of feeling.”

“A feeling?” she looked at me, her expression as if she had just heard the strangest thing all day. “Have you

forgotten you're a medical professor? We're not professional hikers, we have no experience."

"I know. But do you remember what Mr. Zhang Feng said? That sometimes we need to follow nature, to listen to the voice of our hearts. Perhaps, right now, that's all I'm trying to do."

Qing Ling said nothing more. She looked at the trail silently for a long moment, then nodded slightly.

We began to step into the forest. Each step felt like advancing a little further into another world—not a world of detailed maps or pre-planned routes, but a world of inviting ambiguity. The trail was at times steep and precarious, at others slippery with the thick green moss covering the rocks. I felt my body begin to ache, but my mind, conversely, was unusually clear and alert. A very different kind of wakefulness, not from strong coffee or an adrenaline rush—but seemingly from the vast silence of the forest itself.

We walked on, sometimes making small talk, other times just silently listening to the rustling wind in the canopy above. On difficult stretches, we stopped to rest by a small, gurgling stream. The water was crystal clear and as cold as if it had just melted from ice.

"I still don't really understand why you're so drawn to all of this," Qing Ling said suddenly, while resting on a large rock by the stream, her finger idly drawing circles on the water's surface. "It's not at all like the pragmatic, rational person you were before."

I sat down beside her, taking a deep breath of the fresh mountain air.

"Perhaps... it's because I feel I've lived for too long, too accustomed to things that can be measured, calculated, and controlled by reason. But here—it's the very things I can't explain, the things beyond my control, that make me feel... more at ease. Not because I've understood them, but perhaps, for the first time in my life, I feel I don't have to understand everything completely to accept its existence."

Qing Ling turned to look at me, her gaze softened, a look of understanding appearing in her eyes. "I understand that feeling. It's not like being convinced by someone's logic, but more like standing before something so vast, so different—that even if you can't grasp or define it, you can't possibly ignore it."

I smiled faintly. Perhaps, though we did not yet completely share the same belief, we were beginning to share the same perspective, the same openness to new things.

We continued on, with no map in hand, no clear path ahead. Only the trail that appeared and disappeared, and a feeling that we needed to slow down, to look more closely, and to listen more—both to the sounds of the surrounding forest, and perhaps, to the silent voices from deep within.

The Journey to the Mountaintop

We continued along the trail, which led us deeper and deeper into the dense mountain slopes. The path wasn't exactly treacherous, but it was by no means easy. Some sections seemed to have been long forgotten—green moss covered the rock faces, layers of thick, decaying leaves were piled up, and weeds grew nearly knee-high. The previous night's rain had left the ground slippery and damp, forcing us to pay close attention and be more cautious with every step. At times, we both had to cling to trees along the path to keep our balance on gentle slopes, or use sticks to push aside the thick bushes that obscured the way. This wasn't exactly a high-stakes, adventurous climb, but it was enough to leave both Qing Ling and me silently exhausted after several hours of steady walking in the near-absolute silence of the forest.

As the sun rose higher, dispelling the lingering mist, the forest gradually revealed scenes that I had probably never truly seen on my previous business trips or vacations—not because they were exceptionally special or magnificent, but perhaps because this was the first time I had actually allowed my mind to pause and observe. Ancient trees reached high, forming a canopy of green shade; a few bushes of violet wildflowers bloomed quietly beside patches of lush grass; the incessant chirping of insects mingled with the sound of the wind rustling through the leaves... all of these things, in themselves, were perhaps not splendidly beautiful, but strangely, they seemed to be whispering something incredibly peaceful.

We stopped to rest on a large boulder, its surface cool and mossy under the shade of an old tree. Qing Ling sat down, quietly shrugging off her small backpack, then gently rubbed her ankle—she had probably twisted it slightly earlier. She didn't complain. She just looked around silently, her gaze lingering for a long time on the misty valley in the distance, before a faint smile touched her lips, a gentle smile as if she had just re-encountered something deeply familiar from memory.

I was about to say something, but then decided against it. The surrounding space was so quiet that I felt any words would be superfluous. A yellow leaf detached from its branch, twirled a few times in the wind, and then gently

landed right next to my foot—and in that brief moment, a fleeting thought crossed my mind: I had never been so fully "present" in the small details of life like this.

We resumed our journey. The path grew steeper, winding its way along the rocky slopes. The higher we climbed, the stronger the wind blew, carrying the earthy, damp smell of the soil, the scent of decaying leaves, mixed with the light fragrance of some wildflower hidden in the bushes. I could feel my breathing become heavier, my heart beat faster, but my mind, conversely, was unusually clear and alert—no more wandering thoughts, no more daily worries swirling around as before, only the pure presence of each footstep, of my beating heart, and of the rustling leaves somewhere ahead.

At one point, Qing Ling suddenly stopped before a large, precariously perched boulder by the path. She gently touched its surface, where a natural, winding curve made the entire rock resemble a large dragon, coiled and resting. Without a word, she just turned to look at me, her gaze a bit distant, then looked back towards the deep forest ahead. Something in her eyes made me feel as if she, too, was being drawn into the special atmosphere of this place.

Along the way, we came across many other strangely shaped rocks—one looked like a person in silent

meditation, another resembled a small stone gate, all lying still and silent in the deep, ancient forest. There was no trace of human intervention—it was purely the hand of nature, which, whether by chance or by design, had created these unique forms, causing passersby to pause and admire them.

I wasn't sure if these were the "traces of the ancients" that Mr. Zhang Feng had alluded to, but one thing I felt with growing clarity: this place possessed a very different kind of stillness. It was not the desolation of an uninhabited wilderness. It was a special kind of silence, one with weight, that naturally quieted the mind, making one no longer wish to speak or think of superfluous, useless things.

After several hours of continuous climbing, as the sun began to set in the west, we finally reached a relatively flat area near the summit. As I was looking for a place to rest, I suddenly saw, not far ahead, a small lean-to made of bamboo and leaves, nestled on a large, flat rock by the path. Under the shelter, a young couple—probably locals up here for the view or a picnic—were sitting, drinking water, and chatting. Beside them, a silver-haired old man with a graceful demeanor was engrossed in a small game of Go.

We cautiously approached. The young woman smiled and greeted us warmly, while the young man remained

absorbed in the game, his face full of fascination. The old man sat there, unusually calm, his eyes never looking up at us, seemingly completely undisturbed by the arrival of two strangers.

I didn't know much about Go, so I only glanced at it for a few minutes before deciding to leave so as not to disturb them. I had just turned and taken a few steps when a deep, clear voice came from behind:

"You are Wang Ming, are you not?"

I froze, my heart suddenly beating faster. Turning my head, I saw the old man still had not looked at me; his hand had just lightly placed a black stone on the board.

I tried to keep my voice steady and replied slowly, "Yes, that is me."

I was about to ask what he wanted, but he spoke again, his voice still even, unchanged:

"Someone asked me to stay here for a while... to give you directions."

He still did not look up, his hand gently lifting a white stone and placing it on the board.

A moment later, after making his move, he continued, his voice unhurried, as if reciting something he had been carefully instructed on beforehand:

"Just keep following this trail. When you reach a fork in the road, where there are some large bamboo groves, turn to the right. Walk for about another hour, and you will come to another fork—then, turn to the left and just go straight. At the end of that path, you will find the place you are looking for."

I tried to memorize his every word. The directions were not long, but in the way he paused and emphasized each word, I had the feeling that everything had been pre-arranged—not forced, but not entirely coincidental either.

A thought flashed through my mind: Could Mr. Zhang Feng have notified this old man of our arrival by phone? But I immediately remembered—ever since we had entered this mountain region, my cell phone had lost all signal. I had checked several times as we passed through the small villages at the foot of the mountain, but there wasn't even a single weak bar of signal. Qing Ling had also mentioned that, as far as she knew, this mountain area was not yet fully covered by telecommunications, although there were rumors of the local government planning to develop eco-tourism here in the future.

Thinking of this, I suddenly felt a cold chill run down my spine. If it wasn't through prior contact... then how could this old man know my name, and the reason I had come to this place?

Qing Ling looked at me, her eyes also filled with surprise and unconcealed confusion. We said nothing, but I knew we were both thinking the same thing: this journey seemed to be leading us into something that far exceeded our initial expectations.

Meeting the Hermit

We carefully followed the concise directions of the old Go player. Past the fork with the large bamboo groves, we turned right, then followed a gentle, slippery slope of green moss, which took us nearly an hour. After that, we turned left at a narrow path next to a thicket of old bamboo. As the last rays of the afternoon sun turned golden, filtering through the leaves, we suddenly saw a small thatched hut, appearing and disappearing behind a thin veil of mist and a row of lush green bamboo—it was so simple and rustic that had we not been paying close attention, we might have walked right past it.

A small, packed-earth yard in front of the porch was swept very neat and clean. There were a few beds of fresh green vegetables, a star fruit tree heavy with fruit, and a small, ancient stone well nestled humbly under the canopy of an unnamed old tree. The space was unusually quiet, so quiet that we could distinctly hear the evening wind gently rustling through the bamboo leaves.

On the porch steps, a man was in deep meditation. He wore a coarse, earth-brown cloth robe, worn and faded, his silver-white hair falling to his shoulders, a silver beard reaching his chest. He looked thin, but there was no sense of withering or frailty—on the contrary, a vibrant inner strength, a solemn dignity emanated from his half-closed eyes and his steady, gentle breathing. He sat with his back straight on a simple straw mat, his hands resting lightly on his knees, in a posture so stable and serene it was as if time and all the world's vicissitudes no longer existed, no longer flowed.

We instinctively stopped, keeping a natural distance. Neither of us spoke. Perhaps there was no need to say anything at this moment, for his very presence, the tranquil atmosphere that enveloped him, made the entire space feel different—not a solemnity that inspired fear, but a profound peace that naturally quieted the heart.

A moment later, as if sensing our presence, he slowly opened his eyes.

Those eyes—bright, clear, and tranquil, without the 'look' of scrutiny or judgment with which people usually regard one another. They were more like a mirror, reflecting and then gently letting go—as placid and deep as an autumn pool at the bottom of a ravine.

He looked at me, and a very slight, almost imperceptible smile touched his lips:

"You are Wang Ming, aren't you." It was a statement, not a question.

Before I could react, he continued, his voice even and unsurprised:

"I knew you two would come. Someone sent word ahead. But in truth, even without the message, I already knew."

His words made both Qing Ling and me freeze.

It was that familiar feeling again—the feeling I had when Mr. Zhang Feng first called my name in a crowded Tokyo teahouse, the feeling that all my calculations and preparations had become utterly superfluous. But this time, I no longer felt the same startling shock. I just nodded slowly—as if, deep down, I too had vaguely known this meeting would happen, just not when.

"Greetings, sir," I said, trying to keep my voice respectful enough. "My name is Wang Ming. This is my wife, Qing Ling. We were... referred here by a friend, Mr. Zhang Feng."

The man nodded again, his gaze briefly sweeping over Qing Ling. He asked nothing more, only said in a calm voice:

"If there were no fated connection, it would be difficult to sit and talk, even if you met by chance. That you two were able to find your way to this place is because you have something you are seeking in your hearts, and also because there is some root between us that has connected us before."

He made a gentle gesture of invitation with his hand.

"Well, please come inside for a cup of water. It has been a long journey; you must be tired. If you have questions, we can speak of them slowly."

We followed him into the small hut. The floor was made of packed clay, very flat and clean. There were only a few straw mats on the floor, a low tea table made of plain wood, and a few old books neatly arranged on a simple bamboo shelf. No electricity. No modern conveniences. Not a single trace of the industrial age we had just left behind. But strangely, I felt no sense of lack

or inconvenience. Everything here seemed just enough, and was so clean and tidy that I hesitated to set foot inside.

He poured us water himself. The water came from the stone well outside, held in an old, dark earthenware jug. The spring water was crystal clear and cool, with no discernible taste, but as I swallowed, I felt as if something that had been weighing on me was being washed away.

"Not many people come to this place of mine," he said, after we were seated. "It's not because the path is difficult or treacherous. Perhaps it's because few people think a remote, secluded place like this has anything worth seeking. Some have come, but they only stood in the yard for a moment before turning back. Others have made it to the porch, but then found themselves unable to utter a word."

He looked at me, a profound gaze:

"You have a fated connection, which is why you were able to take this step. Your friend Zhang Feng saw that long ago. As for me... I only receive those I feel I should receive."

I was silent. Something was shifting very gently within my mind, like a heavy door being pushed slightly ajar. It

wasn't so much because of the specific words he said, but perhaps because of the way he said them, the way he made no attempt to persuade or prove anything. Every sentence he spoke was gentle, calm, yet like drops of water landing precisely in the deepest, quietest part of my soul.

Qing Ling sat beside me, her hands clasped lightly in her lap, her eyes quietly observing every corner of the hut, then resting on the window frame that looked out onto the silent yard. She said nothing, but I saw a different kind of pensiveness on her face.

A moment later, when our cups were nearly empty, he spoke, his voice as light as the wind rustling through the bamboo grove:

"You two have just arrived after a long journey. Please rest for a while to regain your strength. Let me brew a pot of tea for you."

He stood up, his steps light and slow, and walked to a corner of the hut where a small fire still glowed with embers. He calmly poured water from another earthenware pot set on the fire. A rustic, pure scent of tea began to spread gently in the fresh, cool mountain air of the afternoon.

We sat quietly, unspokenly, neither of us wanting to speak at this moment. It seemed that something in his calm, unhurried rhythm had caused all the thoughts and disturbances in my mind to temporarily recede.

When he brought the steaming cups of tea and set them before me, he looked at me once more and said:

"If you two are not too busy with your work... feel free to stay here for a few days. I believe a quiet place like this will be good for those who are so used to a noisy, busy life."

I was about to thank him or ask something more, but I stopped myself. The space and time at this moment seemed too peaceful, too still. I just sat there, with Qing Ling, and quietly waited for him to refill my teacup.

A Dialogue with the Hermit

Evening began to fall. The last streaks of light from a beautiful, sunny day were gradually fading over the lush green bamboo grove in front of the hut. The hermit leisurely added more oil to an old lamp, then placed a new kettle of water on the fire. We remained seated

around the small wooden table, inside the simple hut that held a strange warmth. The space was completely silent, save for the chirping of insects starting up somewhere in the garden and the steady crackle of boiling water in the time-worn earthenware kettle.

Neither Qing Ling nor I rushed to ask any more questions. It seemed the still, solemn atmosphere of this place was telling us that all questions would be addressed... at the right time.

After a long silence, punctuated only by the soft sound of tea being poured, I spoke, trying to keep my voice as natural as possible:

“Sir, I come from a world where empirical science is considered the foundation of all understanding, all truth. But what I chanced upon in Tokyo, and the things Mr. Zhang Feng alluded to... along with the very special atmosphere of this place... all of it is truly making me reconsider many things. I very much want to understand better—what was the path of cultivation of the ancients, and what made some people willing to commit themselves, to dedicate their entire lives to that path?”

The hermit smiled faintly, a benevolent smile, his hand still gently turning the warm teacup. “Cultivation is not something so new or foreign, Mr. Wang,” he said. “It has existed in this world since very ancient times—not just

here in Asia, but in many other civilizations that have appeared and vanished on this Earth. Though the outward forms may differ, the core of all true paths of cultivation is the same: it is the journey of returning to one's kindest, most original nature, to gradually transcend the delusions and sufferings of human existence."

He spoke slowly about the different paths the ancients chose to cultivate themselves: some sought the stillness of temples or deep mountains, while others chose to temper their minds amidst the turmoil of worldly life. He said that each person might have their own way, but what mattered was whether their heart truly strove for kindness and nobility.

"The universe we live in is not as simple as what the naked eye can see. There are countless different levels of space, like layers of invisible energy waves, overlapping and interpenetrating one another. Our human existence is the same—it is not just this physical body, but also other parts, more subtle parts: one could call it the spirit, the soul, or the Primordial Spirit—the names may vary according to the understanding of each person, each culture. Your modern science, as I see it, is only observing and studying a very shallow portion on the surface of these things."

He turned to me slightly, his gaze still gentle but with an indescribable depth:

“You are a researcher of medicine. Have you ever wondered—emotions like fear, love, or a word of sincere comfort... where do they actually reside in a person’s body?”

I was taken aback by the unexpected question.

He did not seem to wait for a specific answer from me, but continued:

“The heart is not where feelings are stored. The brain does not get any heavier after a new thought. But it is these invisible, intangible, immeasurable things that are in control, that govern the entire physical body.”

He poured more tea into my cup, his voice still even, unchanged.

“People today tend to only believe in what can be seen, what can be measured by machines. But what truly creates life, what creates a being... is always hidden, always beyond all the formulas and laws that humans try to establish.”

I stared silently at the steaming cup in my hand, the wisp of vapor rising from it, tilting slightly with a very faint

tremor in my fingers, a tremor whose reason I did not know.

He continued, his voice still warm:

“In ancient methods of cultivation, people often spoke of a concept called ‘karmic force.’ It is not merely a moral concept of good and evil—but in fact, a type of subtle, invisible matter. It is formed and accumulated by what people have done over countless past lifetimes—through every action, every thought, every word. This matter exists in other dimensions, invisible to the naked eye, but it can cause illness, misfortune, unhappiness, and even create negative personality traits and spiritual deviations. The purpose of true cultivation, an important part of it, is precisely to eliminate this karmic force, to make one’s soul increasingly pure and light.”

“Mr. Zhang Feng in Tokyo also briefly mentioned that to me...” I muttered, as if trying to piece together the scattered fragments.

The hermit nodded slightly.

“You truly have a fated connection. Not everyone who hears these things can understand them right away, and not everyone who understands can immediately believe. But if a person truly knows how to live for nobility, always striving for kindness in every thought and action,

then even if they have never known the word 'cultivation,' their life has in fact already begun to change for the better."

Qing Ling sat quietly beside me, her gaze lowered to the old wooden table. She listened intently, without interrupting. From time to time, I saw her give a very gentle nod—as if trying to balance her mind in the face of what she had just heard, things that were perhaps very new, yet also very familiar to her.

"What about the traces we saw on the way up here—the strangely shaped rocks, the faint carvings... do they have anything to do with the cultivation methods of the ancients, sir?" I asked, suddenly recalling the unusual rock formations we had seen on the mountainside.

"That is very possible," he replied, his voice calm. "There were very ancient times when people still retained their purity and simplicity, when they could sense the subtle energy flows of heaven and earth, of the universe. They tried to record what they had enlightened to, their understanding of this world. But as the years passed, that true understanding gradually faded, forgotten by later generations. Now, when people look at those rocks, they usually just see stones—few can still sense the profound things once hidden within them."

There was no definite confirmation, no absolute answer.

I said nothing more. In my mind, many thoughts and concepts were colliding—not a debate of right and wrong, but as if they were trying to find some crack, some foothold, so they could slowly settle and sink in.

Outside, the wind from the bamboo grove blew again, carrying the chill of the mountain night. The flame of the oil lamp on the table flickered. The hermit calmly stood up, walked to the hearth, and added a few more dry logs to the fire.

“The air is getting cold,” he said, his voice still gentle. “The moon in the mountains will probably be very bright tonight.”

The Moonlit Night and the Strange Visitor

The moon had risen high. The night sky over the mountain was crystal clear, without a single cloud. The ethereal, silvery moonlight cast a gentle glow over the small earthen yard in front of the hut.

The hermit placed another small oil lamp on the tea table, its warm yellow light mingling with the moonlight from

outside. He calmly poured another round of fresh tea, then said softly, his voice placid:

"On these mountains, it is usually just me. If you and your wife have no pressing matters, feel free to stay here a few more days to quiet your souls. There is no binding schedule up here, and I have no urgent business."

He smiled faintly, then turned to me.

"I wonder if Mr. Wang would be interested in a few games of chess tonight? Whether it's Chinese chess or Go, I can play a little of both."

Before I could even respond, he suddenly paused, his gaze lifting toward the bamboo forest rustling in the night wind.

"Oh, a fellow Taoist friend... seems to be coming for a visit."

Before Qing Ling or I could fully understand what he meant, a tall, slender figure suddenly emerged from the trail hidden behind the bamboo grove. The figure had short, neat hair, and his steps were unusually light. There was something very different about the way he moved, an elegance I had never seen before.

As the person drew closer, about a dozen paces away, I was suddenly struck by an unbelievable sight: the man appeared to be flying!

He wasn't soaring high, but gliding smoothly about a hand's breadth above the ground. It was clearly a glide through the air. His heels never touched the rustling dry leaves on the ground, and his shadow did not cast a distinct shape like ours did under the moonlight. Everything happened right before my eyes, so real, so clear, yet at the same time so irrational, so far beyond my conventional understanding.

Qing Ling instinctively gripped my arm. I could feel that we were both holding our breath, trying not to miss a single detail of this incredible scene.

The hermit calmly stood up, clasping his hands together in a very ancient gesture:

"Fellow Taoist Liu Yun has arrived."

The strange visitor also clasped his hands in greeting, then stepped closer. Now, his steps were completely normal, touching the ground like anyone else. He was a man of about forty, dressed in a simple, light-gray cloth garment and soft-soled cloth shoes. He had a very lithe, sturdy build, the tanned skin of someone who

often worked outdoors, and his eyes were piercingly bright and sharp.

The hermit turned to us and introduced him naturally:

"This is Liu Yun, a friend of mine. He usually lives down in the town and works as a freelance merchant. He comes up to visit me from time to time. This time... he must have brought something for me."

Liu Yun smiled, nodded a greeting to us, and then placed a small, carefully wrapped cloth parcel on the tea table.

"Yes, venerable brother. A few brothers down below have just pooled their efforts to reprint some books. I thought you might like one, so I brought one up for you."

My attention was no longer on the parcel of books; my mind was still reeling from the way he had appeared. After a few brief, gentle exchanges among the three of them, I could no longer contain my curiosity and ventured to ask:

"Mr. Liu Yun... may I be so bold as to ask a question? Were you... were you actually flying just now?... And if so, do you often travel that way for your daily work, or do you only do so in special, deserted places like this?"

Liu Yun burst out laughing, a hearty laugh without any attempt to hide anything.

"I have to drive a car or ride a motorbike every day, just like everyone else, Mr. Wang. As for this..." he shook his head slightly, "...it cannot be used casually. Heavenly principles do not permit it. Only in truly quiet places, with no ordinary people around, where it won't disturb the social order, can one display a little of it on rare occasions."

He took a sip of tea, then calmly stood up.

"Well, I should probably leave tonight. There's still some business to attend to down in the town. When we are not busy, we will surely have a chance to meet again."

He gave a slight bow to the hermit and us, then quietly departed, his figure quickly blending into the darkness of the mountain forest, as light and mysterious as when he had arrived.

The atmosphere in the small hut returned to its inherent quiet. The flame in the oil lamp on the table flickered, illuminating our pensive faces.

Qing Ling whispered, as if afraid to shatter something:

"I... I have never seen anyone... actually fly like that."

I could only remain silent. We both sat there, stunned, trying to digest what we had just witnessed, not knowing where to place it in our consciousness.

The hermit gently closed the book Liu Yun had brought and set it aside on the table.

"One cannot see the true reality just by searching for it in the outside world," he said, his voice still soft and distant. "Sometimes, if one can just sit quietly, allowing the mind to settle, other doors will naturally open."

We stayed at the hermit's home for three more days. Those days passed simply. In the mornings, we sometimes went with him to the nearby hills to pick medicinal herbs. In the afternoons, we would sit together in the yard, basking in the sun. In the evenings, we would gather around the warm teapot, silently watching the moon rise. He didn't say much, nor did he lecture on anything profound. But every story he told, every word he spoke, though very simple, often left me pondering for a whole afternoon, or even for days afterward. Some days, the three of us would just sit in silence for hours, no one asking anything, he saying nothing. But strangely, it was in those moments of stillness that the things I had desperately wanted to ask, the questions that had troubled me, gradually became unimportant, no longer in need of a specific answer.

On the third day, as I was packing my few personal belongings to go down the mountain, he said to me softly, his voice like a breeze:

"There is someone else waiting for you down there. The next door on this journey... it will open on its own when you set foot there."

I did not fully understand his meaning, but I didn't ask further. At that moment, I only knew one thing—that the few short days here, spent mostly in silence, had truly opened something new, something different within me. Like the bright moonlight on the night we first arrived—not loud, not dazzling—but enough to illuminate a path ahead, even if that path was still faint and full of the unknown.

Conclusion of the Wondrous Encounter and the Journey Onward

It was still early. Thin wisps of clouds drifted lazily across the distant mountain peaks. The pure morning light cast a soft, silvery-gray hue over the earthen yard in front of the hut. From the small kitchen, the soft, steady sound of water boiling on the hearth could be heard. The

hermit, as on every other morning, was leisurely stoking the fire, preparing a new pot of tea. There was no formal send-off, no words of farewell were spoken.

Qing Ling and I quietly packed our few belongings. We had, in a flash, stayed for three days. Initially, we had only planned to visit him for an afternoon, but then neither of us mentioned leaving—and so the days passed in a strange stillness and peace. Each day, the hermit only did very simple, ordinary things: sometimes he would go to the nearby hills to pick some wild herbs, other times he would be seen diligently decocting medicine by the fire, or he would just quietly tend the fire and brew tea. He hardly explained anything, nor did he proactively share any stories with us. But strangely, it was in that near-absolute silence that we perceived so many things that perhaps no words could ever fully express.

One afternoon, as I was helping him spread some trays of medicinal herbs to dry in the backyard, he suddenly asked, his voice even, without looking at me:

"In your land now, do people still believe that humans truly have a soul?"

I paused for a moment, looking up at him. He still did not look back, merely continuing to meticulously arrange

each small bunch of herbs on the bamboo tray. I replied, my voice a bit hesitant:

"Sir, I think... perhaps many people still do, but they often don't know what a soul truly is, and few genuinely pay it any mind."

He said nothing more. But from that afternoon on, I began to pay more attention to the small things, the very ordinary sounds happening around me. The moments when the wind suddenly blew, rustling the bamboo eaves; the soft simmering of the teapot; or the shifting colors of the sunlight on the earthen yard whenever a cloud passed over... All of it seemed to be telling me something—something very old, very familiar, that I had perhaps inadvertently missed for a very long time.

This morning, when we had finished packing everything to go down the mountain, the hermit came out of the hut and handed me a small parcel wrapped in rice paper. Inside were some dried wild herbs that gave off a pure fragrance, and a small, handwritten note with a few words:

"Not for healing. Just to remember the scent of the mountains."

I accepted it reverently, then bowed to him. He only gave a slight nod in return. No more words were exchanged.

We quietly left the small, simple hut. The familiar trail through the bamboo forest leading down to the foot of the mountain was the same one from days before, but for some reason, our steps today seemed somehow different. No one spoke a word for the entire way down. The early morning mountain wind carried a slight, cool dampness and the earthy scent of wild grass. Qing Ling walked beside me, occasionally reaching out to gently brush a bare branch along the path, like a silent farewell.

As we neared the foot of the mountain, I instinctively glanced back. The hermit's small thatched hut was now completely hidden behind the dense layers of green trees. But deep in my heart, the image of his quiet, clear eyes—and the familiar scent of cooking smoke mingling with the drifting mountain mist of the early mornings—was still vividly preserved.

The wind blew up from the valley below, seeping softly through my collar, carrying the breath of ordinary life. I adjusted the straps of my backpack on my shoulders, and without another backward glance, I walked on.

* * *

CHAPTER 4: THE FORENSICS OF THE MYSTERIOUS

A Tale from the Brink of Life and Death

Leaving the mountaintop where the hermit lived in seclusion, my heart seemed to linger with the fragrance of forest leaves and morning dew, a mystical resonance that words could hardly capture. The fresh air and absolute tranquility of the mountains seemed to have temporarily washed away some of the worldly dust that had clung to my mind, but at the same time, it sowed countless new questions for which my repository of modern medical knowledge could offer no satisfactory

answer. My wife, Qing Ling, though not a direct participant in all the deep dialogues with the hermit as I was, had nonetheless sensed the unusual atmosphere and the things that lay beyond our conventional understanding. I noticed she had also become quieter than usual, her gaze often distant, holding an unvoiced curiosity and a hint of doubt.

We decided not to rush back to the noisy, bustling cities. Instead, following a somewhat vague suggestion from the local guide we had hired before parting ways at the foot of the mountain, we found our way to a small town nestled peacefully at the base of another mountain range, named Qingxi. The town truly had nothing particularly elaborate or outstanding in terms of architecture or scenery, but it possessed a strange peace and stillness, as if the hurried wheel of time had gently stopped or intentionally forgotten this place. Classic, moss-covered yin-yang tiled roofs were interspersed with a few newly built houses still smelling of fresh plaster; small, winding honeycomb-stone alleys; and a stream—perhaps the very Qingxi stream of its name—with crystal-clear water, gently winding its way around a part of the town. The people here also seemed to live more slowly, more unhurriedly, a world away from the haste and rush common in other places.

We rented a small room in an inn with a balcony overlooking the stream, planning to stay for a few days

to sort through our rich experiences and decide on the next leg of our journey. The innkeeper was an old man surnamed Chen, who looked very kind, benevolent, and seemed to be a man of few words. And it was from him, one late afternoon as the three of us sat drinking tea on a bamboo couch on the porch, that the first strange story of Qingxi found its way to us.

Initially, the story was just quiet whispers and small talk among a few of Mr. Chen's neighbors who had stopped by for tea. They spoke of a funeral that had taken place in the town a few days prior, the funeral of Old Man Wang, a carpenter who had lived his whole life at the end of town. The matter would likely not have been worth mentioning if not for the extremely strange events that followed.

Old Man Chen, after his neighbors had left, seeing that my wife and I were quite attentive and curious, slowly poured more tea himself, then deliberately recounted the story from the beginning. Old Man Wang was over seventy this year, living alone in his old house after his wife had passed away, and his children were all working in distant big cities. A few days ago, one afternoon, he suddenly suffered a massive heart attack. The neighbors discovered him and rushed him to the town's clinic, but it was too late. The young doctor at the clinic, said to be a recent graduate from a city medical school, after a thorough examination, confirmed that the old man's

heart had stopped, he had ceased breathing, his pupils were dilated, and he showed no reflexes whatsoever—all clear clinical signs of death. His family in the distant provinces had been notified and were rushing back to arrange the funeral.

Following local customs, Old Man Wang's body was brought home by his family and neighbors, washed clean, dressed in new clothes, and laid on the wooden bed in the main room for relatives and neighbors to pay their last respects. The funeral was scheduled for the next day. Everything seemed to proceed in the sorrowful, mournful atmosphere typical of a funeral wake.

But the strangest thing happened around midnight that night, just before the day of the funeral procession. As the old man's eldest son was keeping vigil by his father's coffin, amidst the flickering oil lamps and curling incense smoke, he was startled to see his father's chest seem to faintly rise and fall. At first, he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him from exhaustion and grief. But then, still under the dim lamplight and wafting smoke, the faint movement of the chest became undeniably clear. Not only that, but the old man stirred slightly, then slowly opened his eyes, and then bolted upright in bed, his eyes wide open, looking around in a daze, like someone waking from a very long, very deep sleep.

Needless to say, the son was terrified. He let out a piercing scream and ran out into the yard to call for everyone. The whole family and the few neighbors staying to help with the funeral rushed in, horrified. Everyone was stunned into silence, frozen in shock, as they saw Old Man Wang—the man who just the day before had been confirmed dead by the clinic's doctor—now sitting there, plain as day, alive and well.

"This... this can't be real!" I blurted out, the professional reflex of a long-time doctor suddenly taking over. "Could it be a case of apparent death? Or perhaps the young doctor at the clinic misdiagnosed?"

Old Man Chen slowly shook his head.

"At first, everyone thought so, Professor. Old Man Wang's family hastily called the young doctor back to have a look. He arrived, his face pale as a sheet, utterly drained of color, when he saw Old Man Wang sitting there. Trembling, he checked the old man's pulse, blood pressure, and breathing... all the vital signs were present, faint but clearly signs of life. The young doctor stammered, unable to explain, only insisting that when he had examined him earlier, the old man had truly stopped breathing and his heart had stopped completely, with no signs of life. He had even written out the death certificate for the old man."

Qing Ling, who had been sitting silently beside me, gently took my hand. I knew she too was captivated by this incredible story. She asked Mr. Chen softly:

"So... sir, how was Old Man Wang after he 'came back to life'? Does he remember anything? And how is his health?"

Old Man Chen sighed softly, his voice lowering, his gaze distant as he looked out at the yard.

"That is the strangest part of this whole story, miss. Although Old Man Wang did indeed come back to life, he was no longer the same person he was before. He didn't recognize his own children and grandchildren, didn't remember who he was, or where his home was. He would just sit there in a daze all day, or sometimes wander around the house, muttering things no one could understand. At times, he would speak with perfect clarity about events from ancient times, things that even the oldest people in this town had never heard of. His eyes were usually vacant, lifeless, but occasionally, for no reason, they would flash with a sharp glint that sent a chill down one's spine."

"Doesn't recognize his family? Complete amnesia?" I muttered, trying to find a reasonable explanation. "Is it possible that prolonged cerebral hypoxia during the period of cardiac arrest could be the cause? It could lead

to severe and irreversible brain damage." This was probably the most logical explanation from a modern medical perspective.

"The young doctor at the clinic said the same thing," Mr. Chen nodded. "But there were things that even he couldn't explain. For example, Old Man Wang was a carpenter, who could barely read and could only write his own name. But these past few days, people have seen him holding a calligraphy brush, writing lines of beautiful, classical Chinese characters, which the literate folks in town said were poems about the Tao of immortal cultivation or something similar. Other times, he could just watch the rain fall and predict the exact time of the next downpour, or diagnose the hidden illnesses of his neighbors just by looking at their faces, illnesses they themselves were unaware of. If you say it's just brain damage, how could that explain it all away?"

Old Man Chen's story left me utterly bewildered. As a scientist, a medical professor with years of experience, I was trained to believe only in what could be observed, measured, and empirically proven. Death, to me, was a clear and definitive biological state: the cessation of blood circulation, respiration, and finally, brain death. The fact that a person confirmed clinically dead for nearly a day could "come back to life" was already an extremely rare event, possibly classified as a rare medical error or an extremely unusual case of apparent death.

But the strange changes in mind, knowledge, and the sudden emergence of "prophetic" abilities in Old Man Wang afterward were what truly challenged every limit of my understanding. Brain damage typically leads to a decline in bodily functions; how could it possibly "unlock" such seemingly transcendent abilities?

Qing Ling listened silently from beginning to end, her delicate brows furrowed in thought. I guessed that as a professor of language and culture, she was likely drawing parallels to the mysterious tales of spirit possession or "a soul returning in another's body" that were often passed down in the treasury of Chinese folklore. These were concepts that, previously, we both had regarded as mere products of a rich and somewhat superstitious imagination of the ancients.

"So... what is Old Man Wang's situation now?" Qing Ling asked, her curiosity unconcealed.

"Still the same, nothing has changed," Mr. Chen replied, a hint of concern in his voice. "His children and grandchildren are now both happy and worried. Happy because their father miraculously came back to life, but worried because he seems to have become a completely different person. They've invited several shaman priests and Taoist masters from somewhere to take a look, but no one could do anything. Some said the old man was possessed by a ghost, others said it was a great fated

blessing, that the soul of some past cultivator had entered his body to continue unfinished work. There's no way to know for sure."

The old man paused for a moment, slowly poured more tea into our cups, and then continued, his voice more hesitant than before:

"In this small town of ours, whenever strange things happen, things where the line between life and death becomes as fragile as a spider's thread, people often whisper about one person—that is Master Mo. It is rumored that he can see through things that our mortal eyes cannot. He is not a doctor, nor a shaman or a priest, but people say he has a special pair of eyes, able to perceive what ordinary people cannot, especially the mysterious matters related to the incredibly fragile boundary between life and death."

The introduction of Master Mo came to us so naturally, almost as an inevitable consequence of the strange tale of Old Man Wang. A strong curiosity suddenly arose within me. Could this be the next piece of the mysterious puzzle that this journey was slowly revealing to us? A person who could see through life and death, beyond the scope of sharp scalpels and advanced microscopes? Although the scientific part of me was still full of doubt, my heart now urged me intensely to seek out this special person. I glanced at Qing Ling and saw in her eyes a

similar anticipation, a similar longing. It seemed we both vaguely sensed that another door to the deeper mysteries of the wondrous East was about to open.

Meeting Master Mo

Early the next morning, my curiosity now irrepressible, Qing Ling and I decided to try to find the Master Mo whom Mr. Chen had mentioned the night before. Following the somewhat vague directions from the old innkeeper and a few other townspeople we carefully asked, we learned that the master's residence was not in the usual bustling residential area, but on the very edge of town, near an old, long-unused cemetery, a place where the trees grew thick and the atmosphere was always more serene and deserted than elsewhere. The path leading there was a small, stone-paved alley, worn smooth by time, uneven and damp, like a separate passage leading away from the noisy, bustling world, winding between moss-covered stone walls, guiding us gradually into a space that felt quieter and more ancient.

Finally, after some searching, we stopped before a small wooden house. It looked quite old but was still very clean and sturdy, nestled modestly under the shade of a

giant banyan tree, its gnarled roots clinging to the earth like great pythons. There was no sign, no indication that this was anyone's place of work or practice, only a dark brown wooden door left ajar. The surrounding atmosphere was strangely silent, a silence unlike the desolate, somewhat gloomy feel of the nearby cemetery. It was a special kind of silence, seemingly filled with some invisible inner force, that made one instinctively lower one's voice and walk more gently, more unhurriedly upon approach.

I raised my hand and knocked lightly on the wooden door three times. No immediate reply came from within. Qing Ling and I looked at each other, a hint of hesitation in our eyes. Should we just walk in? Or had we perhaps come to the wrong place? Just then, a deep, warm, and slightly hoarse voice suddenly came from inside the house:

"Come in, the door is unlocked. Guests from afar have arrived; no need to stand in the misty wind."

The voice was not loud, but it had a strange penetrating power, as if its owner had known of our every step for a long time and was just waiting for this very moment to invite us in. We exchanged another glance, then I gently pushed the door open and stepped inside, with Qing Ling close behind.

The interior was not a conventional clinic, nor was it a Taoist temple for worshiping deities as I might have imagined. It resembled an ancient study strangely blended with a somewhat cluttered research laboratory. Natural light filtered through rice paper-covered windowpanes, gentle as threads of golden silk, suspended in a space so still that it seemed even time was holding its breath. The light illuminated bookshelves that reached nearly to the ceiling, filled with old cloth-bound books with frayed covers, carefully tied bamboo scrolls, and even modern printed documents. On the plain wooden tables were scattered all sorts of objects I could not immediately name: miniature bronze models of the human body, various stones of different colors and shapes, antique-style compasses, several magnifying glasses of different sizes, calligraphy brushes, rice paper, and notably, a rather out-of-place microscope in one corner. A faint scent of old paper, ink, and some dried herb mingled together, creating an atmosphere that was at once solemn and imbued with mystery.

Sitting behind the largest desk in the middle of the room, facing the door, was a man. He didn't look exceptionally old, perhaps just over sixty, but his hair was as white as silk, tied neatly in a bun at the back of his head with a simple pin. He wore a simple indigo-colored garment of coarse cloth, its style plain but exuding an unusual, elegant air. He was not tall, even a bit small in stature,

but his eyes were unusually bright and sharp. As we entered, he looked up, his gaze sweeping quickly over Qing Ling and me, a very deep look that seemed to see beyond our outward appearances.

“Are you two looking for me for some reason?” he asked, his voice still deep and a bit hoarse.

I cleared my throat, trying to maintain the calm composure of a scientist, though I couldn't help but feel a bit overwhelmed by the man's presence and the special atmosphere of the place.

“Yes, Master. My name is Wang Ming, and this is my wife, Qing Ling. We have come from the United States to travel and to learn more about traditional culture. We happened to hear the townspeople mention you...”

He smiled faintly, a gentle smile that seemed to already understand why we had come all this way.

“The townspeople just call me Master Mo. As for the title ‘Forensic Pathologist of the Mysterious,’ which you have probably heard, it is really just their playful way of referring to me whenever they encounter matters that are hard to explain by common sense. I am merely one who is fond of exploring the workings of a human being's life, both when it manifests clearly on the outside, and when it recedes into the invisible realms.”

His use of the word “being” and his mention of it “receding” particularly caught my attention. It was not like a doctor’s usual talk of the body’s biological functions; it seemed to carry a deeper, more philosophical meaning.

“Master, when you say ‘recedes’... do you mean to speak of death?” Qing Ling suddenly asked, the inherent curiosity of a cultural and linguistic researcher seemingly overriding her initial skepticism.

Master Mo looked at Qing Ling, a hint of approval in his eyes.

“You are partly right. The world often calls it death. But is ‘death’ truly a complete end, a permanent disappearance? Or is it merely a transformation of a being’s state, another door opening or closing?” He paused for a moment, then looked directly into my eyes. “Professor Wang, you work in the medical field; you must have witnessed the passing of many people. So, with your experience, how would you define ‘death’?”

His unexpected and direct question made me pause for a second. I began to try to present the standard medical definitions I always taught: the cessation of heart function, respiration, brain death, the loss of basic life functions... But as I spoke, Master Mo’s eyes seemed to

be looking right through all the scientific jargon, the professional terminology.

“Those are all outward manifestations, signs that your instruments and machines can measure on this tangible body,” he said slowly, after I had finished. “But what about the ‘something’ that actually made this body function, the ‘something’ that created consciousness, feelings, and the endless stream of thoughts within each of us... So when those biological manifestations cease, where has that ‘something’ gone? Does it truly vanish into thin air like smoke?”

I was completely silent. This was the core question, the chasm that our modern science was still struggling day and night to answer, the incredibly fragile boundary between matter and consciousness, between pure biology and what could be called spiritual life.

“I do not use scalpels or microscopes like you do, Professor,” Master Mo continued, his hand gesturing towards the strange-looking objects on his desk. “I have other tools, other methods to ‘see.’ To see the subtle energy flows, to see the imprints that the ancients called the ‘soul’ or ‘consciousness’ left behind after departing the body, to see the karmic connections that have quietly led to that event of birth or death for a person.”

“Energy? Soul?” I repeated the words, which were outside the scientific dictionary I was used to. “Master, do you truly believe in the existence of such things?”

He did not answer my question directly, but only smiled faintly, a somewhat mysterious smile.

“Whether I believe or not is actually less important than whether it truly exists and operates according to its own laws, Professor. It is like the wind outside; we cannot see its shape, but we can feel its coolness, we can see its powerful effects on the trees, on the water’s surface. There are things the naked eye cannot see, that machines cannot measure, but that does not mean they do not exist.”

He stood up calmly, walked slowly to the window, and looked out at the quiet, hazy expanse of the old cemetery in the distance.

“You two came here because you heard the story of the old carpenter Wang at the end of town, did you not?”

His question did not really need an answer. Clearly, he knew everything.

“Yes, that’s right,” I admitted honestly. “We truly cannot explain what happened to him with conventional medical understanding. A man confirmed completely

deceased by a doctor, yet he could come back to life, and then transform into a completely different person..."

Master Mo turned back, his gaze now seeming even more distant and profound.

"That is indeed a very interesting case," he said softly. "A rather classic example to show us that the boundary between what people call 'life' and 'death' is sometimes more fragile and complex than we imagine. It is not as simple as an on-off switch. It is like a magical revolving door, where each being, depending on the weight of their karmic burden or the light of kindness they carry in their heart, will be led down a completely different path. It is like a revolving door that can lead to many different ways, depending on countless factors that ordinary people can hardly perceive."

He gestured for us to sit on the simple wooden chairs near the tea table.

"If you two truly wish to learn more, I can share some of my own perspectives. But please remember, this is not knowledge you can find in modern science textbooks. It requires a more open mind, a listening with the heart and not just with analytical reason."

Qing Ling and I looked at each other. The inherent skepticism of a scientist was still there within me, but at

the same time, curiosity and the feeling that we were truly standing before a half-open door to a completely different world of knowledge had won. This man, Master Mo, with his simple appearance but possessing such a penetrating gaze and words full of profound implications, was clearly no ordinary person. He was not like a forensic pathologist who dissects corpses to find the cause of physical death; he seemed to be one who specialized in “dissecting” the deeper mysteries of life and death itself. We both nodded slightly, silent and ready to listen.

A Perspective Beyond the Physical Body

Master Mo calmly poured tea for us into small, jade-green ceramic cups. The pure, gentle fragrance of the tea filled the air, blending exquisitely with the scent of old paper and dried herbs characteristic of the room, creating a feeling that was both tranquil and somewhat solemn. He did not rush into an explanation, but only took a small sip of tea, his gaze seeming to drift with the thin wisp of steam rising from his cup, settling amidst deep layers of thought before condensing into calm words.

“To understand what happened to Old Man Wang,” he began, his voice still as deep and slow as before, “we perhaps need to temporarily set aside the perspective that focuses solely on the physical body, which your modern medicine is accustomed to.”

He placed his teacup on the wooden table, then looked directly at me. “Professor Wang, as I understand it, you often view the human body as a highly complex biological machine, is that correct? The heart is seen as a circulatory pump, the brain as a central processing unit controlling all activities, and other organs perform specialized functions. When an important part of that machine ceases to function, the machine is considered ‘broken’—that is, dead.”

I nodded slightly. That was indeed the very basic and common approach of modern medicine.

“But,” he continued, his eyes full of contemplation as he looked at me, “what made that ‘machine’ start in the first place? What truly created consciousness, feelings, the stream of memories, and the unique personality traits—all those invisible things that make up a real ‘person,’ and not just an assemblage of cells and organs? Your medicine might call these the complex functions of the brain, the result of countless chemical reactions and sophisticated neural impulses. But is that the whole story?”

He paused for a moment, letting the questions hang in the still air of the room.

“From the perspective of the ancients, and those today who are still on the path of understanding the true nature of a being’s life, beyond this tangible body, each of us carries a core spiritual self. It can be called by many different names, depending on the culture or school of thought. The most common and easily visualized term is probably the soul. Some who go deeper into the path of cultivation might call it the Primordial Spirit, referring to the true self, the most original part of a being. Sometimes people use the term ‘consciousness’ to describe its aspect of awareness and perception. Though the names may differ, they all refer to the invisible, subtle part that is not matter in the conventional sense, and cannot be weighed or measured by your scientific instruments. Yet it is the very core of life, the place that truly holds each person’s unique self, past memories, latent wisdom, and the deep imprints from very distant lifetimes.”

“Soul? Primordial Spirit?” Qing Ling softly repeated the words, her eyes lighting up with clear curiosity and interest. “I have also come across these concepts in books and cultural documents.”

Master Mo nodded gently. “That’s right. Although the term ‘soul’ in folklore has sometimes been cloaked by people in too many layers of superstition. Try to imagine

it this way: our physical body is like a tangible horse-drawn carriage, and that soul (or you could call it the Primordial Spirit, or consciousness) is the invisible driver controlling the carriage. When the carriage becomes worn out, dilapidated, or has to stop for some reason, that driver can still continue to exist, waiting for a suitable opportunity to set out on new journeys, with other carriages."

I tried to visualize what he was saying. The idea was not entirely foreign to me; it existed in many major religions and ancient philosophical schools around the world. But hearing it presented so calmly and coherently today by a man with such a profound and erudite appearance, it carried a very different weight, a different kind of persuasiveness.

"So, death... from this perspective, what is it, Master?" I asked.

"The death of the physical body," he replied, his voice still even, "is the moment the soul has completely detached from that body. The connection between the 'driver' and the 'carriage' has been permanently severed. At that point, the physical body will begin the process of decomposition according to the laws of nature. But the soul does not 'die' in that sense. It will carry with it everything it has accumulated during the process of 'driving the carriage'—and from even more ancient

journeys—to enter another state of existence, to begin another journey.”

He looked at both of us intently and then continued, “And one of the most important things that every soul carries with it is karmic force.”

“Karmic force (Karma)?” I frowned slightly. I had heard this concept a few times, and it was often associated with Buddhist teachings.

“That’s right. Karmic force, in its simplest sense, is the invisible flow of the law of cause and effect, where every thought, every word, every action of ours in this life—and even in past lives—is quietly weaving the threads of fate that our mortal eyes cannot see. Kind and good actions create good karma (also called virtuous karma or blessings), while evil, wrongful actions create bad karma (or karmic debt). This karmic force never just disappears; it accumulates, attaches itself to each person’s soul, and largely determines their destiny, life circumstances, and what they will encounter in the future, even after they have left this current body.”

He explained with great clarity, showing no sign of proselytizing or imposing any belief on us.

“It is like an invisible river; every action, every thought of ours is like a drop of water added to it. That river

flows on, carrying both the sweetness of good deeds and the bitterness of evil, and sooner or later, we will have to taste the very water we have contributed."

Here, he paused for a moment before returning to the story of the old carpenter Wang.

"The case of the carpenter Wang that you heard about is indeed very special. When he suffered the sudden heart attack and was subsequently confirmed dead by the clinic's doctor, it is very likely that his original soul, carrying all the karma of a lifetime as a carpenter, had indeed left the body according to the normal process of life and death."

"Then why was he able to 'come back to life' afterward?" Qing Ling couldn't help but ask immediately.

"This is the complex and rare point of the matter," Master Mo said, his voice lowering slightly. "There are extremely rare cases where a body has just become 'empty' because the soul has departed, but the body itself has not yet begun to decompose. And at that very moment, under a highly sophisticated and complex convergence of fated factors, of time, space, and the invisible flows of karmic force, another soul—perhaps because of some unpaid karmic debt from a past life, or

because of an ancient vow or mission—finds its way and takes over the newly vacated body.”

I was almost stunned. “You mean... the phenomenon that people in folklore call ‘a soul returning in another’s body’?”

“That is the folk term,” he nodded in confirmation. “But its deeper nature is likely still closely related to karmic force. It is very possible that this new soul is carrying a great karmic debt that needs to be repaid right here, or perhaps they have a special mission that was unfulfilled in a previous life. ‘Borrowing’ a body that has just been abandoned by its former owner is a possibility, though it is extremely rare and requires many complex fated factors to converge at once.”

“Could that explain why Old Man Wang seemed to have become a completely different person after coming back to life?” I asked, beginning to see a glimmer of logic in this seemingly irrational series of events.

“It is entirely possible,” Master Mo nodded. “The new soul, upon entering, would bring with it all of its own memories, knowledge, personality traits, and karma. It has no memory of the carpenter Wang’s former life, so its failure to recognize his children and grandchildren is understandable. It might also carry knowledge or special abilities from some distant past life—for example,

knowing how to read and write classical Chinese, or being able to compose poems about the Tao of cultivation. It might also possess certain special abilities brought about by its karma or cultivation from previous lives, such as being able to sense things that are about to happen or see the hidden illnesses within others' bodies."

He sighed softly. "However, this 'body borrowing' is often never perfect. The connection between the new soul and the old body may not be entirely compatible, which can lead to states of daze, moments of lucidity and confusion, or other strange behaviors that are difficult for outsiders to understand. And more importantly, this soul will still be governed by all the karma it carries, as well as any residual karma related to the body itself."

Master Mo's explanation seemed to open a completely different door for me to re-examine the whole event. It did not deny the biological signs of death I was familiar with, but it added a whole deeper layer of meaning, another dimension of existence—that of the soul and karmic force. This explanation, though it seemed incredible, could explain the highly irrational points in the story of Old Man Wang that our modern medicine was completely at a loss to address: the miraculous "revival" and the complete change in personality, knowledge, and special abilities afterward.

Although the inherent rationalism of a scientist in me was still full of questions and doubts about the authenticity of these things, about what concrete evidence could be verified, I could not deny that this explanation seemed to touch upon aspects of the event that our modern medicine could not explain.

I glanced at Qing Ling. She was listening intently, her eyes wide, fixed on Master Mo. With her background in Eastern culture and philosophy, I guessed that these concepts of soul and karmic force were probably not too foreign to her, though this might be the first time she had heard them presented so vividly and connected to a specific case.

The room fell silent again, with only the soft simmering of the teapot and the light breathing of the three of us. Master Mo's words still echoed in my mind, not as a complete explanation, but like the first sketches of an immense painting, a worldview I had never imagined before.

Between Skepticism and Enlightenment

Stepping out of Master Mo's wooden house, I felt as if I had just returned from a very different world. The air outside, though still the familiar tranquility of the edge of Qingxi town, now seemed to cloak everything in a thin, invisible mist—something heavy that I could not name. The initial curiosity, even a touch of excitement, that we felt upon arriving here seemed to have completely vanished, replaced by an enveloping silence, so dense and indescribable, between Qing Ling and me. We walked side by side down the small, uneven stone alley, the crunch of gravel under our shoes sounding so distinct, as if it were the only sound left in an inner world that had just been completely upended.

I said nothing, and Qing Ling was also silent. We both needed our own space, needed more time to slowly digest everything we had just heard and felt in that small room filled with the scent of old paper and herbs. My mind was like an old documentary film, constantly rewinding and replaying Master Mo's words and images, and each time the film replayed, it seemed to etch the nagging questions even deeper into my consciousness. Soul? Karmic force? A soul returning in another's body? All these concepts, which for me had previously existed only in fantasy novels or in studies of folk beliefs, were now presented by a man with sharp eyes and an incredibly calm demeanor as self-evident

truths, as invisible laws operating in parallel with the tangible, physical world I had always known.

Absurd! A stubborn, rational part of me—the part honed by years of rigorous scientific research—was still screaming in protest, trying to erect its final ramparts against the silent but powerful wave of doubt invading my consciousness. Where was the concrete evidence? Where was the verifiable data? How could I accept such vague, non-material things? Death, from what I had learned and witnessed, was a clear biological phenomenon, an irreversible cessation of basic life functions. I had witnessed it hundreds of times in my career, had signed countless death certificates, had had to explain it to patients' relatives using specific and clear medical terms. That was the foundation of knowledge, a truth proven by generations of science.

But then, the image of the old carpenter Wang, with his strange changes after "coming back to life," reappeared vividly in my mind, an undeniable challenge. A body that had been confirmed clinically dead by a professional doctor for nearly a day. A carpenter who had worked with his hands his whole life, who could barely read and write, suddenly "woke up" and transformed into a completely different person—with profound ancient knowledge, with the ability to see things that ordinary people could not. Brain damage? Prolonged cerebral hypoxia? All the familiar medical explanations I could

think of now sounded feeble and weak, like a garment that was too tight being forced onto an oversized body. They could not fully explain the sudden emergence of that new knowledge and those new abilities.

And then there was Master Mo himself... He was nothing like the fortune-tellers or shaman priests I had always imagined. There was not a trace of contrived mystery, no enchanting, hollow, or obscure rhetoric. Only an extraordinary calmness, a penetrating insight in his eyes, and a frighteningly coherent logic in the way he connected these seemingly fantastical concepts to explain an anomalous phenomenon. He spoke of the soul, of karmic force, as naturally as if he were speaking of the flow of blood in the veins or the transmission of nerve impulses in the brain. It was that very placidity, that certainty without need for exaggeration or embellishment, that made me all the more bewildered and confused.

I instinctively raised a hand to rub my temples, feeling as if the very foundation of my thinking, which I had always prided myself on as scientific and objective, was actually being violently shaken. Could the worldview I had always considered complete and correct actually be too narrow, too one-sided? Was it that because our current research tools could only measure the tangible, physical world, we had hastily denied the existence of other layers of reality, of invisible laws that were quietly

governing human destiny in ways we could not understand? The encounter with the hermit on the mountaintop a few days ago had planted the first seeds of doubt in my heart, and now, Master Mo seemed to have poured a powerful stream of water on them, causing those seeds to stir and sprout. I felt as if I were standing before a vast, mysterious ocean of knowledge, whose existence I had previously known only through a small, stagnant puddle.

I glanced over at Qing Ling. She was still walking slowly beside me, her eyes fixed on the ancient stones under her feet, but I knew for sure her mind was not there. Her delicate brows were slightly furrowed, her lips occasionally pressed together as if struggling with a complex train of thought. With her extensive knowledge of Eastern culture, would she find it easier to accept these things than I? Or was it precisely because of that knowledge that she found this matter even more complex and difficult to explain? I remembered her expression back in Master Mo's house—first curiosity, then a touch of astonishment, and finally, a deep pensiveness. She wasn't just listening with her ears; she seemed to be mobilizing all her knowledge and her most subtle perceptions to confront the concepts she had just heard.

"What are you thinking about, Ming?"

Qing Ling's soft voice finally broke the long silence between us. It came out a bit hesitantly, as if she herself were not sure what kind of answer she wanted to hear.

I stopped and turned to look at her. The morning sun had begun to filter through the leaves, creating dancing patterns of light on her elegant face, but it seemed unable to dispel the pensive look in her eyes. I took a deep breath, trying to find words to describe the chaos in my heart.

"I... I honestly don't know, Ling," I replied truthfully, my voice a little weary. "It's as if... as if the entire map of the world, whose accuracy I once had absolute faith in, has suddenly turned into a blank sheet of paper, and I am standing in completely unfamiliar lands, on horizons I had never dared to dream of before. There are new lands, new paths emerging that the old map never recorded."

Qing Ling nodded gently, her eyes full of sympathy, but she couldn't hide her own confusion. "I understand," she said softly. "I have a similar feeling. The concepts of the soul, of karmic retribution... I've read about them many times in books before, and usually just saw them as part of folk beliefs or ancient philosophical schools. But hearing Master Mo explain them so thoroughly, and connecting them directly to the story of Old Man Wang... they no longer seem like empty theories. They become vivid, concrete, and... strangely frightening." She paused

for a moment, then continued, almost as if whispering to herself, "It makes me feel like I've just stepped through a mirror. Everything around me looks the same, but its essence seems to have changed a great deal."

We fell silent again. But this time, the air between us no longer felt so heavy with separate doubts. There was a silent connection, as if we were both looking in the same direction, facing something immense that had just descended upon us.

As we neared the end of the alley, where the path widened and the familiar sounds of daily life in the town grew louder, my eyes happened to catch a small image. On an old, moss-covered stone wall, a slender but resilient wildflower was struggling to push its way through a cold, damp crack to reach a faint ray of sunlight—a silent testament to an undying life force, always striving to overcome adversity. The delicate violet of its tiny petals stood out against the gray stone, a powerful expression of life against all odds. I found myself staring at it for a long moment, a vague thought arising within me. This life... is it really just the result of complex chemical reactions and cell division? Or is it also some form of will, some invisible energy, always seeking to manifest, always seeking to exist, even in the most impossible circumstances, in ways we could never have expected?

I did not voice this sudden thought to Qing Ling, but I had a feeling that the image of that small wildflower, along with Master Mo's profound words, would haunt my mind for a long time to come.

As the familiar sounds of the small town of Qingxi grew clearer, I knew we had returned to the everyday world. But something inside me, and perhaps inside Qing Ling as well, was no longer entirely the same. The inherent skepticism of a scientist was still there, strong and rational. But alongside it, a very narrow crack seemed to have truly opened, leading to a land of possibilities I had never dared to consider before. The questions about the nature of existence now seemed larger and deeper than ever.

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CHAPTER 5: THE TOWN WHERE TIME STOOD STILL

The Thirteen-Day Sleep in a Forgotten Land

After the haunting encounter with Master Mo and his shocking explanations of the soul and karmic force in Qingxi, both Qing Ling and I felt a strong urge to find a true moment of quiet. The rush of experiences, from the hermit on the mountaintop to the story of Old Man Wang's "soul returning in another's body," had shaken the very foundations of our thinking. We needed time, we needed a truly quiet space to reassemble the shattered pieces of our beliefs, to face the countless immense questions that had just been unveiled before us.

During our final conversation with Master Mo, when we expressed our desire to find a secluded place to quiet our minds for a few days, he just gazed pensively out the window, then casually mentioned a rather unfamiliar place name: "Wangyou Town." He didn't say much about it, only smiled faintly and said that there, "time sometimes becomes strangely elastic for some people, and one can more easily forget the troubles of the secular world." His half-joking, half-serious words, along with the evocative name "Wangyou" (Forgetting Sorrow), quietly planted an indescribable curiosity in our hearts.

Finding the way to Wangyou Town was no easy task. It didn't appear on any standard tourist maps, and the people in neighboring towns we asked only had a vague knowledge of some remote valley. Our journey began with a train ride, then a transfer to a rickety local bus that crawled along winding mountain roads, finally stopping at a small, secluded town at the foot of a high mountain range. From here, to get to Wangyou, we had to hire a local young man and his self-made three-wheeled motorcycle to traverse a rough and treacherous dirt road.

By the time we reached the edge of the Wangyou valley, it was already dusk. Both Qing Ling and I were exhausted after a full day of constant travel. The scenery of Wangyou Town appeared from a distance, with its dark brown tiled roofs emerging from the evening mist, looking ancient and somewhat isolated. Our guide

introduced us to a hospitable local family at the entrance of the town, who had a small, simple room often reserved for stranded wayfarers.

The host family, a middle-aged couple and their young son, welcomed us warmly, albeit with the shyness of mountain folk unused to strangers. They quickly prepared a simple dinner for us with white rice, boiled wild vegetables, and some salted stream fish. Being so exhausted, neither Qing Ling nor I could eat much. Immediately after dinner, an overwhelming, unprecedented drowsiness suddenly hit both of us, so swift and powerful that it was impossible to resist. I vaguely remember my head spinning, my eyelids growing heavy, and then everything dissolving into a void. My last fleeting thought before completely losing consciousness was how quiet this place was, an unusual kind of quiet.

I awoke with a start, feeling incredibly light and refreshed, as if I had just experienced an extremely deep and restful sleep. My mind was completely clear, with no trace of fatigue, a stark contrast to the usual sluggish mornings after long trips. I stirred slightly, my eyes taking in the simple wooden room. Morning light was already seeping through the cracks in the door, casting pale yellow streaks on the floor.

Qing Ling had also just woken up beside me, looking around with a similar dazed expression, a look of unusual freshness and relief on her face.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked softly. "I feel strangely refreshed, my mind is so clear. It feels like I only dozed off for a moment, I can't believe it!"

Qing Ling nodded, gently rubbing her eyes. "Me too. So incredibly light. It's strange, I just had a very clear, vivid dream."

"A dream?" I was surprised. I rarely remembered my dreams. "What did you dream about?"

"I dreamt we were lost in a valley filled with white mist," Qing Ling recounted, her voice still a bit dreamy. "Then we found a trail leading up a very high mountain. At the top, there was an ancient temple, with elegantly curved roof tiles, looking very majestic. We went inside and saw many monks in yellow kasaya robes, sitting upright and chanting scriptures. The sound of the chanting was deep and resonant, the bells and wooden fish echoed... it felt so peaceful, so serene, and also strangely familiar, as if I had been there before..."

I listened to Qing Ling's story, my heart stirring. In truth, I had just had a nearly identical dream, clear down to the

details. But before I could share this with her, the door creaked open.

The hostess came in carrying a small tray with two bowls of steaming white congee and a simple dish of boiled vegetables. Seeing us awake, she smiled kindly.

“Ah, our esteemed guests are awake. Please have some congee to warm your stomachs. You must be very hungry.”

“Yes, thank you,” I said, a little surprised by her thoughtfulness. “We must have slept quite soundly, sorry to have troubled you.”

The hostess just waved it off with a laugh. “It’s no trouble at all. It’s good that you could sleep. Seeing you sleep so deeply, we didn’t dare to disturb you.”

“So, we probably slept until almost noon, right?” Qing Ling asked, looking out the window where the sun was already quite high.

The hostess looked at us, her eyes hesitant for a moment, then she said slowly:

“Well... I don’t know if you’ll believe me, but today is the fourteenth day since you arrived.”

"Four... fourteen days?!" Qing Ling and I exclaimed in unison, our voices filled with utter disbelief. I hastily looked at my wristwatch—it had stopped at some unknown time, the battery probably dead. Qing Ling also quickly took out her cell phone, but the screen was dark, without a flicker of life.

"Are... are you serious?" I stammered, my heart pounding in my chest as if it would leap out. "We... we slept for thirteen straight days and nights?"

The hostess nodded, her expression strangely calm. "Yes, that's right. For the first few days, when you didn't wake up, we were a bit worried. But my husband and the village elders said that, in the old days, there were one or two cases of strangers from afar coming here and also sleeping for a long time like this. Some said it was because they weren't used to the mountain air, others said it was people with a predestined connection for cultivation, fated to be with the gods and Buddhas of this mountain. We saw that your breathing was steady and your complexions were rosy, so we didn't dare to disturb you much, just checked on you from time to time, and moistened your lips with a little thin congee when they looked too dry."

Thirteen days! Thirteen days and nights had passed without us knowing, feeling only like a short nap, a fleeting dream. Even more unbelievable was that after

such a long period with almost no food or drink (that bit of thin congee was hardly enough to sustain a body), we felt neither famished nor exhausted. On the contrary, I felt an unusual vigor and mental clarity, as if my body had just been recharged with some new form of energy. I didn't even feel the need to use the restroom.

I looked at Qing Ling and saw the same utter shock and disbelief on her face, mixed with something indescribable. The dream of the ancient temple, of the solemn chanting ceremony... what did it mean? And for the past thirteen days, where had we really been, what had we experienced in that state of deep, unconscious sleep?

The scientist in me screamed that this was completely irrational, impossible according to any biological law I had ever known. But the truth was right before my eyes, along with the hostess's sincere, unembellished words, leaving me unable to deny it.

Wangyou Town. This land, it seemed, held many more secrets, many more wonders, far beyond what even Master Mo had hinted at.

Meeting People with Unusual Experiences or Concepts of Time and Aging

After a somewhat restless night, partly from being in a new place, but mostly because the feeling of Wangyou Town's unusual rhythm of time from the previous afternoon still haunted my mind, Qing Ling and I awoke as the first rays of morning sun barely seeped through the cracks of the wooden window. The early morning air here was unusually fresh, carrying a bit of moisture from the nearby river and the distinct earthy scent of the mountains. In stark contrast to the usual hustle and bustle of other places at this hour, Wangyou Town was still submerged in an almost absolute stillness. Only the chirping of birds from afar and the gentle, gurgling sound of the river were the rare sounds breaking the vast silence.

We went downstairs, where the white-haired innkeeper—whom we now knew as Mrs. Lin—was leisurely sweeping the small earthen yard in front of the porch. Each sweep of her broom moved rhythmically, unhurriedly, even as the sun began to rise higher, as if she were drawing lines of tranquility onto the yard's surface. Her hair was as white as snow, and though her face had many wrinkles, her eyes were remarkably clear and sharp. Her hands, though dotted with age spots, did not look as dry or wrinkled as those of other elderly

people I had met. She moved with a light, graceful ease, showing no signs of the fatigue or heaviness of old age.

"Good morning, esteemed guests," she smiled kindly upon seeing us, a smile that was also... as slow as everything else here. "Did you sleep well last night?"

"Good morning, ma'am. We slept well enough," Qing Ling replied. I noticed her voice had also unconsciously become softer, more unhurried. "This Wangyou Town is truly peaceful, ma'am."

"Of course, it is peaceful, my dears," Mrs. Lin nodded slightly, her hands continuing the steady sweeps. "In this place, there is nothing to be rushed or hurried about."

"Ma'am, have you been here for a very long time?" I blurted out, unable to hide my curiosity about this woman with such a special appearance and demeanor.

Mrs. Lin paused her sweeping and looked up at me, her clear eyes seeming to see right into my soul. She didn't answer right away, but seemed to be searching for something in a distant memory. "A long time, my child," she said softly, her voice seeming to echo from a faraway place. "So long that I can no longer remember exactly how many seasons of rain and sun have passed over this land. In this Wangyou Town, people don't have the habit

of counting the days and months. We just live, day after day, season after season.”

Her somewhat vague answer surprised me. Not remembering how long one has lived? Or simply not caring? That was so different from our common notions of time and life. She smiled again, a somewhat mysterious smile. “Time in this place is like that river. It flows along at its own pace—sometimes it seems very fast, other times it feels very slow—but it never truly stops, like an endless song. The important thing is whether one is quiet enough to feel that special flow.”

With that, she resumed her work, leaving us standing there with our minds racing. Her words, though seemingly simple, seemed to hold a profound philosophy of time that I could not yet fully grasp.

After a simple breakfast of soft-cooked congee and boiled wild vegetables with sesame salt, prepared by Mrs. Lin herself, we decided to take a walk around the town to observe the local life more closely. And indeed, the feeling that time was slowing down here became ever more palpable in my mind. Everyone we met on the road—from the old folks sunning themselves warmly on their porches, to the women carrying babies on their backs to the market, to the men diligently mending bamboo fences or re-thatching roofs—all shared a

common demeanor: they were unhurried, deliberate, and seemed completely free from any of life's pressures.

We stopped for a long time in front of a small pottery workshop modestly situated on the bank of a river tributary. Inside, a middle-aged man, perhaps around fifty, sat intently before an old potter's wheel, his hands gently caressing and shaping a mass of reddish-brown clay. His movements were incredibly focused and meticulous, yet carried a rhythm of ease and contentment, as if each stroke on the clay was a slow, steady breath in harmony with the pulse of the earth. The pot gradually taking shape under his skillful hands had a very rustic, simple beauty, yet was also harmonious and well-proportioned. Around him were countless other ceramic pieces, finished or in progress, of all sizes and shapes, all with a very unique style, unlike any pottery we had ever seen before.

Seeing us lingering at the door, he looked up and gave a kind smile. "Are you two visitors from afar?"

"Yes, we're from the US," I replied. "Your pottery is beautiful. This craft must require a great deal of patience."

He chuckled, a laugh that revealed deep wrinkles around his eyes, but his eyes were very bright. "Patience? I don't really think so. It's simply about following its nature. However the clay wants to take shape, my hands

just follow. Whether a piece is finished quickly or slowly is not as important as whether the pot has its own 'soul'."

I pointed to a particularly beautiful jade-green glazed vase displayed prominently on a shelf. "This vase, you must have spent a lot of time making it, right?"

He followed my finger, his gaze as affectionate as if looking at his own creation. "The time to make it?" He laughed again, then shook his head. "To be honest, I don't remember anymore. It might have been a few weeks, or it could have been several months. When you're truly doing what you love, when you're completely immersed in it, time seems to stop as well. You only know the beginning and the end. The process in between is like a continuous flow; there's no need to measure or calculate it."

Qing Ling, with the sensitivity of someone in culture and arts, was very interested in these unique ceramic products. She began asking him about the local pottery techniques, the source of the clay he was using, and the meaning of the decorative patterns on the vases. He cheerfully answered all her questions, but when we inadvertently mentioned time, the length of his career, or the rapid changes of the outside world, he seemed rather indifferent. "The world out there must be changing very fast now, right?" he asked us in return. "People there are always rushing somewhere, doing something quickly.

But here in our Wangyou Town, things just happen slowly. The sun rises and sets, the trees sprout and change leaves with the seasons. There's nothing to rush for."

I observed the potter closely. He looked robust and healthy, his skin tanned by the elements, his hands calloused from labor. But something didn't quite add up. If he was really only around fifty as he appeared, then who had made these ceramic pieces with their classic style and clear marks of age? Or was this man actually much older than his sturdy appearance suggested? I didn't dare ask directly, afraid of offending him, but the question lingered in my mind.

Leaving the small workshop, we strolled along the riverbank. Under the shade of a giant banyan tree, whose lush canopy covered a large earthen yard, several old men were leisurely playing Go. The stone Go board was worn smooth over the years, and each black and white piece was polished to a sheen, as if holding countless quiet afternoons within them. The old men played very slowly, each move considered with great care; sometimes an entire afternoon would pass with only a few moves made. The atmosphere was incredibly tranquil, with only the dry 'clack' of a stone being placed on the board and the steady, gentle breathing of the old men.

We stood and watched silently for a long time. What I found strange was their conversation. They didn't just discuss the current moves on the board; they sometimes talked about events from long ago with a natural tone, as if they had just happened yesterday. One mentioned a great flood that had devastated the region ages ago, while another recounted a bountiful harvest from his youth. Listening to them, I had the strange feeling that the past and present no longer had a clear boundary in their consciousness. Was time a completely different flow for them?

"Did you notice?" Qing Ling whispered in my ear. "They talk about things that happened decades ago as if it were yesterday. And look, although their hair is white and their skin is wrinkled, their minds are still very sharp, with none of the confusion or frailty of old age that we often see in other elderly people."

I nodded. It was true. These old men, though surely very advanced in age, showed no signs of severe mental or physical decline. They were still sharp, still active in their own way, and participated in community life with great placidity. Aging here seemed to follow a very different course—slower, and seemingly not heavy with decay as I was used to seeing, but more like a mellowing, a settling of the spirit.

The more I interacted with the people of Wangyou Town, the more bewildered I felt. The way they perceived and experienced time, the way they faced the aging of their bodies, was completely different from anything I had ever known. It didn't seem to be a denial or an attempt to resist the flow of time, but a harmony, an acceptance so complete that they had almost forgotten its existence. They did not live to race against time; they seemed to be truly living in a different stream of time, a much gentler and quieter one.

As a doctor, I knew very well that the biological aging of the body is inevitable. Cells grow old, organ functions decline, and diseases become more frequent. It is a very natural law of creation. But in this Wangyou Town, that law seemed to be bent, or at least significantly slowed down. Could the pure, isolated environment, the ever-quiet atmosphere, and an easygoing, contented state of mind truly affect that biological process? Or was there another factor, some secret still hidden deep in the heart of this valley, something closely related to the very nature of time and space?

I looked at Qing Ling and saw that her eyes were also filled with similar questions. It felt as if we had wandered into a land that time seemed to have deliberately forgotten, where the familiar laws of the outside world no longer held much meaning. And the people we met, with their extraordinary equanimity in

the face of the years and their very different concepts of time, only deepened the mystery of this place in my mind.

Elastic Time and Other Dimensions?

The afternoons in Wangyou Town seemed to have a strange, prolonged quality. The golden sunlight still lingered gently, like delicate silk threads, on the moss-covered tiled roofs, draped languidly over the silently flowing river, and seemed to hesitate, reluctant to fade completely, even though, according to my watch, darkness should have been fast approaching. We sat on the wooden bench on the inn's porch, silently gazing at the river, trying to sense the strange, elusive rhythm of this place. The stories of the townspeople who seemed unhurried by the years, of an aging process that also appeared to be slowing down, kept circling in my mind.

Mrs. Lin, the innkeeper, having finished her afternoon chores, brought a small stool and sat down beside us, fanning herself with an old bamboo-strip fan. She looked at both of us, her kind eyes holding a strange understanding.

"Esteemed guests, you seem to be pondering a great deal about this Wangyou Town of ours," she said, her voice as even and slow as ever.

Qing Ling turned to her, smiling gently. "Ma'am, this place is truly special. We feel... that time here doesn't seem to be quite the same as in other places. Everything happens more slowly, and the people here seem to live in great harmony with that rhythm."

Mrs. Lin nodded slightly, her gaze distant as she looked towards the mountains fading into the mist at the end of the valley. "Time?" she repeated the word, as if it were a concept both deeply familiar and somewhat foreign. "You outsiders are used to measuring it with clocks, dividing it neatly into minutes and hours. But here in Wangyou Town, we often perceive it differently."

She paused for a moment, her eyes on the languidly flowing river. "The ancients here often compared it to this river. There are stretches where the water rushes over rapids, and other stretches where the water just whispers along in quiet bends. There are places where the water is as deep as a mirror reflecting the whole sky, and other places where underground currents churn in ways our mortal eyes can never see. Time, perhaps, is just like that—a flow that is both tangible and intangible."

I listened intently to her every word. Her expression was rich in imagery, yet somewhat vague, not adhering to any scientific logic. "Do you mean... that time can actually change its speed here?" I tried to ask more specifically, unable to hide the curiosity of a scientist.

Mrs. Lin smiled kindly, a smile that showed no mockery of my somewhat naive question, but was more like that of an adult trying to explain to a child something that was already self-evident to them. "Not exactly 'change its speed' in the way you might think," she said slowly. "Rather, it is said that at times, in certain moments here, a day can feel as long as a week, but other times, a whole season can pass in the blink of an eye. They say this is especially easy to perceive when one is truly focused on something, or when their mind is completely tranquil, free from all attachments."

She tilted her head slightly, looking at both of us with a somewhat probing gaze. "Have you two ever had strange dreams? Dreams in which you see things that have never happened, or meet relatives who have been gone for a long time?"

Qing Ling and I instinctively looked at each other. Who hasn't had a few strange dreams in their life? But I sensed that her question was hinting at something much deeper.

"It is often recounted," she continued, her voice lowered as if whispering a secret, "that in this place, people sometimes dream of fragments of a future that has not yet come, or get lost in ancient memories so clearly that it feels as if they happened just yesterday. Some even say that in such dreams, they have traveled to very strange places, meeting people who do not seem to belong to this world of ours."

"Strange places? People who don't belong to this world?" Qing Ling asked, clear curiosity in her eyes.

Mrs. Lin nodded, her gaze now seeming to look into some indefinite space. "The elders of Wangyou Town often pass down tales of 'hidden doors'—places where it is believed the boundary between our world and other worlds becomes as thin as a morning mist. With just the right moment of convergence, a completely different reality can be revealed. It is said that, especially at the transitional times of day like dawn or dusk, or on bright, full-moon nights, in the deep parts of the forests on those mountains..." She gestured with her chin toward the distant, hazy mountains. "...someone has gotten lost, and just for a moment, found themselves in a completely unfamiliar place, where the trees, the houses, even the sunlight were different. Then, in the blink of an eye, they were back in the same spot, but the feeling of how much time had passed was very different."

Listening to her words, I felt a cold chill run down my spine. Was she talking about other dimensions? About the concept of a multiverse? These were concepts that even our most advanced theoretical physics has only dared to speculate on and was still fiercely debating. Yet here, a simple-looking old woman was speaking of them as passed-down stories, as beliefs that had existed for generations.

"These 'other worlds' you mentioned... what are they really like?" I tried to keep my voice calm, though my mind was in turmoil.

Mrs. Lin shook her head slightly. "I've only heard the stories myself, my child; I've never seen it with my own eyes. People say some places are incredibly beautiful, always filled with light and wondrous, melodious sounds and music, but other places are very gloomy and frightening. But it seems they often exist in parallel with this world of ours, right here, it's just that our mortal eyes cannot see them, just as we cannot see the air around us. It is said that only those with truly tranquil minds, or at very special times, when fated connections align, can catch a glimpse or be fortunate enough to see."

Mrs. Lin's words, though presented as folk tales and ancient beliefs, resonated strangely with what we had experienced and felt during our short time in Wangyou Town. The feeling of an "elastic" flow of time, the

seemingly slower aging of some residents, the strange dream we both shared, and now the concept of parallel spaces, of "hidden doors"... All of it seemed to be gradually connecting, forming an incredibly complex and mysterious picture of the true nature of this place.

This wasn't some advanced physics theory about the curvature of spacetime or the complexities of string theory. This seemed to be a form of experience, a direct perception of the universe's workings from a completely different perspective—a perspective that my empirical science had perhaps not yet been able to touch. In this place, time did not seem to be an immutable straight line, and space was not just the familiar three tangible dimensions. They seemed more flexible, more malleable, and could exist in many more layers and levels than we ever imagined.

I looked at Qing Ling and saw that she, too, was silently pondering, her brows slightly furrowed. Perhaps these concepts, though strange and hard to believe, were not entirely foreign to the Eastern cultural foundation she had been exposed to since childhood, a culture where stories of celestial realms, the underworld, and cultivators with the ability to enter other dimensions have existed for thousands of years.

"So, ma'am, is it because they live in such a special place," Qing Ling slowly asked Mrs. Lin, "that the people

of Wangyou Town have such a sense of peace, less bound by time and age than people elsewhere?"

Mrs. Lin smiled faintly, a smile full of meaning. "That could very well be it, miss. When people know that this world is actually much larger than they thought, that time is not always the sole master governing everything, and that death is perhaps not a complete end, they will naturally let go of the trivial worries and struggles of daily life. They will learn to live more slowly, to listen more, and to feel more deeply. And when a person's soul is truly at peace, perhaps the passing years will also be kinder to them, don't you think?"

She stood up calmly, the bamboo fan still waving gently in her hand. "Well, I should probably go inside and prepare for dinner. You two feel free to sit here and enjoy the sunset."

She went inside, leaving Qing Ling and me there with a jumble of emotions and countless unanswered questions. Her explanations were not scientific, nor was there any concrete evidence to verify them, but they touched a deeper level of consciousness within us, partially answering our questions about Wangyou Town in their own unique way. It did not dispel the mystery of this place; on the contrary, it made us feel more keenly the existence of wondrous things beyond ordinary human understanding.

We sat there, silently watching the mystical violet of the sunset gradually seep into every lingering cloud, every green treetop, as if the whole world were breathing in unison with the heavy thoughts in our hearts. My mind was in turmoil with unanswered questions. Could it be that what I had always known as "reality" was just an incredibly thin slice of a far more complex, multi-layered, multi-dimensional universe? Could it be that time and space were not always immutable constants, but could be "stretched" and "bent" by factors our science had yet to discover, such as a person's state of mind, or the special energy field of a location?

I had no answers for any of it. But sitting there, watching the mystical violet sunset descend upon the Wangyou valley, I knew that the limits of my own thinking were being pushed back, bit by bit. This world, it seemed, held far too many wonders and mysteries, far beyond what my thick science books had ever described.

Expanding the Mind Before the Unknowable

Sunset in Wangyou Town was truly a different experience. It didn't fade quickly as in other places, but seemed to linger like an old friend, slowly spreading

layers of golden, then soft orange, then mystical violet light across the landscape, as if trying to hold everything back for a moment longer before sinking completely into darkness. Qing Ling and I sat almost motionless on the old wooden bench on the inn's porch, our eyes silently following the magical transformation of colors in the sky and on the surface of the placid river. The air began to grow cooler, carrying the characteristic damp scent of the earth and the fragrance of mountain plants after a long day in the sun.

The stillness here was not a deathly silence, but a profound peace, punctuated only occasionally by the unique sounds of the valley: the steady, gentle flow of the Wangyou River, the nocturnal symphony of insects beginning from the dense thickets along the bank, the soft rustle of leaves with each passing breeze. In the distance, a few flickering oil lamps had begun to light up in the ancient stilt houses, casting the silhouettes of people moving unhurriedly on the wooden walls. There were no sounds of TVs or radios, no roar of engines, only the primordial, pure rhythm of a life that seemed completely intertwined with nature.

I instinctively glanced down at my watch again. The second hand ticked on steadily, as diligent as a solitary traveler, trying to count each moment in a world where time had seemingly become utterly vague, no longer willing to obey its old rules. But that very mechanical,

precise rhythm now felt completely foreign, pathetically out of place in the space of Wangyou Town. I looked up at the crescent moon that had just risen from behind the high western mountain, a moon that looked faint and magical in the weak twilight. In theory, I could estimate the time based on its position in the sky, but a vague sense of fatigue held me back. It seemed that trying to impose concrete numbers, dry logical calculations, on this place was a completely meaningless, even somewhat crude, act. I shook my head slightly, chuckled to myself, and then stopped looking at my watch.

Qing Ling let out a soft sigh and gently rested her head on my shoulder. The prolonged silence between us was not at all suffocating, but more like a deep empathy that needed no words. We were both experiencing, together, the very special atmosphere of this place.

"Ming," her voice was a sudden whisper, so soft it almost blended with the night wind. "I was just thinking of Master Mo's words... Back in Qingxi, everything he said about the soul and karmic force felt so foreign and hard to believe. But now, sitting in this space, those things seem to have gently seeped into my heart, as naturally as my own breath. They no longer feel fantastical or irrational at all."

I was silent for a long moment, my gaze still on the shadows deepening on the placid river. Qing

Ling's words seemed to have touched upon the very thoughts that were still vague in my own mind. The continuous experiences over the past weeks, from the first meeting with Mr. Zhang Feng, to the hermit on the mountaintop, Master Mo with his profound interpretations, and now this very special space of Wangyou Town—they were all like seemingly disparate puzzle pieces that were now coming together to point to a larger, more complex picture of this world. "I know how you feel," I replied softly, my voice also low. "In places like this, there seem to be very different laws at work, laws we've probably never known."

Mrs. Lin called us in for dinner. The flickering oil lamp in the house cast long shadows on the old wooden floor. Tonight's meal was again very simple and rustic: a plate of lightly stewed small river fish, a dish of freshly picked wild vegetables boiled and served with sesame salt, and a pot of fragrant, newly cooked rice. We sat around the low wooden table, eating slowly, deliberately. Mrs. Lin didn't say much, only occasionally and kindly placing more food into our bowls, her benevolent eyes always holding a quiet, warm smile. The atmosphere of the meal was so simple, so intimate, unlike any meal I had ever had in fine restaurants or at noisy social gatherings. It had a special authenticity, a very simple connection between people, and between people and the surrounding nature.

That night, lying on the slightly creaking bamboo bed in the attic room, I found I was no longer tossing and turning with racing thoughts as on previous nights. I stopped trying to analyze or explain everything with dry scientific knowledge, and instead just quietly opened all my senses, letting my soul drift freely with the slow, deep rhythm of the Wangyou night. I felt the near-absolute stillness of the darkness here, broken only by the incessant chirping of insects from the garden and the faint, distant sound of the flowing river. I felt the cool night breeze seeping through the cracks in the windows, carrying the fresh scent of the mountain forest. I even felt the presence of the simple houses around us, of the people who were probably also sinking into a very peaceful sleep. It was as if something invisible, a special kind of tranquility, was enveloping the entire valley, seeping into every thought, calming the restless currents in my mind. I fell asleep without knowing when, a deep and dreamless sleep.

The next morning, as the first rays of the new day pierced through the thick mist still blanketing the valley, we woke up feeling unusually light and refreshed. The air was so pure that a single deep breath felt as if it had completely cleansed my lungs. The rhythm of life in Wangyou Town went on as usual, slow and incredibly calm. A few townspeople had started their day with their familiar routines: lighting the fire to cook an early meal,

going to the river to fetch water, or herding buffalo out to the lush green pastures in the distance. Everything proceeded sequentially, rhythmically, without any hint of haste or rush.

We packed our few belongings, a feeling of wistful reluctance in both our hearts. Though we had only stayed in Wangyou Town for a few short days, this place had left a profound impression on our souls. When we went downstairs, Mrs. Lin had already prepared some hot rice cakes and a pot of fragrant herbal tea for our breakfast. She didn't ask where we were going or what we would do next.

When we said our goodbyes to leave, she walked us to the end of the alley, where the trail began to lead back up the mountain. She gently pressed a small cloth bag into Qing Ling's hand. Inside were some dried wild herbs that gave off a very gentle aroma. "This is a little medicinal herb from this land of Wangyou," she said, her voice as even and unchanged as ever. "It will help you calm your nerves and sleep better. Take care on your journey."

Qing Ling took the bag of herbs, thanking her profusely, her eyes a little emotional. I also bowed to her once more, trying to find words to express my gratitude and appreciation, but in the end, I could only say a very

simple sentence: "Thank you so much, ma'am. We will never forget this place."

Mrs. Lin just smiled faintly, a smile as benevolent and mysterious as the valley itself. "Wangyou Town will always be here. Whenever you wish to forget the sorrows of the world, just feel free to return."

We set off, following the trail covered in decaying leaves. After walking a fair distance, I instinctively glanced back. Wangyou Town was still there, nestled peacefully in a sea of white morning mist, with only a few dark brown tiled roofs and wisps of cooking smoke faintly visible. It was like a beautiful dream, a world seemingly completely separate from the noise and haste of modern life outside.

I don't know if I had truly "understood" all the secrets of Wangyou Town. Probably not. But at that moment, it no longer seemed so important. I suddenly realized that perhaps not all questions need an immediate, clear answer, not all mysteries must be unraveled by reason. Some things, it seems, simply exist, and our task is to learn to perceive, to learn to accept their presence with a more open soul. Some truths simply exist, beyond our current understanding and ability to explain. And accepting the existence of the "unknowable," accepting one's own limitations, is sometimes the first step toward

expanding one's thinking, toward approaching deeper levels of consciousness.

I gently squeezed Qing Ling's hand, feeling its familiar warmth. The journey of the past few days had many points that were difficult to explain from a scientific perspective. But strangely, that no longer brought a sense of confusion or fear as before. A curiosity, a vague sense of excitement, was quietly kindling in my chest, urging me to move forward, to unveil more layers of the mystery of this wondrous East.

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CHAPTER 6: THE WEAVER OF FATED CONNECTIONS

Huanglongxi Ancient Town and the Old Woman by the River

Leaving the Wangyou valley, we carried with us a feeling of having shed an invisible burden, yet also a sense of wistful reluctance. The outside world, with its familiar rhythm of time, now felt somewhat alien after our days in that special place, especially after the strange thirteen-day sleep. We decided not to rush back to the noisy, bustling big cities, but to continue our journey of exploring the lands that still preserved much of China's ancient culture.

On the way from Wangyou back to the small town at the foot of the mountain, where we could catch a ride, our guide from the previous day pointed out an old temple perched on a nearby mountainside. He said it was a very sacred temple, not very large but with a history of several hundred years, and that pilgrims from afar still occasionally came to visit. With our recent spiritual experiences, both Qing Ling and I felt an urge to visit.

The temple was indeed not large, hidden amidst groves of old pine trees, the atmosphere incredibly serene. We met the abbot, a rather elderly monk with a benevolent face and kind eyes. After learning that we were visitors from afar, hoping to understand the culture and sacred places, the monk spoke with us cheerfully. He told us about the temple's history and the eminent monks who had cultivated there.

When he learned that we planned to continue our journey of exploration, the monk pondered for a moment and then said, "If you two truly have the heart to understand more deeply about spiritual values and traditional culture, then perhaps you should not miss Sichuan. That land not only has majestic scenery but is also a convergence point for many famous Taoist and Buddhist temples, like the sacred Mount Emei or the majestic Leshan Giant Buddha. The ancients used to say, one goes to Sichuan to feel the soul of the land and the wonder of the Buddhist Law."

The monk's recommendation, though merely informational as it would be for any other tourist, unexpectedly struck a chord within me. Sichuan. I had read about this region, but had never seriously considered going there. Qing Ling also showed great interest. "Sichuan? I've also heard a lot about the cultural relics and cultivation schools there," she said to me, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. "Since we have the fated connection to be recommended, why don't we give it a try?"

And so, very naturally, our next destination was set. From the old temple, we returned to the small town, then took a bus to Guiyang. From Guiyang, we easily bought high-speed train tickets to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. The journey on the modern train, gliding past plains and rolling mountains, once again showed me the astonishing development of this country.

Upon arriving in Chengdu, we did not linger in the big city for long. After resting for a night to regain our strength and gather some necessary information, we decided to hire a private car with a driver to head south, with the intention of seeing the Leshan Giant Buddha, one of the world's most famous Buddhist wonders I had long heard of. Along the way, we learned of an ancient town called Huanglongxi, situated peacefully by a river, said to still preserve much of its old architecture and a

very serene atmosphere. We decided to stop there for a few days to rest before continuing on to Leshan.

The comfortable car took us away from the noise and bustle of Chengdu. The urban landscape of towering buildings and heavy traffic quickly receded, giving way to vast rice paddies and the prosperous, tranquil villages of the Sichuan plain. The driver, a middle-aged local man, was quite enthusiastic and open, occasionally pointing out scenic spots or telling interesting stories about the places we passed.

When we arrived at Huanglongxi Ancient Town, it truly possessed a very different kind of beauty. Small stone-paved streets ran alongside a gentle river, with ancient, curved stone bridges and wooden houses with moss-covered yin-yang tiles packed closely together. Although there were some signs of tourism, the general atmosphere still retained a rustic, simple charm, making us feel much more relaxed and relieved after the rather mentally taxing experiences we had just been through.

We found a small, rather simple inn with a balcony overlooking the river, planning to stay for a day or two. In the afternoon, after stowing our luggage, we took a leisurely stroll along the riverbank, breathing in the fresh air and observing the simple, slow-paced life of the local people.

As we were walking, Qing Ling's gaze suddenly fell upon a small earthen yard in front of a house that looked quite old but still very clean and neat. Under the shade of a loofah trellis heavy with fruit, an old woman sat on a low bamboo chair, her back slightly stooped, her hands moving nimbly with colorful balls of yarn and a pair of bamboo knitting needles. She wore a faded brown homespun garment, her silver-white hair tied neatly in a bun at the nape of her neck. Her face was deeply etched with the wrinkles of time, but her eyes were unusually bright and kind. She sat knitting with such focus and placidity that she seemed oblivious to the world around her.

Qing Ling, who loved handicrafts and was always curious about local cultures, was very intrigued. She gently pulled my arm, and we both walked closer. We stood silently for a moment, watching the old woman work. Her aged but still very nimble hands moved the bamboo needles swiftly, each stitch perfectly even, gradually creating a rather complex pattern on the garment she was making. It was a very strange pattern, one I had never seen before, seemingly a combination of many small motifs, overlapping and intertwining into a very harmonious and unique whole.

As if sensing someone watching, the old woman looked up, her kind eyes meeting ours, and she offered a faint,

unspoken smile. The smile was so warm that we instantly felt a sense of closeness and friendliness.

"Greetings, ma'am," Qing Ling said politely in perfect standard Mandarin. "Your knitting is beautiful. This pattern is very special."

The old woman looked at Qing Ling, a flicker of pleasant surprise in her eyes upon hearing her voice. "Thank you, miss," she replied, her voice as deep and gentle as her eyes. "This is just an old pattern from our village. Few of the young people nowadays want to take the trouble to learn how to knit such complex patterns anymore."

"I love knitting at home, but I've truly never seen a pattern like this," Qing Ling said, stepping a little closer to get a better look at the sweater she was knitting. "It looks so intricate, as if many threads of different colors are meeting and blending together."

The old woman smiled again, this smile seemingly deeper than before. She looked at the yarn entwined in her hands, then looked up at both of us. "That's right, miss," she said slowly. "Each of these threads has its own path, its own color, its own thickness. But once they meet on these knitting needles, the one that goes before, the one that follows, the one on the inside, the one on the outside, they all blend together to become a warm garment. It is just like the fated connections of people in

this world. No one can know in advance whom they will meet, how they will be woven together with them, but each of those connections, whether happy or sad, has its own meaning."

The old woman's seemingly simple words felt like a cool breeze suddenly weaving through the dense layers of my thoughts, gently opening up things I had never before put into words. Her analogy touched something very deep within me, evoking rambling thoughts about the words "fated connection," about the invisible links that both Qing Ling and I had begun to vaguely sense throughout this journey. I looked at the old woman more closely. Her appearance was very ordinary, her work simple, but her words contained a life philosophy that was anything but common.

The old woman gestured for us to sit on the empty bamboo chair beside her. "You must be visitors from afar, right? You don't look like you're from around here."

"Yes, ma'am. We're from the US," I replied, sitting down next to Qing Ling. "We're on our way to Leshan and stopped here to rest and learn more about the culture and life in ancient towns like Huanglongxi."

"Ah, so you're on your way to the Leshan Giant Buddha," the old woman nodded slightly, her eyes never leaving her knitting. "Then it must be fate that you

stopped here in Huanglongxi. Our ancient town may be small, but it has many interesting things, and the people here are gentle and simple. Feel free to stay for a few days to regain your strength before you continue."

We sat there, chatting a little longer with the old woman. At first, it was just polite inquiries about daily life, about her family, about the ancient town. But then, very naturally, our conversation began to drift toward deeper matters, as if the old woman had somehow vaguely sensed that we were searching for something beyond ordinary scenery or tourist experiences.

Sitting by the riverbank, under the loofah trellis heavy with fruit, listening to the simple yet profound words of the knitting woman, I suddenly had the feeling that this chance encounter was not at all random. Something new, another door, was slowly opening before us in this land of Sichuan.

A Tale of Reincarnation and Predestined Connections

We sat beside the old woman, in a space so quiet that the only sounds were the rhythmic *clack-clack* of knitting

needles, mingling with the endless, murmuring whisper of the Fuhe River in the distance. The late afternoon sun had cast a golden glow, gently blanketing the small earthen yard in front of the porch, creating a scene of serene warmth.

Qing Ling, after carefully examining the intricate patterns on the sweater the old woman was knitting, asked, her voice filled with admiration, "Ma'am, I see these yarns have very different colors and thicknesses, yet I don't understand how you can combine them so harmoniously. What is your secret?"

The old woman paused her knitting for a moment, admired her work, and then smiled kindly. "It is not because I am skillful, miss. It is because these yarns themselves are fated to be together. This thread needs to go with that one; a dark thread needs a light one to enhance its beauty. They just find their way to each other, entwine, and become a warm garment."

She resumed her knitting as she spoke, her voice still slow and deliberate. "People in this world are much the same. Each of us is like a thread; everyone has their own color, their own path. But then, somehow, we meet—as parents, children, spouses, friends, or even as people we dislike... none of these encounters are random. It is because some invisible fated connections have linked them together long before."

"Fated connections..." Qing Ling softly repeated the words, her gaze as if touching some distant memory, a feeling that was at once deeply familiar and yet somehow strange, indescribable. She had encountered this concept, read it, and even lectured on it countless times in classic literary works, in the allusions of Chinese culture. But today, hearing it spoken so simply, so mundanely, by this old woman, it carried a completely different weight. "...Is it like what is often said in the books of the ancients, ma'am?"

The old woman nodded slightly, a look of satisfaction in her eyes. "That's right, my child. That is a fated connection. It is like invisible threads, woven together long ago, perhaps even from past lifetimes."

"Past lives?" I blurted out, the inherent skepticism of a scientist suddenly surfacing. But Qing Ling had a completely different reaction. She lifted her head slightly, a flash of surprise mixed with a strange familiarity on her face. *Past lives?*—the concept was indeed all too familiar to her from countless fairy tales, myths, and the doctrines of Buddhism and Taoism she had studied. It was an almost indispensable part of the culture she taught every day. But today, hearing it from the lips of an old woman leisurely knitting by a small river, as if she were recounting a self-evident truth rather than a fantastical fairy tale, made her suddenly feel the thin line between 'fiction' and 'reality' seem to be blurring. The

familiarity of the concept and the strangeness of confronting it as an objective reality seemed to be unfolding right before her eyes.

The old woman seemed to notice the difference in our reactions. She smiled magnanimously at me before turning to Qing Ling. "It feels very familiar to you, doesn't it? You must have read many books."

"Yes... yes, ma'am," Qing Ling replied, her voice a little hesitant. "I have read about these things in old stories and scriptures. But... I always thought they were just symbols, metaphorical expressions of moral principles. Hearing you speak today, I have a very different feeling." She was truly curious to know the "source" of this belief in the practical, daily life of the local people.

The old woman nodded gently, her eyes still kind and warm. "Books can only record so much; the real experiences of people's lives are another matter entirely. Well then, let me tell you a story of our Huanglongxi Ancient Town, a story about my own grandparents."

She gently placed her knitting needles in the bamboo basket beside her, her distant gaze fixed on the languidly flowing river, and slowly began to weave the tragic tale of a young couple named A Sheng and Lian—a thread of sadness suddenly weaving its way into the space filled with the warm glow of sunset.

Qing Ling listened intently, her delicate brows slightly furrowed. She knew these motifs well—the star-crossed love stories that had to overcome societal prejudice, the tragic fates that were the familiar fabric of folk literature. She felt moved, pained by the fate of the characters in the story, but at the same time, the rational part of her, the researcher, was still trying to analyze the structure of the narrative.

"What a sad story, ma'am," she said softly when the old woman paused after the first part.

"It is sad, my child," the old woman agreed. "But it is not over." And she continued, telling of the birth of a boy named Chang and a girl named An to different families in the town, some decades later. She told of the strange marks on their bodies and in their dreams, of their irrational fear of deep ravines and swift-flowing rivers, and finally, of the blessed fate that naturally brought them together to live happily ever after in marriage.

When the old woman mentioned the detail that the boy Chang had a birthmark in the shape of a lotus flower, very similar to the tattoo on Lian's shoulder, and that the girl An had a faint scar on her wrist identical to A Sheng's, Qing Ling instinctively shivered. These details were no longer just literary motifs. They were too specific, too "real" to be dismissed.

"The old folks here in Huanglongxi," the old woman concluded, her voice full of conviction, "all believe that Chang and An were A Sheng and Lian, returned to continue the unfinished love from their past. The marks left on their bodies, along with those fears, are the traces of the wheel of reincarnation. And the fact that they finally found each other and were joined in marriage was the arrangement of a predestined connection from a past life."

The story ended, leaving a long silence. Qing Ling sat still, her eyes gazing distantly at the river. I saw an indescribable turmoil on her face. The elements of reincarnation and fated debts in this story were probably not foreign to her extensive cultural knowledge. But I had a feeling that the way the old woman told it, with an unshakeable faith shining in her eyes, combined with the strange phenomena we had experienced on our journey, was making her re-evaluate everything.

She turned to look at me, her eyes holding both the emotion of someone who had just heard a moving story and the clear confusion of a scholar facing a phenomenon that seemed to challenge both her knowledge and her beliefs. "Do you see?" she whispered, her voice very low. "It's like what we've read in books... but at the same time, it's not just in books anymore."

I looked at Qing Ling, and in her astonished eyes, it seemed something was cracking, melting away. The familiar concepts from the books she often studied now carried a very different weight. On the bank of the Fuhe River, under the setting sun, the old knitting woman's story seemed to have sowed in both our hearts the seeds of contemplation about the invisible threads of fate and the mysterious cycles of human life.

Karmic Force as an Invisible Thread Connecting All Things

After the old woman finished the story of A Sheng, Lian, Chang, and An, both Qing Ling and I fell silent for a moment. Their sorrows and reunion still seemed to linger in the air. We sat together in silence, our eyes gazing at the sunset descending over the distant river.

"Ma'am," Qing Ling spoke, her voice still carrying a trace of the story's echo, but her eyes now shone with the inquiry of someone wanting to get to the very root of the matter. "So, was it what the ancients called 'karmic force' that created those fated connections, that guided A Sheng and Lian to find each other again in their next life?" When Qing Ling mentioned the words "karmic

force," I suddenly remembered. That's right, Master Mo in Qingxi had also spoken of this, of the law of cause and effect that governs a being's life. But to be honest, at that time, amidst so many strange things and concepts beyond my comprehension, I had just listened without giving it much deep thought. Now, after the old woman's story, the term "karmic force" suddenly carried more weight.

The knitting woman nodded slightly, a kind and understanding smile on her lips. She picked up her knitting needles from the bamboo basket, her slender, skillful fingers beginning to work again. "This young lady understands so quickly," she said, her voice still even and warm. "Fated connections are like the ties that bind people together, sometimes near, sometimes far. And karmic force, that is the very force that creates those ties, that pulls people along on the endless wheel of reincarnation."

She gently lifted the sweater she was making, as if to let us see its patterns more clearly. "Look here," she said slowly, "on this sweater, there are beautiful, smooth yarns with bright colors, but there are also coarse, dark ones that seem more likely to break. Karmic force is like the material of the invisible threads that make up the garment of each person's life. The kind thoughts, truthful words, and benevolent actions we perform are like handcrafting fine, strong, bright threads. And the selfish,

evil thoughts, the hurtful words, the actions that harm people or things, are like creating for oneself coarse, dark, rotten threads."

She paused for a moment, her gaze distant as she looked out at the languidly flowing river, then returned to the sweater in her hands. "The ancients had a saying, 'you reap what you sow,' and that is the reason. Those good and bad threads do not just disappear. They quietly accumulate, wrapping tightly around one's soul, or what people call the spirit." Hearing this, Qing Ling and I instinctively looked at each other. Master Mo in Qingxi had also spoken of a "true self" that transcends the physical body, though he used terms like "consciousness" or "spiritual body" that had sounded strange to me at the time. Now, hearing this old woman speak of the "soul" or "spirit," I felt that though the terms were different, they seemed to be pointing to the same core, unchanging essence of a person.

"Then, when a person leaves this world," she continued, her voice as calm as if telling an everyday story, "their soul will carry all those threads of good and bad karmic force into a new journey. All that karmic force will determine where they are reborn, what circumstances they will face, whether they will have happiness or suffering, health or illness, whether they will meet good people or have to face evil ones..."

She looked at us, her kind eyes as deep as if they held an entire river of time. "Like A Sheng and Lian in the story. In their past life, though they were poor and faced many hardships, their love was sincere, their hearts were kind. Perhaps they had created good karma and a very strong vow. Therefore, in this life, it was that very karmic force that guided them to meet again in better circumstances, so they could repay the debt of love left unfinished, to enjoy the blessings they had sown before."

"So is karmic force something that is predetermined and unchangeable, ma'am?" I blurted out, trying to find clarity with my scientific way of thinking. "If someone is born to suffer, is it because the karmic force from a past life has already ordained it, and they must endure it forever?" This question contained a persistent doubt of mine: if everything is predetermined, what is the meaning of effort, of human will, in this current life?

The old woman shook her head slightly, a flicker of contemplation on her time-worn face. Her knitting needles continued to move steadily, without pause. "It is not quite like that, young man," she said, her voice still gentle. "Karmic force indeed has great power; it influences the circumstances we are born into, the people we meet, the events we experience. But it is not a sealed verdict that cannot be changed." She emphasized this.

"It is like the 'capital' and 'debt' that we carry with us from past lives. The family we are born into in this life, the state of our health, that is due to the initial 'capital' of karmic force. But what is most important is how we live in this life, how we act with what we have." She looked directly at me, then at Qing Ling, her eyes encouraging. "If we know to do good and kind things, to help others when we can, to cultivate our moral character to be better each day, then we are creating new, good karma. Our 'good capital' will increase, which can be used to gradually pay off the old 'bad debts,' and thus, our future will also gradually become better. Conversely, if we continue to do bad things, creating more bad karma, then the 'debt' will only pile up, suffering will beget more suffering, affecting not only this life but also future lives."

The old woman paused for a moment, as if to give us time to absorb her words. Then she continued: "So, knowing about karmic force is not so we can use it to blame fate or give up and resign ourselves. It is so we can understand that everything that happens to us has its reason; nothing is random. And more importantly, it is so we can take responsibility for every thought, every word, every action in this present moment. Because it is these things, no matter how small, that are quietly weaving our own future, and the future of those with whom we have fated connections."

The old woman's explanations, though very simple and rustic, were like raindrops seeping deep into the soil of a soul that had been parched by doubt. The concept of cause and effect and personal responsibility was expressed so vividly and relatably. It did not deny the role of the past, of what had been, but it especially emphasized the power of the present, of every moment we are living, in shaping and transforming the future. Karmic force, as she told it, was no longer a fated verdict or a lottery ticket drawn in advance, but a continuous flow of energy, constantly being created and changed by the actions and moral character of each individual.

I sat in silence, trying to imagine that invisible network of karmic force. It seemed much more complex than the laws of physics I had learned and taught—it was not just a mechanical action and reaction, but an accumulation of thoughts, of intentions, of invisible connections woven over countless lifetimes. An invisible web, both tight and flexible, encompassing everything.

Qing Ling also seemed deeply captivated. I saw her nod slightly, her eyes pensive. This concept of karmic force, though she had known it from Buddhist texts, seemed to have left the cold pages of books when explained so vividly by this old woman, with such simple, everyday images, and seeped deep into her consciousness like an underground stream, silent but powerful. It was like a key that could help her decipher some of the injustices,

the sufferings, and even the seemingly random joys that occur in life. The scattered pieces of book knowledge seemed to be being arranged by an invisible hand, creating a more meaningful, more profound picture.

The encounter with the knitting woman by the Huanglongxi river, which began with curiosity about an unusual pattern on a sweater, had inadvertently led us to a deeper understanding of the invisible laws that seemed to quietly govern both the universe and human life. Reincarnation, fated connections, and now, karmic force—these concepts were no longer just dry, foreign words in books. They were gradually becoming manifest, as vivid as multicolored threads, silently weaving the incredibly complex fabric of reality that Qing Ling and I were experiencing, step by step, on this journey of discovery in the East. The late sunset still gilded the river's surface, and the threads of karmic force, it seemed, were still quietly weaving the endless tapestry of human existence, right before our eyes.

Reflecting on Our Lives Through the Lens of Fated Connections

Night began to fall. The old knitting woman paused her work. Her kind eyes gazed into the space before her, as if still listening to the echo of the stories and insights she had just shared. We sat there, in the twilight stillness, each lost in our own thoughts, yet seemingly all directed toward one great question: what would our own lives look like, if viewed through the lens of reincarnation, fated connections, and karmic force?

I instinctively looked over at Qing Ling. She was also looking at me, her gaze deep, at once familiar and yet holding something new, something just discovered. All the years we had been together, from our university days to our married life, I had always seen it as a choice we both made, a result of love and compatibility. But now, after what the old woman had said, a question arose in my mind: Was our meeting truly just a coincidence, or had it been linked by some invisible threads long ago? Was there a thread of destiny that had skillfully drawn us together, a fated connection predestined from ancient lifetimes, like the story of Chang and An she had just told? The thought did not diminish the love I had for her; on the contrary, it seemed to add a deeper layer of meaning to our relationship, a bond that felt more sacred and enduring.

Then, other images from my past slowly came to mind. My career path as a medical professor and entrepreneur, at times seemingly smooth, with successes that

sometimes came unexpectedly, but also with stumbles, with business partnerships that looked promising but suddenly fell apart for no clear reason. The people I had met in my life, those who helped me, those who caused me difficulties... Were they all links in a chain, connected to me by some fated connections and karmic force operating silently, without my knowledge? Was everything I had experienced, the joys and sorrows, all an arrangement of karmic force, the result of the "good and bad threads" that I myself had created in the past, perhaps from lifetimes I no longer remembered? The thought sent a slight shiver down my spine, but at the same time, it brought a sense of a certain order, explaining in part the things I had previously attributed only to luck or chance.

I saw Qing Ling sigh softly, her hand gently brushing her hair. I guessed she was thinking, too. Her life, from her days in Shanghai, to the major turning point of moving to the US with her family, the years of study to become a professor. On that journey, we met in college, then built a family together, with children who were now nearly grown. All of it, viewed through the lens of fated connections, must surely contain so many predestined links, so much guidance from karmic force. And her coming back to China with me on this trip, to listen to these stories, was that also part of that arrangement?

The old woman gave a soft cough, as if to bring us back. She had finished packing up her things. "It's completely dark now; I must go home for dinner. I wish you both a pleasant journey... Oh, by the way, the end of this road leads to a small food court. If you wish to have dinner, that would be a good place."

We stood up and bowed to her once more. "Thank you so much, ma'am, for your time and for sharing such meaningful stories with us," Qing Ling said, her voice sincere.

The old woman just waved her hand, smiling kindly. "It's just some old stories passed down by the elders. For you to listen to for pleasure." But in her eyes, I had the feeling she knew those stories meant much more to us.

We walked slowly back to the inn on the cobblestone path. Along the way, red, traditional-style lanterns (perhaps with electric bulbs inside) hung from the eaves of a few houses and at some intersections, casting warm patches of light on the road, mingling with the light of the crescent moon high above, creating a nighttime scene of the ancient town that was both sparkling and serene. No one spoke, but I understood we were both reflecting, silently examining our own lives from a new perspective—the perspective of fated connections and karmic force.

The people, the events, the relationships of the past were no longer just scattered dots. They seemed to be strung together by invisible threads, some intentional, some unintentional, but all seemingly part of a complex web of cause and effect. This perspective did not make me feel bound by fate; on the contrary, it made me more keenly aware of my own responsibility for every thought, word, and action in the present. Because I vaguely sensed that it was these very things that were continuing to silently weave the tapestry of our lives, and the lives of those around us, not just in this lifetime but possibly for future journeys as well, if what the old woman said was true.

The chance encounter with the knitting woman by the Huanglongxi river had not only brought interesting stories. More importantly, it had sown in our hearts a new and profound way of looking at life and relationships. We began to reflect on ourselves, no longer as just separate individuals, but as small links in a great chain of cause and effect and fated connections, both subject to its influence and at the same time contributing to the flow of karmic force.

CHAPTER 7: THE SHOP OF DESTINY

The Strange Antique Shop and the Mysterious Owner

After leaving Huanglongxi, the old woman's stories about fated connections and karmic force kept circling in my mind and Qing Ling's. For a man of science like me, those concepts sounded strange at first, but the more I thought about them, the more I saw a certain logic. It seemed there were other, deeper laws governing this life

that I didn't fully know. This trip was truly opening up many new things for us.

We decided to continue south, to an ancient city called Zhenyuan, said to be situated by the Wuyang River. People said Zhenyuan wasn't very large but had many old streets, stilt houses overlooking the river, and several old stone bridges. It sounded interesting, so we found a small room in an inn in the old town, planning to stay for a few days to see what it was like.

One afternoon, with the sun having softened, after visiting a few temples and taking a boat ride on the river, Qing Ling and I decided to take a walk through the small, stone-paved alleys of the old quarter. These alleys were less crowded than the main streets, flanked by old, moss-covered stone walls and wooden gates that were shut tight; only occasionally did we see a local pass by.

While wandering around, I happened to notice a wooden sign, looking very old, hanging hidden behind a bougainvillea trellis. On the sign were three Chinese characters, their paint faded, which read "Sui Yuan Ge" (Pavilion of Following Fate). Right below it was a low wooden door, only slightly ajar, looking no different from the surrounding houses. It probably wasn't a bustling shop. If one didn't look closely, one would walk right past it.

For some reason, I felt curious. "Ling, look," I nudged my wife. "Sui Yuan Ge. The name sounds special, don't you think?"

Qing Ling followed my gaze. She was fluent in Chinese and understood immediately. "Sui Yuan... Following Fate... It doesn't sound like a normal shop," my wife remarked, her eyes also curious. "Should we go in and have a look?"

I nodded. The name and its quiet exterior had something that drew me in. We gently pushed the wooden door.

A small wind chime tinkled softly and then fell silent. Inside, the air was so still I could hear my own breathing. The light in the shop was dim, with only a few rays of afternoon sun filtering through paper-covered windowpanes, along with a small oil lamp in a corner. The air felt somewhat heavy, filled with the scent of old wood, dampness, and a faint, unidentifiable incense.

The room wasn't very large, but it was cluttered with objects from floor to ceiling. On shelves, on tables, and even on the floor, there were old things everywhere: cracked ceramic vases, bronze Buddha statues that had turned green, old, yellowed painted scrolls, a few pieces of tarnished-looking jade and silver jewelry, an antique-style compass, a bronze mirror, an inkstone, and even strange items I couldn't identify, looking like the tools of

an ancient Taoist priest. Everything was arranged haphazardly, yet upon closer inspection, it seemed each item had its own place, having rested there for who knows how many years. A thin layer of dust covered almost everything—not the dust of filth, but the dust of time.

The atmosphere in this shop was very strange, quiet yet heavy, completely different from the places we had been to. It felt as if every old item here had its own story.

Then I saw the shop owner.

He sat motionless behind a high wooden counter in a corner, almost blending into the darkness with the pile of old objects around him. If not for the flickering oil lamp illuminating one side of his face, we might not have noticed he was there. He looked very old, his white hair sparse and tied neatly in a bun at the nape of his neck. He wore a long, old black silk robe with a high collar. He was small, his back slightly hunched, but his eyes were strange. They were not clear like Master Mo's or the knitting woman's, but deep and jet-black, staring at us without blinking. The gaze was not scrutinizing, not curious, not inviting; it was like the eyes of someone who had seen too much in this world, now just silently registering the arrival of two more strangers into his domain.

He said nothing when we entered, nor did he stand up to greet us. He just sat there, his hands on the counter, his eyes fixed on us. His silence, combined with the shop's peculiar atmosphere, made Qing Ling and me feel a bit overwhelmed, forcing us to tread softly on the wooden floor.

"Ex... excuse me, sir," I cleared my throat, speaking first to break the heavy air. "We were just passing by and found your shop interesting, so we thought we'd take a look."

The shop owner just gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod, saying nothing. His eyes were still on us, a gaze that seemed to read every thought in my mind. Qing Ling moved closer to me; I knew she was feeling a bit tense too. There was something not normal about this place and its owner, something that was both intriguing and warranted caution.

Sui Yuan Ge. A mysterious owner. Old objects filled with the traces of time. A thought suddenly popped into my head: our coming here was no accident. Like the name of the shop, perhaps "fate" had brought us here, to some turning point that I was not yet aware of.

Each Object a Story of Choice and Fate

The shop owner remained silent, making the atmosphere in the shop even more peculiar. Qing Ling and I exchanged a glance, then began to look around more closely. The path was narrow; we had to squeeze past shelves of objects and things arranged on the floor. I scanned countless old items, each one looking mysterious, yet I felt as if something was silently guiding us.

Qing Ling stopped in front of a small, very old glass cabinet, inside which were a few pieces of jade and silver jewelry. Her eyes were fixed on a jadeite pendant, deep green in color, skillfully carved in the shape of a phoenix, but one of its wings had a small, barely visible crack. The jade, despite a thin layer of dust, still shone with a quiet, proud beauty.

"What beautiful jade," Qing Ling said softly, almost to herself. She placed her index finger on the glass, as if wanting to touch it.

Just then, the shop owner's deep, hoarse voice sounded from behind the counter, though he had not moved an inch. "A phoenix with a broken wing. It is beautiful, yes, but it is the beauty of regret."

The sudden voice startled Qing Ling and me. We turned to look. He was still sitting there, his jet-black eyes fixed on the jade pendant in the cabinet.

"Regret?" Qing Ling asked, her voice curious.

The owner didn't look at us, his eyes still on the jade. "Its former owner," he said evenly, "was a woman of great talent and beauty, from a distinguished family. She stood at a crossroads: one path was to live a comfortable, wealthy life according to her family's wishes; the other was to follow love, to be with a poor but compatible artist." He paused for a moment. "She chose the first path. She lacked nothing in terms of glory and wealth, but her heart was never happy. She lived her whole life in luxury, but never had a single day of true ease. That crack on the phoenix's wing... is the mark of that choice."

He told the story concisely, his voice betraying no emotion, yet it felt heavy. It didn't sound like a story fabricated to sell an item, but like a truth he had read from the object itself. Qing Ling stood silently staring at the pendant, her expression unreadable. The beauty of the jade was no longer simple; it seemed to be imbued with a certain sadness.

I felt a slight chill on the back of my neck. Could it be that every item here had its own story? A story of choice and its consequence? I moved deeper into the shop, my

eyes drawn to a bronze compass resting on a low wooden table, covered in dust. It was unlike modern compasses; its needle was shaped like a small turtle, with strange ancient symbols carved on its shell. The bronze casing was tarnished, the glass face slightly clouded, but the turtle-shaped needle lay still, pointing in some direction in the darkness.

I instinctively reached out and lightly touched the cold glass face of the compass. A strange sensation passed through my fingertips, like a fleeting memory flashing and then disappearing: the image of a great merchant fleet caught in a sea storm, with high waves and strong winds, and a middle-aged man standing on the deck, clutching a compass identical to this one, his eyes both resolute and somewhat bewildered as he stared into the storm.

"The pathfinding compass," the owner's voice sounded again, cutting through the images in my head. I turned and saw he was looking at me, his black eyes seeming to have read what I had just seen. "It once helped a merchant find a sea trade route, bringing him immeasurable wealth."

I waited silently for him to continue, sensing there was more to the story.

"But," he went on, his voice still even, "on that path, to get things done, he had to make many choices. Sometimes against his conscience, sometimes abandoning friends, sometimes using tricks. This compass only helped him find the right direction of the wind, the water, the profit, but it did not show him the direction of morality, of human feeling." He sighed very softly, almost inaudibly. "At the end of his life, he was very rich, but he was alone. He died on a pile of gold with no family by his side. The compass pointed to the right direction for wealth, but it lost the direction of the heart."

The story of the compass was another example of choice and fate. Material success sometimes comes at the price of inner emptiness. Each old object in this shop seemed to be a witness to life's turning points, to the decisions that had shaped a person's destiny. They were like mirrors, not only reflecting the past of their former owners but also silently questioning those who looked at them, like Qing Ling and me now, about our own choices.

I looked around the room full of objects, each one lying dormant under the dust of time, but I felt they were not silent. They seemed to be whispering their own stories—stories of dreams, love, betrayal, courage, weakness, sacrifice... all revolving around choices made at crucial moments. This Sui Yuan shop was not just a place that

sold antiques; it felt like a crossroads of destiny, where lives met in silence.

Between Arranged "Destiny" and "Free Will" in Cultivation

The stories of the phoenix with the broken wing and the misguided compass lingered in my mind and Qing Ling's as we continued to browse the other old items in the Sui Yuan shop. It was as if every object here was a lesson on choice and its consequences, on the paths of fate that had been forged by past decisions.

I walked closer to the wooden counter where the shop owner sat. He was as still as before, his eyes fixed on the empty space in front of him, seemingly lost in thought. The flickering oil lamp cast shifting shadows on his aged face, making him appear all the more mysterious.

"Sir," I began, trying to keep my voice normal despite the turmoil in my heart, "the stories you just told... about the former owners of these items... it sounds as if their fates were sealed by wrong choices. So, is everything in a person's life already predetermined? Do we truly have the freedom to choose, to change our path?"

This was the question that had been troubling me ever since I heard the old knitting woman speak of fated connections and karmic force. If everything was the result of karma from past lives, if all connections were already woven, then what was the point of striving in the present?

The shop owner slowly turned to look at me. This time, his eyes no longer strayed but looked directly into mine, a gaze so deep it felt as if it could read my very thoughts. He was silent for a long moment; the shop sank back into a heavy stillness, with only the faint ticking of some old grandfather clock in a corner.

Then he spoke, his voice still deep and slow. "Destiny and free will... they are like two sides of the same coin, young man."

He pointed a bony, slender finger at a scroll painting of a mountain landscape hanging on the wall behind him. The painting depicted overlapping mountain ranges shrouded in mist, with a tiny, winding path, sometimes visible, sometimes not, on a mountainside.

"Each person's path in life," he said, "is like that trail in the painting. The path itself is pre-formed by the layout of the mountains and rivers—which are like karmic force, like the circumstances of one's birth, family, and society. That is the part of 'destiny' created by the karma one has

generated before, by the family and society one is born into. That path can be difficult or easy, wide or narrow."

He paused, looking at me as if gauging my understanding. "But," he emphasized, "the person walking on that path has the complete right to choose *how* to walk. He can walk carefully, avoiding potholes and sharp rocks. He can choose to rest when tired, or try to go faster. He can choose to help others along the way, or selfishly push ahead. He can even choose to turn onto a different path, though it may be harder, if he feels the old one no longer suits him."

"You mean...?" I asked, beginning to understand.

"I mean," he replied, "the initial scenery, the initial path, may be arranged to some extent by past karma—that is 'destiny.' But *how* you walk, the choice you make at each fork, that is 'free will'—no one can decide that for you. And it is these present choices that continue to create new karma, which can change the path ahead, and even change the final destination."

He looked again towards the old items in the shop. "The former owners of these things, each had their own path. Some were born into favorable circumstances but chose to go backward. Some started with difficulties but strove forward and, by choosing the right path, ascended. The

issue is not the starting point, but the choices made along the way."

"Then what about cultivation?" Qing Ling asked unexpectedly. My wife had come to stand beside me at some point. "Does cultivation help a person see their path more clearly and make better choices?" Her question showed that what we had heard about cultivation from the hermit and Master Mo had truly made her think.

The shop owner turned to Qing Ling, a very faint, almost imperceptible smile touching his face. "You ask a very good question," he said. "Cultivation, if on the right path, is precisely the way to purify one's mind, to discard the desires and attachments that obscure the innate goodness and wisdom of a person."

"When the mind is pure and tranquil, one can see things more correctly, not clouded by emotions or self-interest. They will know what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. From there, they can choose what is in line with principles, with their conscience."

He paused, his voice becoming a bit more serious. "Furthermore, righteous cultivation also helps one to reduce the bad karma created in the past and accumulate more virtue and blessings. When karma changes, the path of 'destiny' can also change accordingly. A difficult

path can become easier, a dark one can become brighter. That is the power to change one's fate by cultivating one's moral character."

The shop owner's explanations illuminated many things in our minds. They did not deny karma or destiny, but emphasized the free will and choice of each person, especially when that person walks on a righteous path of cultivation. Destiny was not something that bound you; it was more like a river, and you could learn to steer your boat along the favorable currents, avoid the dangerous spots, and even make the flow better.

I felt a sense of relief. I understood that I was not in complete control of my fate, but I had the right and the responsibility to influence it—with every choice, every day. And the path of cultivation, according to him, was the best way to gain the wisdom and strength to make those right choices.

The Crossroads Ahead and Future Possibilities

After the shop owner's explanations about destiny, free will, and cultivation, the atmosphere in the shop felt different. It was no longer as heavy as before, but as if something had just been illuminated. My mind felt lighter, but at the same time, I understood more clearly the weight of each choice that lay ahead.

As we were about to thank the owner and leave, my eyes were suddenly drawn to an object tucked away in the darkest corner of the shop, on a low ebony shelf. It wasn't a magnificent or strange antique like the others. It was just a small, square wooden box, dark brown in color, looking old yet strangely clean, as if it had just been carefully wiped down. What caught my attention was that its lid had no lock, no carved patterns, just a smooth wooden surface, faintly gleaming under the oil lamp. It sat there, silent and discreet, yet it gave me a strange feeling, as if it held something very important inside.

I instinctively walked closer to the box, and Qing Ling followed, curious. I suddenly felt the urge to open it and see, but I also hesitated, an unclear feeling, as if opening this box would lead to something from which there was no turning back.

I glanced at the shop owner. He was still sitting behind the counter, but his dark eyes were now looking at the

wooden box, and then at us. An inscrutable smile flickered across his lips again.

"That box..." Qing Ling asked softly, her voice a little hesitant, "what's inside it?"

The shop owner did not answer immediately. He just looked at us, then back at the box, his eyes very deep. "Inside?" he repeated, his voice hoarse. "It could be a map to a treasure. It could also be a curse from ancient times. Or perhaps... it's just an empty box."

He paused, looking directly into our eyes. "It depends on the one who opens it, on their fated connection and their choice."

His words, though vague, carried great weight. The unadorned wooden box suddenly became a metaphor for the very crossroads we seemed to be standing at. To continue exploring this path, to go deeper into the spiritual mysteries that had just been revealed, or to return to the familiar life of science and reason? Either path had its gains and losses, just like what might be in the box.

I looked at Qing Ling. Her eyes were also full of indecision. She understood the shop owner's meaning. It was as if we were standing before an invisible door, and whether to step through it or not was a decision only we

could make. That choice would not only affect the coming days, but could also shape the long road ahead, perhaps even involving the matters of karmic force and reincarnation we had heard about.

We stood there for a long time, looking at the silent wooden box in the dark corner. Neither of us reached out to open it. Perhaps, now was not the time to decide. Or perhaps, the mere realization that we were at such a crossroads was already an important thing in itself.

Finally, I took a deep breath, turned, and bowed to the shop owner. "Thank you for your valuable advice."

Qing Ling bowed as well. The shop owner just gave a slight nod, his eyes unchanged, still as mysterious and profound as before.

We turned and walked out of the Sui Yuan shop, leaving behind the solemn space filled with antiques and stories of fate. The wind chime on the door tinkled softly again and then fell silent. The afternoon sun outside had faded, signaling the end of the day.

Walking on the ancient stone-paved alley, my mind was in turmoil, yet there was also something clearer. The Sui Yuan shop and its mysterious owner had not given us a final answer, but they had helped us better understand the power and responsibility of choice. The road ahead

was still misty, with countless possibilities and turns. But now, we understood that each step we took, each choice we made, was contributing to the very 'destiny' we would meet. The question of the unanswered wooden box and the future possibilities it evoked would surely stay with us. The next day, carrying these thoughts, we left Zhenyuan and continued our journey towards Leshan, where the famous Giant Buddha we had planned to visit awaited.

The Leshan Giant Buddha and a Mundane Tourist Destination

The next day, carrying with us the thoughts of the wooden box and the choices in life, we left Zhenyuan. The car took us south towards Leshan, home to the Giant Buddha I had heard so much about but never had the chance to see. Qing Ling also seemed to be looking forward to it, as this was one of China's most famous Buddhist heritages.

The road to Leshan was not too long, and the scenery on both sides, with its terraced fields and interspersed villages, was quite beautiful. Upon arrival, the first thing that struck me was the scale of the area. Unlike the small

temples or secluded hermitages we had visited, Leshan was a massive tourist complex, with a vast parking lot packed with all kinds of tour buses, and a dense stream of people.

We followed the crowd into the scenic area. To get a panoramic view of the Giant Buddha, the best way was by boat on the river. Our boat slowly approached the cliff face where the Buddha was carved. As the colossal statue gradually came into view, no words could truly describe the overwhelming feeling. It was a seated Maitreya Buddha, over seventy meters tall, carved directly into the red sandstone cliff, looking down at the confluence of the Min, Dadu, and Qingyi rivers. The scale of the work was astonishing, especially considering it was built over a thousand years ago. I tried to imagine how the ancients had managed to create such a magnificent masterpiece. The Buddha's head was level with the mountaintop, his feet resting on the river, his posture at once majestic and compassionate. Seen from a distance, the entire statue seemed to fuse as one with the mountain, a marvelous fusion of human hands and nature.

Qing Ling also seemed very moved. She gazed in silence, occasionally raising her camera to take a few pictures. I knew that for a cultural researcher like my wife, witnessing such a heritage firsthand was a very special experience.

However, alongside the grandeur of the structure, I could not help but notice the surrounding atmosphere. Loudspeakers broadcasted introductions continuously in multiple languages, the chatter of people was noisy, and vendors hawked souvenirs along the riverbank and on the walkways. After the boat ride, we also tried climbing the steps carved into the cliffside to get closer to the statue. The higher we went, the more crowded it became, at times we had to jostle our way through. Around the Buddha area, numerous stalls sold everything from small Buddha statues, bracelets, and prayer beads to various snacks and drinks. Many people even rented period costumes for photos. The scene was somewhat chaotic and bustling, a far cry from the serenity and solemnity I had imagined for a sacred place.

Compared to the near-absolute stillness at the hermit's mountain abode, the time-bending atmosphere of Wangyou Town, or even the rustic simplicity of Huanglongxi, Leshan had a completely different air. This was truly a world-famous tourist destination, with all the accompanying hustle and commercial elements. I had no intention of judging, as perhaps this was inevitable for places that attract large numbers of tourists. But in truth, amidst the bustling crowds and the noise, I did not feel any special "energy," nor did I have any kind of spiritual encounter like in the previous places. This trip, for me, was mainly about admiring a great work of architecture

and sculpture, a testament to the faith and creativity of the ancients.

We had planned to stay in Leshan for a few more days to visit some other old temples nearby that were said to be very sacred. But one evening, while we were having dinner at our inn, Qing Ling suddenly received a phone call from the US. On the phone, her voice was at first surprised, then turned to alarm and became choked up. I saw her eyes turn red. After hanging up, Qing Ling turned to me, her voice trembling: "My love... my maternal cousin in Shanghai... has just passed away suddenly. My mother just called to tell me."

This was the cousin Qing Ling had been quite close to back in Shanghai, though they had had few opportunities to contact each other after she moved to the US. The news was so sudden that it stunned us both. Although we were in the midst of a journey full of wondrous discoveries, a family emergency was something we could not ignore.

"We have to go back to Shanghai immediately," Qing Ling said. Though very sad, her voice was calmer now. "I want to go back to pay my respects and to support my aunts and uncles there."

I understood my wife's decision. Despite a twinge of regret at having to pause our unfinished journey, this

was what needed to be done. "Alright, my dear," I said, taking her hand. "We'll arrange to go to Shanghai as soon as possible."

And so, our plan to explore more of Sichuan had to change abruptly. The journey could not continue as planned; instead, there was sad news from home and a hasty decision to head for Shanghai.

* * *

CHAPTER 8: THE BOOK WITH NO COVER

Modern Shanghai and a Chance Introduction

Traveling from the mountainous region of Sichuan to Shanghai was like stepping from one world into another. In just a few hours on a comfortable high-speed train, we left behind the mossy ancient towns and misty mountains, only to find ourselves in the midst of a glamorous, bustling Shanghai that was overwhelming. Skyscrapers soared side by side, neon lights blazed through the night, and the flow of traffic was incessant. For me, this was a fairly familiar sight of a major metropolis, but for Qing Ling, the emotions were likely much more complex. This was the city where she was

born, where her childhood memories were made before her family moved to the US.

We arrived in Shanghai with a mix of awe and sorrow, as the main purpose of this sudden trip was to attend the funeral of Qing Ling's cousin. His passing was so abrupt that it had shocked and saddened the entire family here. As soon as we got off the train, we saw Qing Ling's aunt and uncle waiting for us, their faces tinged with sadness. For the next several days, we spent most of our time at our relatives' home, participating in the rituals and receiving guests according to custom. He was, after all, Qing Ling's maternal relative, and being present at this time was the proper thing to do, showing respect and affection for the family, even though the years of distance had made the relationship less close than before. The atmosphere in the house was quite somber. Qing Ling was also a bit sad and wistful as she recalled her childhood memories with her cousin, but she mostly focused on sharing in the family's grief and observing the proper etiquette.

During those times, I also took the opportunity to call home to the US to check on our children. Fortunately, they were grown up and understanding, so they weren't too worried about their parents having to stay in China a little longer than planned for a family matter.

After the funeral for Qing Ling's cousin was over, the atmosphere in the house became a little less tense. People began to have more time to sit and talk. One evening, while we were having a family dinner, a friend of Qing Ling's uncle came to visit. His surname was Chen, and he was about her uncle's age, looking like a kind, cheerful man. After inquiring about the family matters, the conversation gradually shifted to current events and health.

In the middle of the conversation, Mr. Chen suddenly mentioned a practice that many people in his neighborhood had taken up. "Lately, a lot of people in my area are practicing a *qigong* called Falun Gong," he said, his tone very natural.

Qing Ling and I looked at each other upon hearing Mr. Chen's words. The name Falun Gong sounded vaguely familiar. I seemed to recall having skimmed over some information about it online or in a few English-language newspapers in the US, something about this practice being suppressed in China. I hadn't paid much attention at the time, only vaguely aware that something like that was happening.

"Falun Gong?" Qing Ling asked softly, her voice holding a hint of surprise and caution. "Mr. Chen, is that the *qigong* that... is being suppressed by the government

here? I seem to remember reading some news about this in the US."

Hearing Qing Ling's question, Mr. Chen looked a little surprised, then he nodded, his voice also lowering a bit. "Ah... yes, you know about that too? That's right, it is happening. I don't understand why a practice that's good for your health and teaches people to be good according to Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance would end up like this." He sighed, then continued, trying to keep his voice normal. "But many people still believe in it, still practice secretly. The old folks in my neighborhood who practice all seem to be healthier and in better spirits. There's an old lady who used to have constant back pain and difficulty walking, but after practicing for a few months, she now walks briskly and has a rosy complexion."

He then lowered his voice even more, looking around with greater caution. "Well, this matter is complicated; we shouldn't discuss it in depth here." He quickly changed the subject, clearly not wanting to delve into this sensitive issue.

Mr. Chen's words, though brief and somewhat evasive, sparked many thoughts in Qing Ling and me. So the information we had skimmed over was true. A seemingly good *qigong* practice, believed in by many people, was being suppressed by the government. What

was really happening here? Our initial curiosity was now mixed with a sense of unease and an urge to find out more. "Falun Gong... Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance... Suppression..." Those words began to loom larger in our minds.

A Fateful Encounter in the City and a Precious Book

A few days after the conversation with Mr. Chen, my wife's uncle's friend, the words "Falun Gong," "Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance," and the "sensitive" atmosphere he had mentioned kept circling in my mind. My wife also seemed to be thinking a lot about it. Though it was only fleeting information, it had sparked an indescribable curiosity and a sense of unease.

One weekend morning in Shanghai, the weather was quite pleasant. After several days spent mostly with relatives for the family matter, we decided to go out for a walk to change the atmosphere. Qing Ling wanted to visit a park near her aunt and uncle's home, a place she used to play in as a child. The park was right in the city

center, quite large with many green trees, and crowded with people doing their morning exercises. The atmosphere here was bustling and modern, a stark contrast to the tranquility of the ancient towns we had visited.

We found a stone bench under a tree and silently watched the people. Some were practicing Tai Chi, some were dancing to music, others were power-walking. Qing Ling had brought her notebook and occasionally jotted something down. As for me, my familiar briefcase still slung over my shoulder, my mind was wandering over what we had been through, and what Mr. Chen had just said. Was that Falun Gong practice really as good as he said, and why was the government making things difficult for it?

Lost in thought, I was suddenly startled by an unusual commotion nearby. Not far from where we were sitting, towards the park entrance, I saw a scholarly-looking man of about forty, wearing glasses and a simple shirt, being stopped by two other men in plainclothes who looked rather aggressive. The conversation between them seemed tense; the scholarly man was trying to explain something, but the other two appeared not to be listening. One of them even shoved him hard on the shoulder.

A vague sense of unease arose. The behavior of those two men was not like that of ordinary people, but more like plainclothes police—something I was beginning to learn to recognize. The scholarly man looked a bit frightened but tried to remain calm, his eyes darting around as if looking for an escape or help.

Then, things happened very quickly. When the two plainclothes officers were not paying attention, the scholarly man suddenly took a step back, his hand moving like lightning to pull a small object from his jacket pocket and skillfully tuck it into a crevice between two large decorative rocks near the tree where we were sitting. The action was so discreet and swift that if I hadn't been looking in that exact direction at that exact moment, I would surely have missed it. Immediately after, the two officers closed in, grabbed his arms, and began to search him.

Qing Ling and I stared at each other, stunned, our hearts pounding. It was clear the man was in big trouble, and the object he had just hidden was surely what those officers were looking for. What was it? Was it related to the Falun Gong that Mr. Chen had mentioned?

The two officers searched the scholarly man thoroughly but found nothing. Their faces showed frustration and suspicion. They began to look around, their sharp eyes scanning the nearby area, including where we were

sitting. I tried to maintain a calm expression, turning to watch the passersby as if I wasn't interested, but my heart was on fire. If they found that object, the scholarly man would certainly be in danger.

An idea flashed through my mind. I had to do something. I couldn't let them find it. Out of an impulse to help the underdog, and perhaps also a bit of curiosity about the hidden object, especially after what I had heard, I turned to Qing Ling and gave her a look. She understood and nodded slightly, though her face clearly showed her worry.

I took a deep breath, trying to act as natural as possible. I stood up, pretended to take a stroll, and casually passed by the crevice where the object lay. As I walked past, taking advantage of the moment when the two officers had their backs turned to interrogate the scholarly man, I quickly bent down as if to pick up something I had dropped, and in an instant, my hand touched the hard, lumpy object in the crevice. A small, coverless book, cold and firm in my hand. I skillfully picked it up, quickly slipped it into the briefcase I was carrying, and then continued walking as if nothing had happened, my heart still racing.

I walked a few more steps and then returned to where Qing Ling was sitting, trying to keep my expression normal. Qing Ling looked at me, her eyes a

mixture of worry and a hint of admiration for my audacity. The two plainclothes officers, after finding nothing suspicious in the surrounding area and perhaps not wanting to cause too much of a scene in a public place, reluctantly let the scholarly man go. However, before leaving, they said something in a threatening tone and their eyes never stopped watching him. It was clear he was still not free from their surveillance.

After the two officers had disappeared, the scholarly man stood silently for a moment, adjusting his clothes and glasses, his face still a bit shaken but calmer. He glanced towards the crevice, and then his gaze fell on us. He nodded slightly as if in recognition, then slowly walked towards us.

I stood up, feeling a bit nervous. The book was now safely in my briefcase.

"Thank you," the man said softly as he approached, his voice gentle and polite, a complete contrast to the dangerous situation just moments before. He looked directly into my eyes. "I saw that you... helped me."

"It's nothing," I replied, also lowering my voice. "I saw they weren't treating you very fairly. Is this... yours?" I cautiously gestured towards my briefcase, preparing to take the book out.

The man quickly waved his hand, his eyes showing clear vigilance as he glanced around. "Wait," he said quietly. "They might still be watching me from a distance. It's very dangerous for both of us if I take it back now."

I understood. "Then... what should I do with it?" I asked, feeling a bit bewildered at having become the unwitting keeper of what seemed to be a very sensitive item.

The man looked at me with sincere, deep gratitude. "Could I trouble you to keep it for me for a few days? When it's safer, I will find a way to contact you." He paused for a moment, then looked at me with a subtle, appraising gaze. "You're a foreigner, aren't you? Traveling in China?"

"Yes, we are Chinese-Americans," I replied.

He nodded slightly, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Perhaps... it was no accident that you found this book," he said, his voice full of meaning. He looked towards my briefcase, where the book lay. "This is a very precious book. It explains the profound principles of the universe and humanity, and the path of true cultivation to return to one's original, kind nature."

He looked directly into my eyes once more. "If you truly have a fated connection with it, please try reading it. Who knows, it might be able to answer the things that

you and your wife have been pondering, have been searching for on this journey."

With that, he gave us another slight bow. "I must go now. Thank you both very much. Take care!" He hurried away, quickly blending into the crowd on the street, occasionally glancing back cautiously.

Qing Ling and I stood there, watching his figure disappear. The coverless book now rested quietly in my briefcase. It was not physically heavy, but I felt its weight in my heart. A precious book? Explaining the principles of the universe and the path of true cultivation? "Fated connection" again? The words of the strange man, along with the difficult situation we had just witnessed, had sparked an intense curiosity in me, mixed with a sense of responsibility and a strange guidance of fate.

That evening, after returning to our aunt and uncle's home, we discussed the matter. Although we were very grateful for our family's help, in order to study this book in peace, and also to avoid any unnecessary trouble for our relatives if the book was indeed as "sensitive" as we thought, we decided to find a place of our own. A few days later, after thanking and saying goodbye to our aunt and uncle, we found a small, quiet-looking hotel in an area a bit far from the center of Shanghai.

First Encounter with *Zhuan Falun*—Shock and Fascination

After settling into the new hotel, with our own private and quiet space, my heart was still unsettled from the incident in the park a few days earlier. I carefully took the coverless book from my briefcase and placed it on the table.

Just as I had first sensed, this was not a professionally printed book. It had no cover at all, just a stack of ivory-white paper, bound along the edge with a few flimsy-looking staples. The first page listed no author or publisher, only a line of large, bold Chinese characters, "Lunyu," as the title for the introduction. A closer look revealed that the print quality was slightly faded in places; it was clearly a document that people had printed themselves to pass around. Its simple appearance only strengthened my feeling that this was something precious, yet forbidden.

"Are you really going to read it?" Qing Ling asked, her voice tinged with worry as she saw me examining the book. "It looks... unusual. And it's connected to what happened in the park. What if we get into trouble?"

"I know," I replied, my eyes still fixed on the book. "But that man asked me to hold onto it, and he spoke with such sincerity. I think I should know what's inside. Besides, I'm curious." Moreover, I couldn't shake the feeling that this encounter and obtaining this book were not coincidental, but perhaps some kind of arrangement in our journey.

I flipped through the pages. It was all in simplified Chinese characters. Qing Ling, being much more fluent in Chinese than I, sat down beside me and began to read the first few passages aloud, slowly.

The language in the book was indeed very direct and simple, without the flowery or obscure metaphors of many ancient scriptures Qing Ling had told me about. The author seemed to be speaking directly to the reader, using very plain language to express incredibly vast concepts about the universe, about a being's life, about the true purpose of being human. The book spoke of "the Fa," of "cultivation," and of the importance of "*xinxing*" (mind-heart nature).

One thing we noticed was that, although the book had no cover or title page, in the content, the author occasionally mentioned the name of the book he was teaching—it was "*Zhuan Falun*." For example, one passage read: "This book of mine, *Zhuan Falun*, is teaching the Fa at a very high level..." or "My true

purpose in imparting *Zhuan Falun* is to save people to high levels...". It was through these details that we learned the name of the book we were holding.

At first, understanding what was in the book was not easy at all. Many terms like "Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance," "karmic force," "virtue," "levels," and "Falun"... were used with very deep meanings, quite different from what we knew. There were passages that lectured on the multi-layered structure of the universe, the simultaneous existence of many different dimensions, ancient civilizations, and the root cause of illness being karmic force... these things seemed to completely contradict the modern scientific knowledge I had learned and always believed in. My scientific mind kept raising questions; many parts seemed hard to believe.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" Qing Ling said after reading a passage about different types of extraterrestrials and their interference in human society. "The writing is very direct, but the content... it's truly beyond imagination."

"It is," I nodded. "If you just skim through it, it's easy to think it's not real. But..." I hesitated. "...for some reason, I don't want to stop reading."

There was a strange pull from these simple pages. Despite our initial skepticism, we were drawn in without realizing it. The deeper we read, the more astonished we

were by the coherence, logic, and tight system of the principles presented in "*Zhuan Falun*." The book didn't just present concepts; it explained their origins, nature, and interconnections in great detail, from the smallest to the largest, in a way that was unexpectedly consistent and profound.

And strangely, these principles seemed to perfectly explain the questions and strange things we had experienced throughout our journey. When the book lectured on true *qigong* and spiritual cultivation disciplines, the images of Mr. Zhang Feng and the hermit on the mountain came back to me. When it lectured on the soul, karmic force, reincarnation, and the ability to change one's destiny, the words of Master Mo, the old knitting woman, and the owner of the Sui Yuan shop seemed to be illuminated, seen from a higher perspective. When it lectured on other dimensions and the relativity of time, the experiences in Wangyou Town no longer seemed entirely irrational.

In particular, when "*Zhuan Falun*" explained that "Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance" is the supreme characteristic of the universe, the sole standard for measuring good and bad, and the foundation of all cultivation, I felt a powerful shock in my heart. It was simple, direct, yet all-encompassing. It was the root, the guiding compass I seemed to have always been searching for without knowing it.

I looked up at Qing Ling. Her eyes were wide, filled with an indescribable emotion and joy. "Ming," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "This book... I feel... it's real. It is the True Fa!"

I understood her feeling. I was undergoing a similar awakening myself. Like a person walking in darkness who suddenly sees the morning light. Like a thirsty person in the desert who finds a cool spring. All the scattered pieces from my previous spiritual experiences seemed to be arranged by "*Zhuan Falun*" into a complete, clear, and meaningful picture of the truth. Although my scientific mind still had a few points that needed more time to ponder, deep in my heart, I knew I had found something incredibly precious.

Profound Principles and Deep Inner Shock

For the next few days in Shanghai, our lives seemed to revolve around the coverless book called "*Zhuan Falun*." Instead of visiting the famous tourist spots of this glamorous city, we spent most of our time in our hotel room, reading and reflecting together. The book had a strange pull, making it impossible for us to put it down. During the day, we took turns reading, sometimes aloud

to each other, other times silently pondering on our own. At night, under the lamp, we often stayed up late, discussing what we had just read—sometimes things that resonated deeply with us, other times points we still found hard to understand. It felt as if we were embarking on the greatest exploration of our lives.

This book was truly special. The more I read, the more I perceived an unusual profundity in every word. It was unlike any religious or philosophical text I had ever known. The book spoke of very grand things, from the universe with its countless different dimensions to the most minuscule things within matter, even surpassing what my knowledge of modern science knew. It also spoke of the true origin of human beings—that we are not just this physical body, but have something more fundamental, called the Primordial Spirit, and that the purpose of coming to this world is not merely to enjoy material things, but to cultivate, to return to one's original, good nature.

The concept of "Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance" as the fundamental characteristic of the universe was repeated time and again. The book explained that this was not just a moral standard, but the Law of the universe, the foundation of everything. True cultivation meant striving to live by these three words, to become a better person each day. The book also spoke at length about the law of cause and effect,

about karmic force and virtue—the things that determine a person's happiness and suffering, and that can be changed through one's conduct and the cultivation of one's mind-heart nature. These things reminded me of the words of Master Mo and the old knitting woman, but here, everything was explained much more systematically and deeply.

"Look at this passage, Ming," Qing Ling said softly one evening, pointing to a page. "The book says that cultivating one's mind-heart nature is the most important thing. Everything else, like supernatural abilities or physical changes, comes from whether one truly elevates one's mind-heart nature. It's not about how much you meditate or do the exercises. It's about facing conflicts in daily life, at work, in the family, seeing where you are wrong, and getting rid of bad attachments like competitiveness, jealousy, showing off... only then can you improve."

I read along attentively. It was true; the book emphasized that cultivation must be integrated with daily life, that one must encounter real-world situations and face tribulations for it to be true cultivation. This was completely different from my previous thinking, that to practice spirituality one had to go to a temple or a mountain, far from the secular world.

But what shocked me most, as a scientist, was what the book wrote about human history and the limitations of modern science. "*Zhuan Falun*" presented a completely different view of human origins, unlike Darwin's theory of evolution, which I had always considered to be correct. The book stated that humanity on Earth has gone through many civilizations, some prehistoric ones having reached very high levels of science and technology, even surpassing today's, but were all ultimately destroyed due to the moral decay of society.

To illustrate, the book mentioned several archaeological findings that modern science cannot explain, or deliberately ignores because they do not fit existing theories. For example, the nuclear reactor that was in operation two billion years ago in Oklo, Gabon; the footprints of giants found in many places; the cave paintings depicting strange creatures or unidentified flying objects; or the incredibly sophisticated artifacts found in geological strata where civilized humans supposedly could not have existed...

"Impossible!" I muttered when I read these parts. My entire knowledge of history and biology, which I had studied and taught for so many years, seemed to be shaken to its core. I tried to find inconsistencies, to recall the scientific explanations for these phenomena. But in truth, there were too many anomalous archaeological findings that mainstream science often explained away

with very forced reasoning, or classified as "mysteries." Could it be that the theory of evolution was just an incomplete, or even erroneous, hypothesis? Could the history of the Earth and humanity really be much more complex and ancient than we thought?

These questions swirled in my head, forcing me to think deeply. On the one hand, I did not want to easily abandon my faith in science, in the empirical methods I had followed my whole life. On the other hand, what was in "*Zhuan Falun*," along with the evidence it presented, had a strange persuasive power, explaining even the things that science seemed to be at a loss to address. I began to realize the limitations of modern science: it is too focused on the physical world we can see, while ignoring the spiritual, the soul; it is constrained by its observational tools and experimental methods; and sometimes, it becomes rigid, unwilling to accept what lies beyond its existing knowledge.

Along with the change in my view of science, the way I saw everything in life also began to change. I thought back on my career successes, the money I had, my social relationships... in light of what the book said about karmic force and virtue, about the true purpose of life, they seemed to become less important. The ambitions, the calculations of gain and loss, the struggles in work and life that I had previously considered normal, even

necessary, now appeared as bad things that needed to be discarded.

I also came to understand the significance of the strange encounters we had had. Mr. Zhang Feng and his unusual "pulse reading"; the hermit's teachings; Master Mo's explanation of the soul and karmic force; the experience of time in Wangyou Town; the old knitting woman's story of reincarnation; the lessons on choice at the Sui Yuan shop... none of it was random. They were like preparatory steps, a skillful guidance from someone unseen, to gradually lessen my rigid, materialistic view, helping me to be able to accept the true Great Law when I had the fated connection.

We also realized the vast difference between Falun Gong and other cultivation practices or religions we had known or heard of. This practice had no cumbersome religious rituals, no mandatory temples or places of worship, no collection of money or donations. It focused directly on cultivating the practitioner's mind-heart nature in daily life, according to the standard of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, while combining it with five gentle exercises to purify the body. It was a Great Way of cultivation that was very simple yet very profound, aimed directly at a person's heart. The systematic, comprehensive, and profound nature of the principles in "*Zhuan Falun*" was something we had never seen in any other doctrine or religion.

Although there were still many things in the book we could not yet fully understand, though we still had questions, a sense of peace and a great hope had begun to grow in both of us. It felt like finding a safe harbor after years of drifting, finding light after a long night. We looked at each other, and in our eyes was not just the love of husband and wife, but also the empathy and encouragement of fellow travelers who had just taken their first steps on a great path. Our relationship seemed to become even closer and deeper as we shared the changes in our hearts, the joy of discovering the profound principles of the universe.

After several days of being almost completely immersed in "*Zhuan Falun*," we felt a strong urge to learn more. The book mentioned five exercises and also other lectures by the Master who wrote the book. We were eager to know what the movements were like and to read other scriptures.

Out of habit, the first thing I thought of was searching the internet. I opened my laptop and connected to the hotel's network. Qing Ling sat beside me, also waiting eagerly. I tried typing the phrase "Falun Gong" in both English and Chinese into familiar search engines. But the results were disappointing. Most of the links were inaccessible, or the web pages showed errors, or worse, were filled with negative, crudely slanderous information that we knew for sure was not true after

having read the book. I tried again and again, using different keywords, but the results were the same.

"Why is it so strange?" Qing Ling asked, surprised. "A practice that seems so good, with such a profound book, why is it so hard to find information about it online?"

I suddenly remembered what I had heard about internet censorship in China, about the so-called "Great Firewall." This was probably the reason. All information related to Falun Gong seemed to have been systematically blocked. This made the "sensitive" nature that Mr. Chen had mentioned feel even more serious.

I considered using some firewall circumvention tools that people in the tech world sometimes use, but honestly, I wasn't very familiar with them and wasn't sure if it was safe to do so while in China. Asking friends in the US to search and send information was an option, but it would probably take time and wouldn't be as direct.

We sat looking at each other, feeling a bit stuck. Then Qing Ling suddenly said, "Ming, what if... we try asking Mr. Chen again? He said many of his neighbors practice it. Maybe he knows someone, or at least knows where they practice."

Qing Ling's idea made sense to me. Mr. Chen seemed like a kind person; although he was cautious when talking about the "sensitive" matter, he had shared positive things about Falun Gong. He could be a lead.

Looking at the book on the table, then at Qing Ling, I knew that if we wanted to learn more, to learn the exercises, we couldn't just rely on the internet here. Trying to contact the man who gave us the book was impossible, but perhaps, through Mr. Chen, we would have a chance to find the people who were truly practicing Falun Gong here in Shanghai.

The Decision to Try a New Path

After realizing the dead end in searching for information about Falun Gong online and with Qing Ling's suggestion to seek out Mr. Chen, we sat down to talk more seriously about what we had just experienced and our next steps. The small hotel room was quiet, with only the yellow lamplight and the coverless book placed reverently on the table between us. Over the past three days, what "*Zhuan Falun*" had brought us had truly and completely changed our view of the world and of ourselves.

Qing Ling was the first to speak, her eyes sparkling with an indescribable emotion, both moved and somewhat solemn. "My dear," she said, her voice soft but clear, "these past three days... I feel as if I've been on a long journey. This book..." She gently placed her hand on "*Zhuan Falun*." "...it is completely different from anything I have ever known. Though there are parts I don't yet fully understand, and things that sound hard to believe, deep in my heart, I feel it is incredibly true, incredibly righteous. It has answered all the questions that have troubled me throughout this journey, and the questions I've held in my heart for a very long time."

She took a deep breath, looking directly into my eyes, her determination clear. "I feel as if... I have just found the way home, Ming. A strong urge from within tells me that this is the True Fa, the Great Way that my soul has perhaps been searching for for a very long time."

I listened in silence, my heart resonating with her every word. I was also undergoing a revolution in my consciousness. My solid scientific worldview had been severely challenged by the principles in "*Zhuan Falun*." The tight logic, the complete system, the ability to explain all aspects of the universe and human life, especially the discourses on history and prehistoric civilizations... all of it made me reconsider what I had always believed.

"I understand, Qing Ling," I replied, my voice also full of emotion. "I feel the same way. Though my rational mind still has many questions, I cannot deny the profundity and power of these principles. They have a perfect internal logic. And most importantly, they touch upon one's conscience, upon the benevolent nature of human beings. That standard of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance... I feel that it is the universal truth, the most righteous path."

I looked deeply into my wife's eyes. "I think... perhaps we have truly found the path we were looking for, my dear."

Silence returned, but this time it was a silence of consensus, of a great decision gradually taking shape. We knew that just reading was not enough. If this was the true path, we had to walk on it.

"So... shall we start by finding Mr. Chen again to ask for more information?" Qing Ling asked, after this idea had been discussed between us earlier. Her eyes were both eager and a little apprehensive. "He seems to know about it. Hopefully, he can help us find an instructor for the exercises, or at least tell us where the Falun Gong practitioners gather."

That was what I was thinking, too. Cultivating one's mind-heart nature according to Truthfulness-

Compassion-Forbearance could be started right away, by trying to measure oneself against it in daily matters. But the five exercises really required specific guidance to be done correctly. "Alright," I nodded, feeling a clear determination. "Tomorrow, or as soon as possible, we will find a way to visit your uncle and tactfully ask Mr. Chen. We must be very discreet and careful, as this matter doesn't seem simple."

A decision was made. We would not stop at just reading the book. We would begin to practice what we could immediately—striving to live by Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance in every thought and action, and proactively seeking the opportunity to learn the five exercises with Mr. Chen's help, if fated connections allowed. The path of cultivating in Falun Dafa had opened before us, and though there were still many unknowns, we were determined to take the first steps together, with faith and hope in the truth we had just found.

The First Supernatural Experiences

After that candid conversation and momentous shared decision, a feeling of both excitement and a certain

solemnity filled our hotel room. We were no longer mere curious explorers, but seemed to have willingly stepped onto a new threshold, a completely unfamiliar path that promised the very things our hearts had deeply longed for.

While waiting for the opportunity to meet Mr. Chen again and hopefully find an instructor for the exercises, we decided not to sit idly by. The book "*Zhuan Falun*" not only taught the Fa principles, but also briefly described the five exercises. Among them, the fifth exercise, the sitting meditation, was described quite clearly in terms of posture.

"What if... we try sitting?" Qing Ling suggested one evening, her eyes shining with a mixture of determination and curiosity. "While we wait, we can at least try to practice what we can."

I nodded. "Yes, let's try. The book says the sitting meditation relies mainly on a tranquil mind, so perhaps we can start by trying to sit still and empty our minds."

And so, in the quiet of our hotel room, we made our first attempt to practice according to the book. I tried to imitate the full-lotus position described, but my stiff legs, accustomed to a lifetime of sitting on chairs, could only manage to place one foot on the opposite thigh in the half-lotus position. Pain and numbness quickly set in. I

took a deep breath, trying to ignore the discomfort and focus on keeping my mind free from stray thoughts as the book instructed. But random thoughts kept coming, like uninvited waves. This was indeed much harder than I had imagined.

I glanced over at Qing Ling. She seemed to be doing better than I was, perhaps due to her natural flexibility or her familiarity with some traditional Asian sitting postures. She sat in the half-lotus position, her back straight, her hands forming the *jiyjin* hand sign in front of her lower abdomen, her eyes closed. At first, I saw her brow furrow slightly; she was probably also enduring the pain in her legs or trying to quiet her mind.

But then, a moment later, I noticed something strange. Qing Ling's body was completely still, her breathing even, but on her face, with her eyes still closed, two streams of tears were silently flowing down her cheeks.

"Ling?" I called softly, a little worried. "Are you... are you alright? Is the pain in your legs that bad?"

She didn't answer right away, seemingly lost in a state I couldn't comprehend. The tears continued to flow. I was bewildered, not knowing what to do, just sitting and watching, my mind full of questions. Was she just very moved thinking about the profound Fa principles we

had just read? Or was it simply a physical reaction to meditating for the first time?

It was quite a while later when she slowly opened her eyes. They were still tear-filled but now shone with an expression of astonishment, emotion, and an indescribable, almost otherworldly quality. She turned to me, her voice still trembling:

"Ming... I... I just saw..."

"What did you see?" I asked immediately, sensing something unusual had happened.

Qing Ling took a deep breath, trying to speak clearly. "I'm not sure... As I was trying to quiet my mind according to the book... suddenly, what was before my eyes was no longer darkness. I saw... with another eye, right here," she pointed to the area of her forehead between her eyebrows. "I saw light... brilliant, strange colors, unlike any color I have ever seen in this world."

Her voice grew softer, as if recounting an unbelievable dream. "Then... then I saw another world. It was so beautiful, so magnificent. I saw... I saw myself there, not in this form... but in a different form, wearing resplendent robes... like... like a King, a Lord of that world..."

Tears welled up in my wife's eyes again. "I also saw a scene... of myself and many others... bidding farewell to that world, descending... descending to this human realm... it seemed there was a vow, a mission... to await the Great Law at this time..."

I sat there, completely stunned by Qing Ling's account. A magnificent world? A King or Lord? A vow to descend to the human world? These things were beyond my wildest imagination, but her strong emotion, the ceaseless tears, and the sincerity in her eyes made it impossible for me not to believe. I suddenly recalled the passages in "*Zhuan Falun*" about the celestial eye, the true origin of a being's life, and the different levels of space. Could it be... could it be that Qing Ling had actually opened her celestial eye on her very first attempt at meditation?

While she was having such a strange and supernatural experience, I, sitting right beside her, saw nothing but the aching numbness in my legs and the jumble of thoughts in my head. A stark difference. But instead of feeling disappointed or skeptical, Qing Ling's experience was like a powerful jolt to my consciousness. Even though I hadn't seen it myself, my wife's story, combined with what we had read and our previous encounters, strengthened my faith immensely. It showed me that what the book wrote was not empty theory, but truth, realms that could be reached through cultivation. I

understood that each person's path and state of cultivation are different; what matters is one's perseverance and enlightenment quality.

"I believe you," I said softly, placing a hand on her shoulder. "What the book says... it's probably all true."

Qing Ling nodded, her eyes still holding a deep emotion. That experience seemed to have been deeply etched in her heart, bringing her a root-level understanding of the meaning of this life.

In the following days, although I still had no special experiences like Qing Ling during meditation, we both began to feel other subtle changes. Our spirits felt more refreshed, our minds unusually clear and bright. The trivial vexations of life seemed to bother us less. Occasionally, I would have strange dreams, not clear, but they would bring a sense of peace or offer some kind of hint. At times, a sudden intuition about some small matter would turn out to be surprisingly accurate.

These things made us feel much more assured. This path seemed to be the right one we were looking for. But to continue, especially to learn the exercises correctly, we definitely needed to find an instructor. That was what we needed to do next.

* * *

CHAPTER 9: ENLIGHTENING PRINCIPLES AND THE CULTIVATION COMMUNITY

The Initial Search and Connection

After several days of reading and reflecting on "*Zhuan Falun*," along with Qing Ling's strange experiences, we both felt a great urge. Clearly, this was not just an ordinary book, but a path, a guidance that we had been

fortunate enough to encounter. But as I've said, to continue, especially to learn the five exercises correctly, we needed to find an instructor. Searching online in China was clearly useless.

The idea of seeking out Mr. Chen, my wife's uncle's friend who had inadvertently mentioned Falun Gong at the family dinner, kept circling in our minds. Although he had seemed a bit hesitant when talking about it then, he at least knew of it and had said many of his neighbors practiced it. That was the only and most plausible lead we had at this point in Shanghai.

"We have to find a way to meet Mr. Chen again," Qing Ling said to me one morning as we were preparing to leave the hotel. "We can't just sit around and wait. I'll call my aunt and see if there's a way to invite Mr. Chen over, or get his phone number so we can contact him directly."

I thought her idea was reasonable. Though I was a bit reluctant to bother her aunt and uncle's family again, this was important. Qing Ling then called her aunt. Fortunately, her aunt didn't ask many questions, just thinking we wanted to thank Mr. Chen for his visit the other day, so she happily gave us his phone number.

With the phone number in hand, Qing Ling called Mr. Chen directly. She chose her words carefully, saying that we were very appreciative of his sharing about health

practices the other day, and had a few more things we'd like to ask him, wondering if he would be free to meet us for a short while. At first, over the phone, I could hear Mr. Chen's voice sound a bit hesitant; he probably guessed what we wanted to ask about. But perhaps the sincerity in Qing Ling's voice convinced him. In the end, Mr. Chen agreed to meet us that afternoon at a small teahouse near his home, a place that seemed discreet and less frequented.

At the appointed time, Qing Ling and I found the teahouse. It was a small place, tucked away in an alley, with a very quiet atmosphere. Mr. Chen was already waiting at a corner table. He looked as kind as he did before, but his eyes seemed more cautious.

After a few polite greetings, Qing Ling got straight to the point, but still in a very gentle and respectful tone. "Mr. Chen, the other day you mentioned the Falun Gong practice that many of your neighbors do. Actually, we also had the fated connection to read its main book, '*Zhuan Falun*,' and we feel the principles within are incredibly profound and meaningful. We would very much like to learn more, especially to learn the exercises, but we don't know where to start, and we don't know anyone here."

Qing Ling paused, looking at Mr. Chen with an expectant and somewhat pleading gaze. "We know this

might be a sensitive issue, but we are truly sincere. We were wondering if you could... help us? Or perhaps introduce us to someone who practices this?"

Mr. Chen was silent for a moment, looking at us, then out the window. I could clearly see the hesitation on his face. Helping strangers learn about a practice that was under the government's watch was certainly not a simple matter. The atmosphere in the teahouse suddenly became a bit tense. Qing Ling and I also held our breath, waiting.

Finally, Mr. Chen sighed softly, then turned back to look at us, the caution in his eyes having lessened, replaced by a sense of understanding and perhaps even a bit of empathy. "I never thought you two would have such a fated connection with that book," he said, his voice lowered. "It's true, the True Fa is not easy to come by. I understand your sincerity."

He paused for a moment, then continued, "This matter... it is indeed a bit inconvenient to speak of publicly. But since you have the heart to learn, I can't bring myself to refuse. Actually, I have a close friend, also a neighbor, who has cultivated in Falun Gong for many years. He is a very good, very knowledgeable person. Perhaps... I can introduce you to him."

Hearing Mr. Chen say this, Qing Ling and I felt a great weight lift from our shoulders. A tremendous joy and hope filled our hearts.

"That would be wonderful!" Qing Ling said quickly. "We truly don't know how to thank you."

Mr. Chen waved his hand. "It's nothing. Helping someone with a fated connection find something good is also a good deed. But you must promise me to be extremely careful and discreet in everything. These days..." He left the sentence unfinished, but we both understood.

After that, Mr. Chen gave us the address and phone number of his friend, whose name was Liu Wei, though everyone affectionately called him Uncle Liu. Mr. Chen advised us to call and make an appointment in advance and to make it clear that he had referred us. He also added that regarding the specifics of learning the exercises, we should discuss it directly with Uncle Liu. He was a long-time practitioner with a lot of experience and would surely find a suitable and safe way to help us under the current circumstances.

The meeting with Mr. Chen was brief, but it opened a crucial door. We left the teahouse with great hope. Finally, after so much searching, perhaps we were about

to have direct contact with those who were truly walking the path of cultivating in Falun Dafa.

Studying the Fa, Doing the Exercises, and Integrating into the Community

Leaving the teahouse with Uncle Liu Wei's contact information, we felt an indescribable joy and hope. That very afternoon, after returning to the hotel, Qing Ling called Uncle Liu. She carefully introduced us, mentioned that Mr. Chen had referred us, and expressed our wish to learn more about Falun Gong and the exercises. On the other end of the line, Uncle Liu's voice sounded very warm and open, but also held a certain caution. He said he was very happy that someone wanted to learn, and after Qing Ling reiterated Mr. Chen's introduction, Uncle Liu arranged to meet us at his home the following afternoon for a more convenient discussion. He also gave us detailed directions.

At the appointed time, we found the address Uncle Liu had given us. It was a small apartment in an old residential complex, nothing remarkable. Uncle Liu, a slender middle-aged man with a benevolent face, opened the door and welcomed us with a kind smile. After

inviting us in, pouring us water, and perhaps observing that we seemed normal, he began to open up more.

The joy and relief of finding someone who could guide us was quickly followed by Uncle Liu's enthusiasm and sincerity. After talking with us and sensing our sincerity and eagerness to learn, Uncle Liu offered to set aside time to teach us the exercises. He said, "Doing the exercises requires quiet and concentration. I will teach the two of you privately at my home. Falun Gong has five exercises, four standing and one sitting meditation. Learning is completely free of charge; not a single cent is collected."

And so, our first lesson began right there in the small living room of Uncle Liu's apartment. The space was not large, but it was very clean and quiet. Uncle Liu even invited a friend of his, another long-time practitioner, a very kind-faced elderly woman surnamed Chen (whom we would also grow very fond of), to help guide us more thoroughly. The two of them took turns demonstrating each movement of the first exercise, "Buddha Stretching a Thousand Arms." The movements looked graceful and gentle, but when I tried them myself, I found it was not at all simple. My stiff body struggled to achieve the relaxation and softness they displayed. Especially with the stretching movements, I could clearly feel the stagnation in my seldom-used joints and muscles.

The second exercise, "Falun Standing Stance," which involved holding the wheel posture, was a real challenge. After holding the "Holding the Wheel in Front of the Head" position for just a few minutes, my arms ached terribly, and my whole body began to tremble. I glanced at Qing Ling; she seemed to be doing a bit better than I was, but her forehead was also beaded with sweat, her brows slightly furrowed as she tried to endure. Yet, Uncle Liu and Mrs. Chen stood firm, their faces placid, as if they were holding something very light.

"Keep it up," Mrs. Chen encouraged kindly. "Everyone is like this at the beginning. It's a little sore, but once you get past it, you'll feel very comfortable. What's important is willpower."

Their patience and goodwill moved us deeply. They showed no impatience or criticism of our clumsiness. They meticulously corrected each small posture, explained the requirements of each movement in detail, and repeated them until we had grasped the basics. Over the next few days, we regularly went to Uncle Liu's home at the pre-arranged times to learn and do the exercises with them. Gradually, we learned all five exercises. The fifth, the sitting meditation "Strengthening Divine Powers," which required the full- or half-lotus position, was another challenge for my stiff legs. But remembering Qing Ling's experience and everyone's encouragement, I tried to persevere. Though I couldn't

sit for long or completely empty my mind, I began to feel a warm flow of energy spreading through my body when I did the exercises, a strange feeling of comfort and refreshment after each session.

But practicing Falun Gong was not just about doing the movements. Uncle Liu explained to us that the core was to cultivate our mind-heart nature according to the principles of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, and that reading the book and studying the Fa were extremely important.

One afternoon, after a few days of getting to know them and doing the exercises, Uncle Liu invited us to stay for dinner and then join a group Fa-study session with a few of his other friends. "We often gather together to read the book and share our understandings in the evening. It's just a small group, at a private home for discretion and safety. If you two don't mind, you can stay and join us."

This invitation made us feel very honored. We understood that in the current situation in China, inviting strangers, especially foreigners, to a group Fa-study at a private home was an act of great trust on their part.

That evening, after a simple but warm vegetarian meal at Uncle Liu's home, a few more of his friends arrived. The small living room was tidied up again. Inside, about

seven or eight people were already sitting upright on mats on the floor. Besides Uncle Liu and Mrs. Chen, there were a few new faces. There was a young man who was a taxi driver, a middle-aged woman who was a retired textile factory worker, and a man who looked weather-beaten but had very kind eyes, said to be a farmer from the suburbs who could only come in occasionally. The atmosphere in the room was very warm and somewhat solemn.

The Fa-study began. People took turns reading passages from "*Zhuan Falun*." The reading was clear and reverent. Although I had read it on my own before, listening to it being read and studying with everyone in such an atmosphere, I felt the Fa principles seeping deeper into my mind. After finishing a lecture, people began to share what they had enlightened to, their experiences in cultivation, and how they had measured themselves against the Fa to overcome difficulties and conflicts in their lives, work, and families.

There were no heated debates or flowery words. Only sincerity, frankness, and a desire to improve together. One person shared how they had tried to endure being misunderstood by others; another told of how they had tried to think of others first when facing a problem. They did not hesitate to speak of their own shortcomings, their bad attachments, and how they were striving to rectify themselves according to the requirements of the Great

Law. Qing Ling, with her fluency in Chinese and cultural sensitivity, also shared her initial understandings of the Fa principles and received everyone's empathy and encouragement.

I sat and listened silently, my heart full of emotion. Here, there was no distinction between professor or worker, engineer or farmer, old or young. Everyone was equal, learning from each other, helping each other to become better on the path of cultivation. There was no form of organization, no leader, no collection of money, no worship rituals. Only the book of the Great Law and a heart that wanted to genuinely cultivate. The pure, kind atmosphere and the sincere bond between these people created an invisible but incredibly powerful spiritual strength. It was completely different from any organization, religion, or group I had ever known.

In the following days, we gradually integrated into this small but warm community. We not only studied the Fa and did the exercises with them, but also heard more stories and met more people. Each person had their own circumstances, their own fate, but all shared a common faith in Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, a desire to become a better person, to return to their original, true self. This integration not only helped us understand Falun Gong more deeply but also strengthened our determination and faith in the path we had chosen. We felt that we were not alone on this journey.

Miraculous Stories and Living Testimonies

The more time we spent with the new group of practitioners at Uncle Liu's home, the more of their personal stories we heard. These were not high-level theories or abstruse philosophies, but very ordinary life experiences that nonetheless held strange and wonderful things, living proof of the power of Falun Dafa to change people.

During the informal chats after reading the book together, or while sipping tea, people would naturally talk about their path to cultivation. What initially caught my attention, as a medical professor, were the stories of health improvements.

Mrs. Chen, the elderly woman with the kind smile we had met, had previously suffered greatly from a severe heart condition and arthritis that made it very difficult for her to walk, leaving her almost bedridden. She said her doctor had told her that her illness could only be managed with medication, and her quality of life was declining. However, since she started practicing Falun Gong a few years ago, not only did her spirits lift, but her health also improved in an unbelievable way. Now,

she could walk briskly, take care of all her own needs, and even help her children with housework.

"At first, I just thought I'd practice to get healthier," she laughed, a radiant smile unlike that of someone who had been seriously ill. "But Uncle Liu told me that to cure an illness, you have to not only do the exercises but also cultivate your heart," she said, pointing to her chest. "You have to get rid of attachments like competitiveness, resentment, and baseless worries. I tried to follow what Master Li taught in the book, to live by Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. Gradually, I felt my heart become lighter; I no longer complained about my fate or got angry with my children. And then, the illnesses just got better, I don't even know when."

According to what I had learned in medicine, Mrs. Chen's recovery was almost inexplicable. But it was impossible not to believe the truth right before my eyes: an elderly woman full of vitality, with a rosy complexion, walking briskly. And she was not the only one. Mr. Li, the young taxi driver, spoke of the chronic migraines that had tormented him for years, for which no medicine had helped, severely affecting his work. Yet, after just a few months of cultivation, the headaches became less frequent and then disappeared entirely. Ms. Hong, the retired factory worker, shared how her long-term insomnia and neurasthenia were gone, helping her find joy in life again.

I listened, an inner conflict between my medical knowledge and these incredible realities stirring within me. Clearly, these cases went far beyond the explanatory power of modern medicine, which usually focuses only on the physical body. But I could not deny the health and cheerful spirit radiating from the very people telling the stories. They did not seem to be exaggerating or fabricating anything. Moreover, they all emphasized a common point: health improvements always went hand in hand with the process of improving their mind-heart nature, of living according to the principles of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. It seemed there was a very close, profound connection between one's mental state, morality, and physical health that our science had not yet touched upon.

However, the stories that moved and impressed Qing Ling and me the most were the sharings about the changes in their moral character, in their way of life.

There was a man named Qiang, who was said to have been a heavy alcoholic and a troublemaker in the neighborhood. He recounted his unsavory past with a sincere, slightly embarrassed tone, telling of how he had made his wife and children suffer and caused his neighbors to avoid him. "Back then, I lived without thinking of tomorrow. As soon as I had money, I drank, and when I was drunk, I'd cause trouble. My wife cried more times than I can count," he said. "Fortunately,

someone introduced me to Falun Gong. Reading the book '*Zhuan Falun*,' it was like I woke up. I understood that the cause of my suffering was the karma created from my past misdeeds, and to change, I had to cultivate my mind-heart nature and be a good person." He said the process of quitting alcohol and changing his temperament was very difficult, but by persevering in reading the book, doing the exercises, and always reminding himself to be truthful, compassionate, and forbearing, he gradually succeeded. Now, Mr. Qiang had completely given up alcohol, become a responsible husband and father, and lived harmoniously with everyone. Looking at his gentle demeanor and modest speech now, it was hard to imagine the person he used to be.

Uncle Liu also once shared that he used to be someone who cared a lot about fame and gain at work, often calculating his own interests, and sometimes even using unfair means to compete with colleagues. "After learning the Great Law, I understood that the things ordinary people fight for their whole lives are actually just illusions," he said with a pensive look. "What one can truly carry with them is karma and virtue. As a person, you have to live truthfully and kindly, and always think of others first in everything you do. So I changed my perspective, stopped competing, worked diligently, and

treated people more sincerely. My heart became tranquil, and life felt much lighter."

Qing Ling listened to these stories with special attention. She told me that the moral values they were practicing, such as sincerity, kindness, and forbearance, though similar to the teachings in traditional Chinese culture she had studied, were expressed here in a much more practical, specific, and systematic way. It was not just theory in books, but something each person strove to follow in every thought, word, and deed, every day.

Every story, every person we met in this small group, was a living testimony. They did not need to use any profound words to convince us. The positive changes in their health, the growth in their moral character, the peace and kindness that radiated from them were the most persuasive proof of the wonder of Falun Dafa. These stories and these people gave us more strength, solidified our faith, and encouraged us to take our first steps on the path of cultivation with greater determination.

Internalizing the Principles of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance

The stories we heard about the changes in health and lifestyle were truly impressive. But what drew Qing Ling and me in and made us want to learn more was the common thread that ran through all of them: the principle of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. These three words were clearly not just a slogan, but the true foundation for all the positive changes we saw in them.

During the Fa-study sessions or when talking with Uncle Liu and the others, we didn't hear them analyze these three words in any high-level way. Instead, we heard them recount how they had tried to measure themselves against Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance in very specific life situations.

We realized that, to them, Truthfulness (*Zhen*) was not simply about not telling lies, but also about being true to one's own heart, being upright and not deceitful in everything one does. Mr. Qiang, the former alcoholic, shared that his first step toward change was to truthfully acknowledge his own mistakes, without evading or blaming anyone else.

Compassion (*Shan*), from their stories, was not just about doing ordinary good deeds. It was about tolerance, about always trying to think of others first, even when one might be at a disadvantage. Mrs. Chen told of a time when there was a mistake and she was shorted on her

pension payment. Instead of getting angry or demanding it back, she thought that perhaps the other person was also facing difficulties, so she chose to let it go gracefully. "I'm cultivating Compassion; I can't make things difficult for someone over a little money and disturb my own peace of mind," she said with a kind smile.

And Forbearance (*Ren*), perhaps, was what we heard them mention most when facing difficulties. It was not a weak submission, but a remarkable inner strength. We heard Ms. Hong tell of how she had endured the ridicule of her former colleagues when they learned she practiced Falun Gong, not arguing back but just quietly doing her job well. We heard Uncle Liu tell of how he had forborne unfair situations at work in the past, not competing but seeing it as an opportunity to pay off karma and rectify himself. It seemed that, to them, every conflict, every unfavorable event, was a "test," an occasion to practice Forbearance, to regain composure and view the problem from a cultivator's perspective.

What particularly caught our attention was their constant emphasis on "looking inward" when encountering problems. Instead of pointing fingers and blaming others, they would turn inward and ask themselves: "Did I do something wrong?" "Do I have some bad attachment (like competitiveness, jealousy, fear...) that caused me to encounter this?" This way of looking at problems was very strange to us, and we

admired it greatly. It was completely different from the common habit of always finding fault with others first.

Listening to these sincere and simple sharings, watching how they treated each other and everyone on a daily basis, Qing Ling and I gradually came to feel the depth of the principle of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. It was no longer a set of foreign words, but came alive through each person, each story. We began to look at ourselves, realizing how many shortcomings we had, how many selfish thoughts, how many hot-tempered reactions had become habits.

An urge to change, to follow these good things, began to form in our minds. We understood that the path ahead was to constantly strive to practice, to live by these three golden words. That was the true core of cultivation, the key to becoming a better person, to returning to one's true nature. The light of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, though only just revealed through these initial experiences, was enough to illuminate our way and give us a firmer faith in the path we had chosen.

* * *

CHAPTER 10: UNDER THE RED SUN - THE HIDDEN TRUTH

The First Ripples of Unease

After about three weeks in Shanghai, having integrated into the small group of Uncle Liu and his fellow practitioners, we had grown closer and more attached to them, to these kind-hearted people we were so fortunate to meet. The exercise sessions at Uncle Liu's home or at other discreet locations, along with the evening Fa-study and sharing sessions, had become an indispensable part of our daily life here. These activities brought us peace of mind and great hope. However, just when we were

feeling most at ease, the first signs of unease began to quietly appear, as if heralding something ominous to come.

The first thing we noticed was the change in the exercise meetups. The number of participants would sometimes inexplicably decrease. There were familiar faces we wouldn't see for several days in a row. Then one morning, Uncle Liu would call to say that day's practice was temporarily canceled, or sometimes the meeting place would have to be changed abruptly with no clear explanation, just a general "it's more convenient" or "something urgent came up."

Not only that, but the demeanor of some of the practitioners also seemed to become more reserved. The lively, open conversations after Fa-study were now sometimes interrupted by somewhat wary glances around the room, or someone would suddenly lower their voice when mentioning certain topics. Uncle Liu, the retired engineer who had always been so enthusiastic and forthright, once during a private conversation, I noticed him occasionally glancing out the window, his eyes holding a flicker of anxiety I had never seen before. He didn't say anything directly, but his manner gave me a sense of unease for reasons I couldn't pinpoint.

One afternoon, as Qing Ling and I were taking a walk near Uncle Liu's neighborhood, I noticed a man in

plainclothes, looking rather unfamiliar, loitering at the opposite street corner. He wasn't doing anything specific, just leaning against a wall, his eyes occasionally darting towards Uncle Liu's residential complex. It could have been a coincidence, but in this context, the sight made me a little suspicious. Qing Ling noticed too, and she gently tightened her grip on my hand.

It was clear that something was happening covertly that we were not yet aware of. The initial serene and open atmosphere seemed to be veiled by a thin mist of anxiety and caution.

Once, during a group Fa-study at Uncle Liu's house (the number of participants that day was also noticeably smaller than in the beginning), as we were sharing our understandings from the book, the kind Mrs. Chen suddenly sighed and said softly, as if to herself, "The weather seems like it's about to change..."

I asked in surprise, "The weather? I think it's still quite nice, ma'am."

Mrs. Chen just gave a slight, somewhat unnatural smile and offered no further explanation. Uncle Liu, sitting beside her, gave a light cough, then looked at us, his voice lowering. "You two are foreigners, and you've just arrived, so there are many things you may not know. Here... things are not as simple as they seem. It's not

always easy to be a good person. You two... should be a little careful."

The veiled, meaningful words of Uncle Liu and Mrs. Chen only deepened my sense of unease. Be careful of what? Why wasn't it easy to be a good person? The questions spun in my head, but I sensed that this was not the time or place to ask more. There was some invisible curtain hiding the truth, a truth that our new friends were apparently facing every day, while we had only just touched its edge. These signs of unease, though still vague, were enough to signal that our journey of discovery was about to enter a dangerous and more challenging turn.

Whispers of the Persecution

The vague warnings and the increasingly cautious atmosphere caused the unease in my heart and Qing Ling's to grow. Although we had vaguely sensed the danger and the "sensitive" nature of Falun Gong through the incident in the park and the difficulty of finding information online, we still couldn't grasp the full picture. The opportunity to understand better came one evening when we were again invited to Uncle Liu's

home. This time, the atmosphere was different. It was just Uncle Liu, Mrs. Chen, and us. The small room seemed quieter than usual; tea was already prepared on the table, but no one seemed to want to touch it.

The silence stretched for a moment, then Uncle Liu looked directly at us. His gaze no longer held the scrutiny of our first meeting, but was filled with a seriousness and a certain heaviness. He sighed, as if he had just made a difficult decision.

"You two," he began, his voice deeper and slower than usual. "These past few days, you seem to have been troubled, and perhaps you've also sensed some unusual things. We see you as family and don't want to hide things, but speaking of these matters, we're also afraid of causing you more worry."

Qing Ling and I held our breath, knowing that what we were about to hear would likely clarify what we had vaguely known and sensed.

Uncle Liu continued, "As you already know from the book '*Zhuan Falun*,' Falun Gong, or Falun Dafa, is a high-level cultivation practice of the Buddha School that teaches people to live according to Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, bringing great benefits to both health and spirit. Previously, there were nearly one

hundred million people practicing it here in China, even more than the number of Communist Party members."

He paused, taking a small sip of tea. "But... as you may have sensed from the incident with the fellow practitioner who gave you the book, since July 20, 1999, everything completely changed." His voice dropped, and I could hear a suppressed pain in it. "The head of the Chinese Communist Party at the time, Jiang Zemin, out of personal jealousy and an irrational fear of Falun Gong's rapid growth, afraid that the people would believe in Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance more than the Party, disregarded the disagreement of many others in the Politburo and ordered the launch of an extremely brutal and senseless persecution nationwide, targeting Falun Gong and everyone who practiced it."

Hearing Uncle Liu state it so clearly, the pieces of information we had gathered before began to connect. Although we were no longer surprised that there was a persecution, hearing an insider, someone we respected, affirm "an extremely brutal and senseless persecution nationwide," the scale of the issue began to appear much larger than we could have imagined.

"So what we read online in the US, and what we witnessed in the park that day... it's all true, and even much more serious, isn't it, Uncle?" Qing Ling asked softly, her voice unable to hide her shock at the

magnitude of the situation. "I still can't understand why they would resort to such brutal measures against a peaceful practice that only teaches people to be good."

Uncle Liu shook his head, a look of sadness on his face. "To the Communist Party, anything not under their absolute control, any ideology that has a great influence on the people but is not the Party's, is considered a threat to their power. They cannot accept people having faith in gods and Buddhas, in universal values like Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, because it goes against their atheist and struggle-based nature."

He went on to describe how the state's massive propaganda machine had been systematically used to slander and defame Falun Gong. "They used all media channels, from TV and radio to newspapers and the internet... to broadcast fabrications day and night. They labeled Falun Gong an 'evil cult,' concocting all sorts of evil stories to incite hatred among the uninformed public, brainwashing an entire generation. They even staged the 'self-immolation hoax' in Tiananmen Square and blamed it on Falun Gong, a clumsy play that nonetheless deceived many people both at home and abroad."

Mrs. Chen, sitting beside him, her eyes having turned red at some point, added softly, her voice choked with emotion, "Millions of our fellow practitioners have been arbitrarily arrested and harassed in countless ways just

for refusing to give up their belief in Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. Their homes were ransacked at any time of day or night, Dafa books were confiscated and destroyed, they were fired from their jobs, their children were discriminated against in school, and their families were monitored and pressured..."

Every word from Uncle Liu and Mrs. Chen, though spoken calmly, was like a knife stabbing at my heart. The scale and evil of this persecution far exceeded what I could have previously imagined. This was no longer a "sensitive" issue or "being given a hard time"; this was a deliberate, systematic, and incredibly brutal campaign to eradicate a faith. How could the gentle, kind people we knew, who only wanted to live better lives according to Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, be branded an "evil cult" and have to endure such terrible things?

I looked at Qing Ling and saw her face had turned pale, her eyes filled with horror and indignation. The beautiful spiritual values we had just found and cherished were now revealed to be a target for deliberate trampling and destruction by state power.

"The scale of it... it's just unimaginable," I said, trying to keep my voice steady but unable to hide its tremor. "What we knew before was only a very small part."

"We understand this is very difficult for you to accept and fully comprehend, especially coming from a free environment," Uncle Liu said, his voice full of sympathy. "But this is the painful truth that has been happening in this country for over twenty years. This is also why we must be extremely cautious in everything we do. We are not telling you this to scare you, but so you can better understand the real situation that we and millions of other practitioners are facing every day."

The room fell silent again, but this time it was a heavy, suffocating silence, thick with the brutal truth that had just been laid bare. Questions about the true scale of the persecution, its level of brutality, and the dangers our new friends were facing swirled in my head. What Uncle Liu and Mrs. Chen had just told us was only a part of a much larger, darker picture, and I knew we had to find out more.

Evidence of Brutality and Absurdity

The initial accounts of the persecution from Uncle Liu and Mrs. Chen left Qing Ling and me truly stunned. For the next few days, my mind reeled with the horrific information. Could the truth really be so brutal? Could

there be some misunderstanding or exaggeration somewhere? My scientific mind still tried to find some rational explanation, but the images of the kind, sincere faces of the practitioners we had met kept coming back, a complete contradiction to the "evil cult" label they had been given.

A few days later, on another visit to Uncle Liu's home, seeing that we were still troubled by many doubts, he decided to speak more deeply. This time, there was also a middle-aged woman named Lan, whom we had not met before. Her face bore the lines of hardship, but her eyes shone with an unusual determination. Uncle Liu introduced her, saying that Lan had been imprisoned for several years just for refusing to give up her practice of Falun Gong.

Lan began to tell her story. Her voice was even, with no hint of resentment, but every word seemed to cut into the listener's heart. She spoke of the night the police stormed her home, ransacked it, and took her away right in front of her small child, who was screaming in terror. She spoke of the days in the detention center, and then the forced labor camp.

"They didn't treat us like human beings," she said softly. "They used every means to force us to renounce our faith in Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. They wanted us to write the 'three statements'—a guarantee to no

longer practice, a letter of repentance, and a statement denouncing other practitioners."

She described the torture that she and other practitioners had endured. Not in general terms, but with specific details that made us shudder. "They used electric batons on the most sensitive parts of our bodies. The sound of agonizing screams echoed through the hallways. They forced us to stand or sit motionless for days on end, without sleep; the moment we dozed off, we were mercilessly beaten. Some were hung up by their handcuffed wrists for hours until they fainted. Some were force-fed by having a hard plastic tube shoved through their nose into their stomach, then a mixture of food and filthy water was poured in, causing excruciating pain and terrible internal injuries..."

Hearing this, Qing Ling couldn't hold back; she covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes already filled with tears. My chest felt tight, a wave of indignation and disgust rising within me. These were not the actions of law enforcement officers; this was clearly a crime.

"The most painful thing wasn't just the physical torture," Lan continued, her voice faltering slightly. "It was the mental torture. They forced us to watch propaganda videos slandering Master and Dafa over and over again. They used the filthiest language to curse and humiliate

us. They tried every way to break our will and destroy our faith."

To show us more clearly, Uncle Liu carefully took out a thin folder, wrapped in several layers of cloth, from a locked cabinet. He opened it. Inside were a few old black-and-white photos, showing bruises and burns from electric batons on a person's body. There was also a carefully handwritten list, recording the names and addresses of some practitioners in the region who had been arrested, sentenced, or had disappeared without a trace over the years.

"This is just a very small part," Uncle Liu said, his voice full of sorrow. "There are countless others suffering in prisons and labor camps across the country. Many have been tortured to death, or have been secretly eliminated, their families never knowing the truth..."

Looking at those photos, those written words, hearing Lan's heart-wrenching and truthful account, any last remaining doubt in me vanished. The truth was laid bare—stark, brutal, and utterly absurd. On one side were kind people who only wanted to improve their health and elevate their morals according to the principles of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. On the other was an entire state machine, using the most brutal methods, from deceitful propaganda to savage torture, to destroy their faith.

This contrast pained my heart. How could such an absurdity exist? Where was the law? Where was justice? Where was human conscience? The worldview based on scientific logic and social order that I had once trusted seemed to be collapsing right before my eyes.

I looked at Qing Ling and saw her silently wiping away tears. The indignation was clear on her face. She was born in China, once proud of her homeland's long history and culture. Now, faced with this brutal truth, the pain and disappointment in her must be even greater than mine.

The conversation that day ended in a very heavy atmosphere. We left Uncle Liu's home with troubled hearts, carrying the burden of the truth we had just learned. The beautiful light of Falun Gong that we had just found was now shrouded in the terrifying darkness of the persecution. We knew we could no longer just watch from the outside. But what could we do? The question kept circling in my mind, leaving us feeling truly conflicted and torn.

Inner Turmoil and Facing the Truth

That night, Qing Ling and I could barely sleep. We returned to our hotel room, but our minds were heavy with what we had just heard and seen at Uncle Liu's home. The room was oppressively silent, with only Qing Ling's soft sighs and the pounding of my own heart in my chest. The truth about the persecution of Falun Gong, with its evidence of brutality and absurdity, had stunned us both, leaving a deep wound in our thoughts and emotions.

The initial shock gradually subsided, giving way to a chilling horror. I could not comprehend how a country like China, with its modern facade and the kind, simple people we had met, could have a state machine that would torture and kill its own peaceful citizens just because they held a different belief. My view of the world, built on scientific logic and a belief in a certain social order, seemed to be shattering. Light and darkness, good and evil, truth and lies... all swirled together painfully before my eyes.

I looked over at Qing Ling. My wife was sitting on the bed, hugging her knees, her eyes gazing out the window into the night. Her tears had dried, but the pain and indignation were still etched in her eyes. I knew she was in more pain than I was. This was the homeland where she was born, the culture she loved and often taught. To be confronted with the reality that the authorities here were trampling on the finest moral values, destroying

the kindest of people, was surely a great trauma and disappointment.

"How could they do this, Ming?" Qing Ling's voice broke the silence, faint yet full of indignation. "People like Uncle Liu, Mrs. Chen, Sister Lan... they just want to be good people. Why are they treated like enemies?"

I didn't know how to answer. All reason became meaningless in the face of such extreme absurdity.

Then, fear began to creep in, seizing my mind. We were foreigners, but we had been in close contact with Falun Gong practitioners. We had learned the exercises, participated in group Fa-study, and held a copy of "*Zhuan Falun*." Were we being watched? Did knowing this truth put us in danger? The worry for our own safety began to rise.

But immediately, a sense of shame washed over me. We had only known about this for a few days, and fear was already making us anxious. What about our new friends? They had been living with this fear for so many years. They had faced the risk of being arrested, tortured, or even killed at any moment. Yet they still held fast to their beliefs, still tried to live with kindness, still helped others. Compared to them, our fear felt so small and somewhat selfish.

A fierce struggle raged in my mind. One part of my reason told me to leave this place immediately, to return to the safety of the US. China was too dangerous; we shouldn't get involved. But another part, the part of my conscience and nascent faith in Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, would not let me turn a blind eye. We had been helped by them, trusted by them with the truth. To leave now would be nothing short of cowardice, a betrayal of their kindness, a betrayal of the very values we had just begun to learn.

What were we to do? Pretend we knew nothing and quietly leave? Or stay, face the danger, and find a way to help them within our capacity? What could we even do? We were just two ordinary foreigners, with no power, no connections here.

Light and darkness. Safety and conscience. Fleeing and confronting. This turmoil made my head spin. This was no longer a simple cultural exploration trip. We had been drawn into the middle of a fierce confrontation between good and evil, between righteousness and the wickedness of power. And we had to choose. The truth had been revealed, and now, we had to face it, to face our own hearts, to decide the path forward.

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CHAPTER 11: TEARS IN A STORMY NIGHT - A FAMILY'S TRAGEDY

A Small, Peaceful Family Before the Storm

After the shock of learning more about the brutal truth of the persecution, Qing Ling and I felt our hearts grow heavy. We temporarily participated less in the group Fa-study sessions, partly to have more time for our own thoughts, and partly to avoid causing unnecessary trouble for everyone in what seemed to be an increasingly tense situation. However, there was one family with whom we still kept in regular contact, partly out of sincere affection, and partly because their little

daughter was very attached to Qing Ling. That was the family of Kang Yu and Chen Mai.

We met them during our first Fa-study sessions at Uncle Liu's home. Kang Yu was about thirty years old, a skilled carpenter with a sturdy build, a simple way of speaking, but eyes that always shone with sincerity. His wife, Chen Mai, was a former elementary school teacher (I guessed she had likely left her job because of her cultivation), with a very gentle face and a soft voice. They had a little daughter named Xiao Lian, about three years old, chubby and incredibly adorable with big, round, dark eyes.

Their small family lived in a simple apartment in a residential complex on the outskirts of the city. They were by no means wealthy, but their home was always filled with laughter and a warm atmosphere. Both Kang Yu and Mai were very diligent Falun Gong practitioners. Their belief in Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance was evident in their every gesture, word, and the way they treated everyone. They lived simply, were friendly with their neighbors, and were always ready to help others if they could.

We were invited to their home for dinner a few times. They were just simple meals with a few homegrown vegetables and tofu, but the atmosphere was incredibly cozy. Kang Yu would often tell funny stories from his

work, Mai would gently care for their daughter, and little Xiao Lian would chatter away, sometimes running to Qing Ling's lap to ask for a story. Looking at them, I could feel a very simple, genuine happiness, a peace that radiated from the very souls of people who were striving to live a good life.

Little Xiao Lian was especially fond of Qing Ling. Perhaps because Qing Ling also loved children very much and was always patient in playing with her and reading her stories. Every time we visited, Xiao Lian would squeal with delight, run out to hug Qing Ling's legs, and ask "Auntie Ling" to hold her. The image of that innocent, pure little girl was like a warm point of light in the increasingly oppressive atmosphere we were sensing in this place.

Because, parallel to the peace in that small family, we knew that the shadow of the persecution was drawing ever closer. Through the incomplete accounts of other practitioners, through the scarce information we could find when trying to circumvent the firewall, we knew that the situation in many places was becoming very tense. There were new waves of arrests, and harassment of practitioners was becoming more frequent. Even here in Shanghai, though it seemed calmer than some other places we had heard about, an undercurrent of anxiety was palpable.

We could see the fleeting worry in Kang Yu's and Mai's eyes whenever the general situation was inadvertently mentioned. They were well aware of the dangers they and their fellow practitioners faced. But instead of being afraid or evasive, they seemed even more resolute in their faith. They still quietly read the books and did the exercises at home every day, and still taught their daughter with kindness and virtue.

"We haven't done anything wrong," Kang Yu once told me in a private conversation, his voice deep but very firm. "We just want to be good people according to Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. Dafa has brought my family so many good things; how could we give it up just because of slander and threats?"

Their steadfastness made us both admire and worry for them. How long could this fragile peace last? Could this small, happy family withstand the storm that was drawing ever nearer? Looking at Xiao Lian's innocent smile, at Mai's gentle eyes and Kang Yu's resolute expression, an indescribable sense of foreboding rose in my heart. I could only silently pray for their safety, even though my reason told me that in this situation, a prayer seemed all too fragile.

The Brutal Midnight Raid

My sense of foreboding about Kang Yu's family, terrifyingly, came true, and in a way more sudden and brutal than I could have ever imagined.

That night, I tossed and turned, unable to sleep. Perhaps the thoughts of the persecution, of the dangers the practitioners faced, kept haunting my mind. The summer night in Shanghai was quite sultry; despite the air conditioning in our hotel room, I still felt suffocated. At around one in the morning, unable to bear it any longer, I quietly went out onto the balcony to get some night air. Our hotel was not very close to Kang Yu's residential complex, a few hundred meters away at least, but from our high-floor balcony, I could still see a part of that area.

As I stood there looking into the distance, trying to push away the heavy thoughts, I was suddenly startled to see the lights in Kang Yu's apartment blaze on, unnaturally bright in the dead of night. Immediately after, though the distance muffled much of the sound, I could vaguely perceive loud, unusual noises—something like the banging of a door, indistinct shouting, and the flickering movement of figures inside the lit window. My heart clenched. A cold chill ran down my spine. I rushed back inside to wake Qing Ling, who had also been stirred by

my movements. "Ling, something's wrong! I think... I think it's Kang Yu's apartment!"

Without a moment's hesitation, we quickly threw on some clothes, quietly left the hotel, and hurried towards Kang Yu's residential complex. We didn't dare get too close, only hiding behind a large tree at the end of the building, from where we could see his apartment a few dozen meters away.

Under the dim yellow streetlights, the scene before us left us frozen in shock. The door to the small apartment of Kang Yu's family had been smashed open, torn from its hinges. Several men in police uniforms and some thuggish-looking men in plainclothes were blocking the entrance. Inside the apartment, the lights were on full blast; the sounds of shouting and the heart-wrenching cries of little Xiao Lian echoed out.

Then we saw them drag Kang Yu outside. He was only in thin pajamas, his hands twisted behind his back, his face seemingly bruised. He struggled, his eyes looking back at the apartment, filled with pain and helplessness. Immediately after, Chen Mai was also dragged out by two women in plainclothes, her hair disheveled, her face dazed. She tried to call her daughter's name but was gagged by one of them.

"Move it! Get in the van!" one of the uniformed men shouted, shoving Kang Yu and Mai towards a small, windowless, unlicensed van parked nearby.

Kang Yu tried to turn his head one last time, shouting, "Falun Dafa is good! Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance is good! Down with the persecution!"

Instantly, a policeman jabbed the butt of his rifle hard into Kang Yu's stomach, causing him to double over in pain. They brutally pushed both of them into the back of the van and slammed the door shut. The vehicle roared to life and sped off into the night, leaving behind an empty space and the piercing cries of little Xiao Lian still echoing from the ransacked apartment.

The remaining men continued to rummage inside for a while longer. We saw them carry out several boxes of things, probably Dafa books and related materials, and throw them into another vehicle. After taking what they wanted, they too quickly got in the car and left, leaving behind the apartment with its shattered door, the lights still on, and the cries of a deserted child.

The entire incident took place in less than half an hour, as swift and brutal as a nightmare. In the surrounding apartments, all doors remained shut; no one dared to peek out. Perhaps they were too used to such scenes, or fear had paralyzed them into inaction. An atmosphere of

terror enveloped the entire residential complex, cold and frightening.

Qing Ling and I stood frozen behind the tree, our bodies trembling. Not from the cold of the night, but from the horror and indignation boiling in our chests. We had witnessed firsthand the brutality, the inhumanity of the so-called "people's government." They had brazenly broken into a home in the middle of the night, smashing the door, beating and arresting people like animals, leaving behind a three-year-old child in utter terror.

My heart ached with a sense of powerlessness. We could do nothing to help them. We were just weak outsiders, witnessing a tragedy unfold without being able to do anything more. The indignation towards this regime rose up, choking me. And the worry for the fate of Kang Yu, Mai, and especially little Xiao Lian, weighed on my mind like a great stone. What would happen to them? And that poor child, now alone in the empty apartment, what would become of her? Her cries were like daggers stabbing at our hearts, haunting and tormenting us without end.

Bad News After Bad News - The Parents Disappear

After that horrifying night witnessing Kang Yu's family being taken away, anxiety and unease weighed heavily on our minds and on those of the other practitioners we knew. The immediate task was to find out where Kang Yu and Chen Mai had been taken and what their situation was.

However, finding information in such circumstances was like looking for a needle in a haystack, and it was also extremely dangerous. The police stations and detention centers would never give any information to families, especially in cases considered to be related to Falun Gong. Any attempt to inquire could lead to suspicion and bring more trouble.

Uncle Liu and a few older, more experienced practitioners tried to discreetly and carefully inquire through informal channels. They asked acquaintances working in low-level government agencies or inquired with practitioners in neighboring areas to see if anyone knew anything. Each day passed in anxious waiting. We took turns looking after little Xiao Lian. She was temporarily being cared for during the day by a kind but also very frightened neighboring family. We tried to comfort and play with her, but Xiao Lian's dazed, fearful

eyes and her innocent question, "Where are Mommy and Daddy?" only made our hearts ache more.

About a week after that terrible night, the first piece of bad news arrived. Uncle Liu came to us with a distraught face, his eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep and worry. He had received news from a reliable source inside the detention center (perhaps someone with a conscience who couldn't bear the cruelty and had secretly passed the word out). Kang Yu... was gone.

"They said... they said Yu 'died suddenly' during an interrogation," Uncle Liu's voice broke, choked with emotion. "But the person who sent the news said that a few days before, he had been brutally tortured for refusing to confess, for refusing to write the 'three statements.' He had steadfastly maintained that Falun Dafa is good."

My heart felt like it had stopped. Kang Yu, the simple, healthy carpenter we had just met, could "die suddenly" after only a week in detention? It was too absurd.

But something more horrifying was yet to come. Uncle Liu lowered his voice to almost a whisper, his eyes filled with an indescribable indignation and disgust. "That person also said... before he died, Yu and a few others were taken for a very thorough 'health check,' but at a place that didn't look like a normal hospital. Then... his

body was returned very quickly, the family wasn't allowed to examine it closely, but they saw strange stitches on his abdomen... They suspect..."

Uncle Liu didn't finish the sentence, but Qing Ling and I understood immediately. The horrific suspicion of live organ harvesting from healthy Falun Gong practitioners—a crime against humanity that we had heard whispers of but had never dared to believe was real—now loomed clearly and grotesquely before us. They had killed Kang Yu, not only for his faith, but possibly also for his healthy organs.

A wave of nausea and a chilling cold ran through me. The brutality of this regime had surpassed all limits of human imagination. This was no longer normal political or religious persecution; this was the destruction of humanity, the most barbaric of crimes. Qing Ling collapsed into a chair, her hands covering her face as she sobbed uncontrollably. She couldn't bear this overwhelmingly cruel truth.

The pain of losing a fellow practitioner had not yet subsided when, a few weeks later, there was news about Chen Mai. Through a lawyer with a conscience (who didn't dare to publicly take on Falun Gong cases but still secretly helped to find information), we learned that Mai had been sentenced to eight years in prison on the trumped-up charge of "using a cult to undermine law

enforcement." Immediately after the perfunctory, swift trial, she was transferred to a women's prison in some remote, mountainous province. From then on, all information about her ceased. Family was not allowed to visit, and letters were blocked. It was as if she had completely vanished from this world, her fate unknown.

Bad news followed bad news. In just a short time, a happy family had been completely shattered. The husband was tortured to death, suspected of being a victim of organ harvesting. The wife was imprisoned and disappeared without a trace, with no knowing when she might return. All that was left was a small, helpless daughter, abandoned in a world full of injustice. The tragedy of Kang Yu and Chen Mai's family was like a deep, gaping wound, laying bare the evil and inhuman nature of the persecution of Falun Gong. It was no longer just stories we heard or numbers in a report, but the real, present pain, the tears and blood of people of flesh and blood whom we had known and cherished. This truth was etched into our minds, an indelible mark, and at the same time, it posed an urgent question: What were we to do for little Xiao Lian, that poor, orphaned child?

The Abandoned Child and a Decision from the Heart

After the heartbreaking news about the fate of Kang Yu and Chen Mai was confirmed, a painful question hung in the air: Who would take care of little Xiao Lian? The three-year-old child had lost both her father and mother in the most brutal of circumstances, becoming a tiny, helpless soul in the midst of a storm.

The kind neighboring family, though they pitied the little girl, clearly could not shelter her for long. The fear from witnessing the brutal midnight raid still haunted them. They lived in anxiety, afraid of being implicated for helping the child of those considered "Falun Gong elements." In a conversation with Uncle Liu, they expressed their difficult position and worry, hinting that they might have to send Xiao Lian to an orphanage or find some other relative—options that everyone knew were extremely slim and full of risks for the future of a child like her.

Every time Qing Ling and I visited Xiao Lian, our hearts felt as if they were being squeezed. She was no longer the lively, cheerful little girl she used to be. Now, she often sat huddled in a corner, her big, round eyes always wide with fear and confusion, staring into an empty space. She spoke little, smiled little, and would sometimes cry out "Daddy! Mommy!" in her sleep, then

wake up startled, sobbing inconsolably. The image of this innocent, pure child caught in the brutal vortex of the persecution, having lost everything simply because of her parents' faith, cut a wound of indescribable pain and indignation in our hearts.

We could not turn a blind eye. The principle of Compassion (*Shan*) that we were trying to learn, and the most basic human empathy, would not allow us to turn our backs on Xiao Lian's tragic situation. Sending her to an orphanage, where she could be stigmatized and mistreated, was something we could not accept.

However, the decision to reach out and help came with enormous risks. We were foreigners, and suddenly adopting a Chinese child without proper documentation in such a sensitive situation was like putting ourselves directly in the authorities' line of sight. We could be suspected, monitored, even arrested or deported. Our own safety, our plans to return to the US, could all be seriously jeopardized. That fear was very real; it crept into every thought, making us hesitate and feel torn.

That evening, after leaving the neighbor's home where Xiao Lian was staying temporarily, our spirits were heavy. We walked back to our hotel in silence, each pursuing our own thoughts but all focused on this same difficult problem. Back in the room, we sat facing each

other for a long time, saying nothing, with only the sound of soft sighs.

Suddenly, Qing Ling looked up, her eyes meeting mine directly. Her usual hesitation was gone, replaced by an extraordinary determination, a resolve that seemed to come from the depths of her soul.

"Ming," she said, her voice trembling but very clear and strong. "I've thought it over. I... I cannot abandon that little girl. Seeing her like this, my heart aches. We have to do something for her. No matter how dangerous it is, I cannot let Xiao Lian face this bleak future alone."

Qing Ling's words were like an electric current running through me. It wasn't a question seeking my opinion, but a firm declaration, a decision formed from deep Compassion, from the love she had perhaps felt through the Great Law and the urging of her conscience when faced with Xiao Lian's pain. The conflict within me instantly dissolved, replaced by agreement and a sense of admiration for my wife's heart.

"I understand," I replied, my voice also full of emotion, taking her hand tightly in mine. "You've made the right decision. We will do this together. We will bring Xiao Lian home, care for her, and protect her."

The final decision was made, not by calculating the pros and cons of our own safety, but by the powerful impulse of our hearts, by our compassion for others, and by our faith in the values of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance that we were learning. Though we knew the road ahead was fraught with difficulties and constant danger, looking into Qing Ling's determined eyes, I felt an unusual sense of resolve.

The very next day, we informed Uncle Liu and the neighboring family of our decision. At first, they were a bit stunned and couldn't help but worry for the safety of two foreigners like us, but then they were moved and understood our intentions. With their discreet help, we prepared everything necessary to bring Xiao Lian to our hotel room.

When we arrived, Xiao Lian was still huddled in a corner, her eyes full of fear. It was Qing Ling who gently approached, crouched down to her eye level, smiled kindly, and opened her arms. "Sweet Xiao Lian, come to Auntie," Qing Ling's voice was warm and gentle.

The little girl stared at Qing Ling for a few seconds, then, as if sensing the safety and genuine love radiating from my wife, she timidly stood up, took tiny steps towards Qing Ling, and nestled into her embrace. The moment Qing Ling held Xiao Lian tightly, her hand gently stroking the child's tangled hair, patting her small,

trembling back, I saw a saintly beauty on Qing Ling's face, a boundless love and an extraordinary strength.

Looking at that image, an image I would never forget, I understood that our lives had truly turned a new page. The supposedly simple three-month summer trip, scheduled to end in late August, had now stretched to nearly the end of October. Initially, we had decided to stay longer only to delve deeper into this path of cultivation, but now, with Xiao Lian's arrival, this decision would surely keep us in this turbulent land for much longer, for how long, we did not know. We were no longer just tourists. We had become reluctant parents, shouldering the sacred responsibility of sheltering and protecting a small soul who had just escaped a tragic fate. This decision from the heart, born from Qing Ling's Compassion and courage, and carried out with our mutual consent, was the most profound and genuine lesson in practicing Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance we could have had amidst adversity. And it officially set us on a new journey, one full of danger but also full of meaning: the journey to find a way for the three of us to survive amidst the storm of the persecution.

* * *

CHAPTER 12: THROUGH THE DARK NIGHT - CONFRONTATION AND ESCAPE

Making a Plan and Beginning the Escape

The moment Qing Ling held Xiao Lian in her arms was also the moment we understood with absolute clarity that the relative safety we had in Shanghai was gone. Our act of taking in Xiao Lian—the child of two Falun Gong practitioners who had just been arrested, one dead, one missing—would certainly not escape the notice of the security apparatus. Though they hadn't acted yet, I

had a very clear feeling that our every move since taking in Xiao Lian was likely already under their watch. To stay in this hotel for even one more day was too dangerous, not only for us, but also for Xiao Lian and for those who had helped us, like Uncle Liu.

That night, after Xiao Lian had fallen asleep from exhaustion in Qing Ling's arms, we sat in the hotel room, whispering as we discussed a plan. The situation was urgent.

"We have to leave immediately, tonight or by dawn tomorrow at the latest," I said, trying to keep my voice calm though my heart was pounding. "Staying here is no different from waiting for them to come and arrest us."

Qing Ling nodded in agreement, her face pale but her eyes very resolute. "Where do we go now?"

"There's only one option," I replied. "We have to find a way to get to the U.S. Consulate. Fortunately, there is one right here in Shanghai. That will be our immediate goal."

Qing Ling seemed a little relieved to know we wouldn't have to travel too far right away, but then she grew worried again. "But how can we get there safely? It's not close to the consulate area from here, and if they've really taken notice of us..."

She was right. Even though our target was within the same city, traveling with Xiao Lian, who had no valid papers, was very risky if we were checked. "We still have to be extremely careful," I said. "Perhaps we won't go straight to the consulate right away, but find another temporary, discreet place to stay in a different district of the city, to monitor the situation and find the right time. We'll have to use the least-monitored means of transport, maybe short taxi rides or roundabout bus routes, trying to avoid central areas with a heavy police presence."

A preliminary plan was drawn up: Leave this hotel tonight or in the early hours of the morning. Find a new, more discreet temporary lodging, possibly in a more suburban area of Shanghai. From there, we would find a way to contact or scout out the route to the U.S. Consulate as safely as possible, while trying not to attract any more attention.

Before leaving, I tried to contact Uncle Liu again very carefully, using a simple coded message we had agreed upon beforehand (using only allusive words, not speaking directly), informing him of our situation and our plan. I also asked if he could possibly alert the network of practitioners in other regions, so they could assist us if needed on our journey, should the situation worsen and we be forced to flee Shanghai. We knew this was a risky request for Uncle Liu, but in this situation, we had no other choice.

The preparations were swift and silent in the darkness. We packed only the barest essentials into two small backpacks: a few changes of clothes, what little cash we had left, our passports, and of course, the coverless copy of "*Zhuan Falun*" that we always carried with us. Qing Ling also prepared some milk powder, crackers, and a few small outfits for Xiao Lian that we had hastily bought a few days before.

Little Xiao Lian was still sound asleep, probably exhausted from the terrifying events. Qing Ling gently lifted her and wrapped her tightly in a large shawl. We turned off the lights, locked the hotel room door one last time, and then slipped away under the cover of night.

The streets of Shanghai still had some light late at night, but the small alleys were deserted. Every sudden noise made us jump. I constantly had the uneasy feeling that someone was watching, though I tried not to show it. We walked a fair distance to a bus station on the edge of the city, where buses ran long routes within the city and to the outer districts.

Fortunately, a night bus was about to depart for a suburban district we had targeted as our temporary hiding place. We bought tickets, trying to look as normal as possible, then quickly boarded, choosing two seats at the very back, hidden in the shadows. Qing Ling held

Xiao Lian tightly, softly humming familiar lullabies to keep her asleep.

As the bus lumbered into motion, leaving the bustling but treacherous city center behind, I let out a small sigh of relief, but only a temporary one. Looking out the window, the thick darkness was like the uncertain future that awaited us. The perilous escape of the three of us, though only just beginning within the confines of this city, had started. We didn't know what we would face, didn't know if we could reach the consulate safely. Only one thing was certain: we had to protect Xiao Lian at all costs, and we had to have faith in the help of the Great Law and the kind hearts on this difficult path.

A Network of Kindness Amidst Danger

Our journey to find a new safe haven within the vast city of Shanghai was a series of tense and exhausting days. After leaving the old hotel on the night bus to the suburbs, we had to keep moving, avoiding staying in one place for too long. Finding a discreet guesthouse that didn't demand strict documentation, while also ensuring Xiao Lian's safety, was no simple task. Every time we had to pass through areas with police patrols, even just for routine traffic checks, my heart would pound. Qing

Ling and I had to maintain the calmest expressions possible; Qing Ling would often hold the sleeping or pretending-to-be-asleep Xiao Lian tightly, hoping the presence of a child would make them pay less attention.

Our food consisted mainly of things bought hastily from convenience stores or small roadside eateries. Little Xiao Lian, though still young, seemed to sense the abnormality and the tense atmosphere. She was much more well-behaved than usual, crying and fussing less, just quietly nestling into Qing Ling's arms, occasionally looking out with dazed eyes at the unfamiliar scenery of the new streets passing by. Seeing her like that only strengthened our resolve to quickly find a safe solution.

In those first difficult days, when at times we felt completely alone, we never expected that our coded message to Uncle Liu would actually work. An invisible network of kindness and support, connected by a shared faith in Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, was quietly operating right here in Shanghai to help us.

When we were struggling to find a temporary place to stay in another district, after a day of moving in circles and starting to feel a bit desperate, a middle-aged woman with a kind face suddenly approached us at a deserted bus stop. She didn't say much, just handed Qing Ling a small slip of paper with an address

and said softly, "Are you friends of Uncle Liu? Follow me."

Though we were hesitant at first, not knowing if we could trust her, looking into her sincere eyes and calm demeanor, we decided to take a chance. She led us to a small apartment deep in a quiet alley, far from the main roads. It was her home. That night, for the first time after days of constant moving, we had a warm place to sleep, a hot meal, and a temporary sense of security. She didn't ask much about our situation, just quietly helped. She prepared some dried food for us to take with us, gave Xiao Lian a few sweet cakes, and advised us on which routes to take the next day if we wanted to move again, to avoid checkpoints or areas with many plainclothes police.

"You can rest here for a day or two. This place is temporarily safe," she said before letting us rest. "Many of us have also gone through difficult times. We help where we can. Just believe in Master, believe in the Great Law, and everything will be alright."

That help did not come just once. In the following days in Shanghai, as we had to change our lodging several times to ensure safety, we received similar support from others in Uncle Liu's network. Sometimes it was a young man who met us at a pre-arranged spot and took us to his home for a night. Other times it was an elderly

couple who directed us to a small guesthouse where they knew the owner was a good person who wouldn't ask for too much paperwork. Once, we were even driven by a practitioner in his private car through some areas we were unfamiliar with, helping us to avoid potentially dangerous spots.

Each time we received such help, our hearts would swell with a deep gratitude. We knew that these people, these ordinary Falun Gong practitioners in the heart of Shanghai, were putting themselves and their families at considerable risk to help us—people they had only just heard of through a referral. They did it not for any personal gain, but simply out of Compassion, out of a sense of fellowship, and out of a belief in the righteousness of what they were doing. Their courage, calmness, and selflessness radiated an extraordinary spiritual strength, a complete contrast to the brutality and fear that this regime was trying to sow.

And it wasn't just Falun Gong practitioners. Sometimes we also received unexpected help from ordinary people in Shanghai, people who perhaps did not know or fully understand Falun Gong, but whose conscience and kindness still moved them to act. Once, when we were resting at a small roadside eatery, the owner saw that Xiao Lian looked tired and quietly brought her a bowl of hot congee without charging us. Another time, a taxi driver, seeing that we looked lost and were carrying a

small child, not only didn't take a roundabout route but also showed us the quickest, safest way to our destination.

These small acts of kindness, no matter who they came from, were like warm flames that warmed us in those anxious days, reinforcing our faith in the good nature of humanity, our belief that even in the darkest of circumstances, the light of Compassion still exists and spreads silently. That invisible network of kindness was a precious spiritual support, giving us more strength and hope to continue our journey to the consulate, towards the light of freedom and justice.

Caught in the Net - Wang Ming is Arrested

Thanks to the network of kindness and the courage of fellow practitioners and kind-hearted citizens in Shanghai, we had managed to get through many days of hiding and moving in fear. After nearly two weeks since leaving the old hotel, constantly changing temporary lodgings and finding the most discreet ways to move through this vast city, we finally felt we were very close to our goal: the U.S. Consulate.

According to the information we had gathered, the consulate was located in a fairly central area. We had planned to find a coffee shop or some other public place near the consulate, from where we could observe the situation and find the right moment to enter. The hope for safety and an escape began to kindle more strongly than ever.

That afternoon, we had just gotten out of a taxi on a street a few hundred meters from the U.S. Consulate. We had intentionally exited the car at a distance to avoid drawing direct attention. The street was quite crowded with passersby, with many shops and offices. Qing Ling was comforting Xiao Lian, who seemed a bit tired after the journey across the city. I was trying to stay calm, observing our surroundings and looking for a place to rest temporarily before getting closer to the consulate.

Just then, I sensed something was wrong. A few men in plainclothes, who seemed to have been loitering nearby since we got out of the taxi, suddenly began to approach us with clear intent. My heart pounded. My intuition screamed that something bad was about to happen.

"ID check," one of them said, his voice cold, as he flashed a police badge very quickly before putting it away. His eyes swept over us, lingering for a long time on Xiao Lian, who was rubbing her eyes in Qing Ling's arms.

I tried to stay calm and took out my passport and Qing Ling's. Although I had prepared myself for the worst-case scenarios, the fact that it was happening so quickly and at this very moment left me stunned.

"Is this child yours?" another man asked, pointing at Xiao Lian.

"Yes, she is our daughter," I replied, trying to act natural, though in my heart I knew they already knew everything.

"Where are her papers?" the first officer asked again, his voice still even but his eyes now sharper, as if he knew for certain we didn't have any.

This was what we had feared most. We had no documents to prove that Xiao Lian was our child. I was about to start explaining that we were in the process of getting her papers reissued because they were lost... But I knew the explanation was utterly futile. They had been following us, they knew who we were, and they chose this precise moment, just as we were about to reach a place of potential protection, to make their move.

Before I could finish my sentence, one of them gave a signal. Immediately, several more men from nearby street corners rushed over, quickly surrounding us. The

atmosphere suddenly became extremely tense. This was it. They had been waiting for this moment.

"You two, come with us to the station," the leader said, his voice now firm. "There are some matters that need to be clarified."

"We haven't done anything wrong!" Qing Ling cried out in panic, hugging Xiao Lian even tighter. "We are American citizens..."

"Quiet! Come with us!" another man shouted, roughly pushing Qing Ling's arm away.

They moved to grab my hands. As a reflex, I took a step back, raising my arms to shield Qing Ling and Xiao Lian. "What do you want? We have the right to contact our consulate! The consulate is right nearby!" I tried to shout, hoping to attract the attention of the passersby.

But that action seemed only to anger them and make them act faster. Two strong men immediately lunged at me, twisting my arms behind my back. I struggled but couldn't resist. A cold pair of handcuffs clamped onto my wrists.

"Ming! Ming!" Qing Ling screamed, trying to rush forward to hold me back but was blocked by another man. Xiao Lian, seeing the scene, began to cry and

scream in terror, her heart-wrenching wails piercing the busy street.

"Let him go! What are you doing?" Qing Ling yelled in desperation, tears streaming down her face.

I was dragged towards an unmarked van parked at a nearby corner, which had probably been waiting. I tried to turn my head to look at Qing Ling and Xiao Lian one last time. The image of the two of them, mother and daughter, hugging each other and sobbing amidst the circle of plainclothes men and the curious crowd that had begun to gather, was like a knife stabbing into my heart. Overwhelming pain, helplessness, and worry consumed me. What would happen to me? More importantly, what would Qing Ling and Xiao Lian do in this city without me?

I was shoved hard into the back of the van. The door slammed shut, trapping me in darkness and fear. The van sped away, leaving behind Xiao Lian's cries and Qing Ling's desperate figure, an image that would haunt me in the dark days to come. The net had closed just as we were about to reach for hope. I had been caught.

The Dark Days in Detention

I was taken to a place they called a "Detention and Interrogation Center." In reality, it was a pretrial detention facility located somewhere in Shanghai, a cold, damp place constantly shrouded in a suffocating, fearful atmosphere. After some perfunctory procedures like fingerprinting, having my picture taken, and having all my personal belongings confiscated (fortunately, Qing Ling had the copy of "*Zhuan Falun*" in her backpack at the time, otherwise it would surely have been taken), I was pushed into a cramped, foul-smelling cell with nearly twenty other people.

The living conditions here were unimaginably terrible. The air was always thick with the smell of sweat, mold, and the unpleasant odor from the open toilet in the corner of the room. We had to lie crammed together on the cold concrete floor, each with only a tattered straw mat. The only light came from a dim yellow bulb hanging from the ceiling, which was never turned off, blurring day and night into one. The food was just meager prison rations, usually dry, hard white rice with some mushy boiled vegetables and a few scraps of tofu, never enough to quell the gnawing hunger.

But the physical discomfort was nothing compared to the mental pressure and the constant interrogations I had to endure. Almost every day, usually at the most

inconvenient times like the dead of night or the crack of dawn, I would be dragged from the cell and taken to a small, cold interrogation room. There, under the glare of a bright electric lamp shining directly in my face, I had to face several police officers who took turns questioning me.

They didn't believe my explanation that we were just tourists in China and had taken in Xiao Lian out of compassion. They insisted on accusing me of being an American spy, using tourism as a cover to gather intelligence and colluding with the "evil cult organization" Falun Gong to undermine the Chinese government. They even deliberately twisted the facts, claiming I had kidnapped Xiao Lian for some dark purpose.

"Confess! Who gave you your orders? Who is in your network here?" They slammed the table and shouted, their voices full of threats. "You think having an American passport makes you special? This is China! If you don't confess honestly, you'll rot in prison!"

They used every method to exert psychological pressure. Sometimes they would threaten, saying they knew where Qing Ling and Xiao Lian were, and that if I didn't cooperate, the two of them would be in danger. Other times they would feign a soft approach, promising leniency and an early release if I would "perform a

meritorious service to atone for my crimes"—meaning I had to admit to the fabricated charges and give them the names of the Falun Gong practitioners who had helped us.

To increase the pressure, they also used methods of mental and physical torture. While not as brutal as what Sister Lan had described (perhaps they were somewhat restrained because I was a foreigner), it was enough to make a person break down. I was often forced to stand or sit in very uncomfortable positions for hours during the endless interrogations. They deliberately deprived me of sleep, waking me up every few hours for questioning or intentionally making loud noises in the cell. Once, because I adamantly refused to admit to their absurd accusations, an interrogator angrily slapped me hard across the face and kicked me to the floor.

They also forced me to watch crude propaganda videos, full of slander and defamation against Falun Gong and Master Li Hongzhi. They gave me pre-printed materials and forced me to read articles vilifying the Great Law. It was truly a form of mental torture, an attempt to shake the faith that had just begun to form within me.

During those long, dark, and at times seemingly hopeless days—I estimate I was detained there for about a month and a half, perhaps almost two months—when the worry for Qing Ling and Xiao Lian, combined with

the physical and mental torment, threatened to break me, it was what I witnessed and contemplated in the detention center that became my greatest spiritual support.

In my cell, there were a few other inmates who had also been arrested for practicing Falun Gong. They didn't say much about their circumstances, but through their soft-spoken words, their gentle gestures, and their unusually calm demeanor in the face of such hardship, I recognized them. I saw them quietly sit in meditation with their legs crossed when the guards weren't paying close attention, even if only for a few short minutes. I heard them whispering poems from "*Hong Yin*" when they thought no one was listening.

I also witnessed them being dragged away for interrogation and returning with new injuries, yet their eyes still shone with an extraordinary determination, without a trace of resentment or fear. There was an elderly farmer who had been beaten so badly he could barely walk, but when another inmate fell ill, he still tried to give away his meager portion of rice. Their extraordinary Compassion and Forbearance in such an extreme environment had a powerful impact on me.

It was these images, combined with my continuous recitation in my mind of the Fa principles I had learned from "*Zhuan Falun*," especially the principle

of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, that helped me maintain my sanity and my faith. I began to understand why they could be so resilient. Because they had found the truth, had found the true meaning of life. They knew that these tribulations were temporary, an opportunity to temper themselves, to eliminate karma, and to return to their original, good nature.

Witnessing firsthand the brutal, absurd nature of the Chinese Communist Party in its treatment of the kindest citizens erased any remaining doubts I had about what Uncle Liu, Mrs. Chen, and Sister Lan had told me. I clearly realized that this was not a battle between a government and some "superstitious" group, but a real confrontation between good and evil, between the righteous and the malevolent. And I knew which side I had to be on.

Nearly two months in that dark prison did not break me. On the contrary, it was like a trial by fire, helping my faith in Falun Dafa become ever more steadfast. Though my body was tired and hungry, and I faced an unknown future, my mind held an unusual clarity and determination. I didn't know when I would get out of this place, but I knew one thing for sure: I would never bow to evil, and I would never give up the righteous path of cultivation that I had been so fortunate to find.

Diplomatic Intervention and a Spectacular Escape

In the early days of December, the weather in Shanghai began to turn colder. In the damp prison cell, I had gradually lost all sense of time, clinging only to my faith and the Fa principles I recited in my mind to endure the harshness of my situation and the cold that seeped into my bones. I didn't know how Qing Ling and Xiao Lian were, whether they were safe, or if anyone was helping them in this vast city. That worry often tormented me more than the beatings or the interrogations.

Then one cold morning, as I was trying to sit with my legs crossed on the freezing concrete floor, the cell door suddenly opened. A guard called my name, his voice gruff: "Wang Ming! Out!"

I didn't know what was about to happen. Another interrogation? Or were they planning to transfer me somewhere else? I staggered to my feet, my body worn out from lack of food, sleep, and the cold, and silently followed the guard out of the cell, not daring to hope for much.

But instead of being taken to the familiar interrogation room, I was led through different corridors to an area

that looked like an office. There, an official who seemed to be a superior was waiting. He looked me up and down with an unreadable expression, then gestured with his chin towards a set of clean clothes (though not my own) on a table.

"Get changed," he ordered. "You're being released."

My ears were ringing. Released? After nearly two months of detention, torture, and being framed with absurd charges, they were now suddenly telling me I was being released? I couldn't believe my ears. "Why...?" I stammered.

"No need for questions," he cut me off, his voice impatient. "There was a 'misunderstanding' during the investigation. The higher-ups have reviewed your case. You are an American citizen; we respect international law. You may go."

"Misunderstanding"? I knew that was just an excuse. There must have been some powerful intervention from the outside. Could it be... had Qing Ling succeeded? Had the U.S. Consulate here in Shanghai gotten involved? A glimmer of hope began to flicker within me, but I still wasn't sure.

After completing some simple paperwork very quickly, I was escorted out of the detention center gate. The weak

winter sunlight hit my eyes, making me squint. The cold air outside struck my face, but it was the air of freedom. I took a deep breath, trying to stand steady.

And then, I saw her. Qing Ling was waiting not far from the gate, her face gaunt and pale from worry and lack of sleep, but her eyes lit up when she saw me. Beside my wife, holding the hand of an unfamiliar middle-aged woman (whom I guessed was certainly a Falun Gong practitioner), was little Xiao Lian. She had gotten thinner too, her eyes still holding a trace of fear, but when she saw me, she softly called out, "Uncle Ming!"

At that moment, all the strength I had been holding back seemed to burst forth. I ran towards them. Qing Ling ran too, throwing her arms around me, sobbing uncontrollably. I held my wife tightly, feeling her frail, trembling body in my arms. I couldn't hold back my own tears—tears of joy and sorrow, of the pain that had passed, and of a happiness of reunion that had seemed impossible.

"I... I did it... You're free..." Qing Ling sobbed in my arms.

"I knew... I knew it was you..." I replied, choked with emotion, stroking her tangled hair.

I bent down to look at Xiao Lian, who was still a bit shy. I gently hugged her. "Good girl, Xiao Lian, it's okay now. Uncle is back with you."

The woman with them smiled kindly. "She has been with us these past few weeks, completely safe. Your wife went through a lot to secure your release."

Later, Qing Ling told me the whole story of her arduous process. After I was arrested, my wife was in a complete panic. But with the help of this kind woman and a few other practitioners Uncle Liu had managed to contact, she and Xiao Lian found a temporary safe place in a discreet part of Shanghai. Immediately after, despite the danger, she tried every way possible to get to the U.S. Consulate in Shanghai. At first, approaching them and presenting her case was not easy; she was met with bureaucracy and a somewhat skeptical attitude. But with persistence, the evidence of my wrongful arrest (she had kept my passport), and the audacity to mention our connection to Falun Gong (knowing full well the risk), my wife finally convinced a consular officer to believe her and get involved. They officially sent a diplomatic note, demanding the Chinese side to clarify the case and release the American citizen, Wang Ming. Nearly two months of continuous diplomatic pressure finally forced the local authorities in Shanghai to concede.

Our reunion was brief but full of emotion. We knew we were not yet truly safe. This was still China, and their "release" could be temporary. We had to leave this place as soon as possible.

With more active support from the consulate after my release, we began a race against time to complete the necessary procedures for all three of us. Obtaining travel documents for Xiao Lian was very difficult, but thanks to the strong intervention of the consulate and the urgent humanitarian grounds, we finally received a special permit to take her out of China with us.

Finally, in the last days of December, as the Christmas spirit filled the air around the world, we were at Shanghai Pudong International Airport, holding plane tickets back to the United States. The journey through the dark night, facing danger, and the final, spectacular escape, was over. We had survived, we had protected Xiao Lian, and most importantly, our faith was not only not destroyed but had become stronger than ever. The light at the end of the tunnel had truly appeared.

* * *

CHAPTER 13: THE EAST DAWNS - RETURNING AND SPREADING THE LIGHT

The Flight Home and the Land of the Free

Sitting on the plane as it gradually left the runway of Shanghai Pudong International Airport, I held Qing Ling's hand tightly. The feeling of extreme tension only began to ease slightly when the aircraft actually lifted off from Chinese soil. Until the very last moment in the departure lounge, while going through exit procedures, the fear of being stopped, of being hassled, had been

constantly on our minds. Now, looking through the window at the land of China receding into the distance, a sense of immense relief, though mixed with many turbulent emotions, finally seeped into my heart.

The long flight across the Pacific seemed to be the necessary quiet interlude for us to truly register that we had escaped from danger. Our bodies, worn out from the exhausting and terrifying weeks, quickly succumbed to sleep. Little Xiao Lian, perhaps also sensing the change in the atmosphere, slept soundly in Qing Ling's warm embrace for most of the journey. Waking up from time to time, seeing Qing Ling and little Xiao Lian sleeping peacefully beside me, my heart would fill with an indescribable gratitude for some miraculous protection that had helped us, all three of us, get through everything.

But that relief could not erase the burden in my heart. The images of Kang Yu being murdered, of Chen Mai disappearing into prison, the images of Uncle Liu, Mrs. Chen, Sister Lan, and countless other practitioners still facing the brutal persecution back home—they kept coming back, tormenting my conscience. We were free, but what about them? The joy of our reunion and escape seemed to be tinged with a shade of sadness, a vague sense of guilt for having had to leave them behind.

Finally, after a journey that seemed as if it would never end, the plane landed at an international airport in the United States. It was now the last days of December. Stepping out of the aircraft door, breathing in the familiar air, hearing the sounds and seeing the beloved sights of our second home, a feeling of absolute safety enveloped us. The airport was magnificently decorated with sparkling lights, Christmas trees, and the melodious sound of Christmas carols playing over the speakers. The warmth, the festive spirit, and the free atmosphere here were a complete contrast to the suffocating, tense, and perilous environment we had just endured in China.

This was it, the land of the free. We were truly back.

Qing Ling held Xiao Lian tightly; the little girl looked around at everything with her big, round, curious eyes. Looking at that image, I realized with profound clarity that we had not returned as the same two people who had left. We were now three. We had brought with us a new member, a new family forged in the midst of a storm. Xiao Lian was not just an orphan we had taken in; she was now our daughter, a living testament to the tumultuous journey we had been through, a sacred responsibility we pledged to shoulder.

Setting foot on familiar American soil, the feeling of safety and freedom was overwhelming, yet my heart remained heavy. The memories of nearly seven months

in China—from the initial curiosity, the strange encounters, the joy of finding the Great Law, to the horror of witnessing and directly experiencing the persecution—were all still too fresh, too profound to fade away. We had returned to the land of the free, but a part of our souls seemed to have remained in the East, with our fellow practitioners who were resiliently enduring and hoping for a brighter tomorrow. This flight home marked the end of a spectacular escape, but it was also the beginning of a new chapter in our lives, a new life under the light of the Great Law in this land of freedom.

Building a New Life Under the Light of the Great Law

In the first few days back in the United States, we tried to stabilize our lives, which had been completely upended after nearly seven months in China. Our familiar home now had the babbling chatter and laughter of little Xiao Lian, bringing a new atmosphere but also significant responsibilities. We contacted family, friends, and colleagues, trying to explain as concisely as possible our long absence and the new member of our family. Most people were surprised and curious, but also expressed

sympathy and support for us. Our older children at home, after their initial worries, were also very happy to have their parents back safely and welcomed Xiao Lian as a little sister.

The most important task now was to help Xiao Lian adapt to the new environment. The little girl still carried psychological scars from what she had been through. At night, she would often startle awake, screaming her parents' names. Qing Ling devoted almost all of her time to being by her side, caring for her, comforting her, and loving her. With patience and sincere love, my wife gradually helped Xiao Lian feel safer, more open, and begin to get used to English and her new life. Watching Qing Ling care for Xiao Lian, I could clearly see the Compassion and tolerance of a mother, of a person striving to practice what she believed in.

Parallel to stabilizing our family life, we quickly found a way to connect with the local Falun Gong practitioner community. Just a few days after returning home, we found the nearest practice site and began to participate in the morning exercises as well as the group Fa-study on weekends.

The feeling of being able to do the exercises freely outdoors, to openly read the Dafa books and share cultivation experiences with fellow practitioners without fear of being monitored or arrested, was incredibly

precious and a stark contrast to what we had experienced in China. Here, we met practitioners from many different countries and cultural backgrounds, but all shared a common faith in Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, all striving together to do better. The open, harmonious, and pure cultivation environment here helped us feel re-energized and strengthened.

Steadfastly reading the book and doing the exercises regularly became the solid foundation of our new life. The profound Fa principles in "*Zhuan Falun*" not only helped us better understand the meaning of the tribulations we had been through, but also illuminated the path ahead for us. We learned to face the painful memories with a calmer mindset, seeing them as tests to be overcome to improve our mind-heart nature. We learned to turn those negative experiences into motivation to cultivate even more diligently.

Our lives, though having gone through a terrifying storm, now became much more meaningful and tranquil than before. We understood more clearly that the purpose of life is not to pursue fame and material gain, but to cultivate, to return to one's original, good nature. Each day, we tried to measure our conduct and thoughts against the standard of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, trying to do better in our roles in the family and society.

The bond between Qing Ling and me grew even closer and more understanding after the near-death trials we had gone through together. We were not just husband and wife, but also fellow practitioners who reminded and supported each other on the path of return. We read the Fa books together, shared our understandings, and reminded each other when we saw something not quite right in the other's behavior.

We also tried to raise Xiao Lian in an environment full of love and the values of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. We told her stories of kindness, honesty, and tolerance. Gradually, a smile returned to the little girl's face, her eyes becoming clearer and more lively. Though she was still too young to fully understand the Great Law, we believed that the seeds of kindness were being sown in her pure soul.

Although the extended trip and unexpected events had forced us to put many work plans on hold and also cost a considerable amount, our new life in the US had become so much more meaningful spiritually. The light of the Great Law had shone into every corner of our lives, helping us find peace in our souls, strength to face difficulties, and a more noble purpose in life. We were rebuilding our lives, not just with material things, but with the very faith and practice of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance every day.

A Storm Amidst the Calm

After the horrific turmoil we had faced in Mainland China, our life in the United States gradually stabilized. The pharmaceutical company I had poured my heart and soul into began to see steady development; our products were well-received by the market, providing the main source of income for our family. In parallel, both my wife and I found teaching positions at a university. Although the income from this work was insignificant compared to the company's profits, it brought us the joy of contributing in an academic environment, maintaining our scientific reputations, the opportunity to interact with the intellectual community, and to continue the research activities we were both passionate about. We had more time for personal cultivation, group Fa-study, deep meditation, and participating in activities to spread the Fa with other local Falun Gong practitioners, where we found empathy and a bond with many people who shared our Chinese cultural roots. Our small home was once again filled with laughter, though my heart still carried a lingering sorrow for our fellow practitioners who were still suffering in Mainland China.

But the peace did not last long.

The first ripples appeared at my pharmaceutical company. Initially, it was just a few small contracts canceled at the last minute for vague, incomprehensible reasons. With my business experience, I dismissed them as normal risks. But then, the problems began to mount. A shipment we sent to Europe suddenly failed to meet quality standards, despite our extremely rigorous internal control processes. Next, malicious rumors about our company's products began to spread on a few online forums, sowing doubt among consumers. Long-time partners started to become cautious, and several promising new research and development projects were suddenly stalled due to a lack of raw materials or inexplicable information leaks.

My mind was stretched taut like a violin string. I tried to maintain the clarity of a scientist, reviewing every step of management and operations, but I couldn't find a fatal flaw. A sense of helplessness and a vague anxiety began to consume my mind.

The fatal blow came when my brother-in-law, who was also a major shareholder and had once believed strongly in the company's direction, suddenly announced he was divesting all his shares for the reason of "restructuring his personal investment portfolio." I knew that behind that reason lay his panic over the malicious rumors and perhaps pressure from his own family upon seeing my company falter. The decision of my brother-in-law, a

man I had always considered a brother, was like a bomb that rocked the entire company, triggering a domino effect. The banks that had once been so welcoming and promising suddenly froze our approved loans, citing all sorts of reasons to delay disbursement. Meanwhile, the interest on our previous investments continued to call, like a noose tightening around the company's neck.

Parallel to the storm at the company, a similar shadow began to fall over our teaching careers. In my department, whispers and scrutinizing glances started to appear. A few colleagues who had been friendly now became distant. The department leadership hinted at "performance needing improvement" and "negative feedback from students" without providing any concrete evidence. My wife, Qing Ling, faced a similar situation in her department. The invisible pressure grew day by day, and the risk of losing the academic environment we loved and cherished hung over both our heads.

Qing Ling, though her heart was in turmoil, still tried to be my spiritual anchor. Our two older children, one a sophomore in college and the younger a junior in high school, though old enough to take care of many things themselves, still needed significant support from the family, especially as they also sensed the ongoing turmoil. Xiao Lian was different. She was still young and carried the scars from the terrifying days in the orphanage and on the run. She needed special care,

boundless love and patience to gradually recover. In the evenings, after putting Xiao Lian to bed, my wife and I would sit together, not to discuss how to solve the seemingly endless troubles, but to study the Fa together, to find tranquility in meditation. Qing Ling would often gently remind me of the Fa principles, of "Forbearance" in the face of adversity, of looking inward to see what attachments I needed to let go of.

In addition to the mounting difficulties from work, we also had to face worry from our family. My parents, now in their seventies, were retired and living with my eldest brother's family. They were born and raised in China and had immigrated to the US in the 1970s, so they understood the nature of the CCP very well. Although neither of them truly understood Falun Gong or what we were pursuing, my father was calmer; he was a man of few words and always respected his children's choices. My mother was different. She would call from time to time, and each call was a trial for me. Ever since she learned that I had been detained for nearly two months in China, her fear of the CCP had deepened. She loved me, felt pained by what my family was enduring, but the way she expressed it left me utterly exhausted. She would often speak in a worried tone, half-admonishing, half-blaming: "Ming, I feel this is not right at all. You keep getting involved with Falun Gong, and on top of that, the company and your work at the university are in

constant trouble. Don't you see something unusual? I'm just afraid... afraid they won't leave you alone, just like that time in China." She tried to persuade me to be more "flexible," to be more "worldly-wise," even hinting that I should "set aside" my cultivation for now to "protect myself."

At those times, although a small doubt would arise in my heart because of the strange coincidences, I still tried to reassure her, and myself. I thought, perhaps my mother was being overly anxious due to old traumas. In America, a country of freedom and the rule of law, how could such sophisticated, covert sabotage happen? I still believed the company's difficulties were due to internal management issues, market fluctuations, or my own lack of ability. I needed to find the cause and solution myself, instead of blaming some invisible force. My mother's words, though I knew they came from love and deep-seated fear, still weighed heavily on me and sometimes made me feel helpless for not being able to put her at ease.

"Ming," Qing Ling said to me softly one time, after such a phone call from my mother, "I think nothing happens by chance. Perhaps this is a time when Master is testing us, to see if our faith is firm, to see if we can truly let go of worldly material things, and these emotional attachments."

I silently took my wife's hand. I understood. But understanding was one thing; facing and overcoming it was another arduous journey. The financial pressure, the responsibility for hundreds of employees, the worry for my family's future, providing for my two children's education, and especially ensuring the best environment for Xiao Lian's recovery, along with the pain of not being able to reassure my parents, all weighed heavily on my shoulders.

The situation grew worse. To save the company, I was forced to make painful decisions. The layoffs began. From a company of over five hundred employees full of vigor, it shrank to a rickety skeleton. A funereal atmosphere hung over the final meetings; the disappointed, bewildered eyes of those who had been with me for so long made my heart ache. In the end, only a little over twenty people remained, those who were truly dedicated, or for some reason, still chose to stay with the sinking ship.

But even with that minimal staff, the burden of operating costs and especially the interest on bank loans was still unbearable. Creditors called constantly, threatening to seize the company's assets. With no other choice, after many long, sleepless nights, I discussed with Qing Ling the decision to sell two of the three properties our family had accumulated over the years in the US. They were an investment house and a rental apartment. With

money tight and needing it urgently for expenses, I had to accept a "fire sale" at a price much lower than their actual value. My family moved into our smallest house, cutting all unnecessary expenses. The luxury cars, each worth over two hundred thousand dollars, that my wife and I had used, also had to be sold. Instead, we bought two used cars, each worth just over ten thousand dollars, enough to get around. The weekend family gatherings at fine dining restaurants were also completely eliminated; replaced by simple, cozy home-cooked meals. Our material life was now a world away from what it once was.

For three months, then six, the storm relentlessly tested us. The company was only operating at a subsistence level. My wife and I, despite our best efforts, finally received notice that our teaching contracts would not be renewed by the university. We lost our last stable source of income, but more importantly, we lost an academic environment where we could contribute our expertise, maintain our scientific credibility, and connect with the intellectual community.

During those dark months, I constantly questioned myself. I faced the harsh reality, trying to understand the cause with Truthfulness (*Zhen*), but all efforts led to a dead end. I did not complain about fate or blame anyone, only silently enduring (Forbearance, *Ren*). For the twenty-plus people remaining at the company, I did my

utmost to ensure a minimal livelihood for them, using my kindness and sincerity to encourage them (Compassion, *Shan*).

Many nights, seeing Qing Ling have to give up her former luxurious lifestyle, quietly adapting to a simpler life in the small house, carefully considering every expense, preparing family meals herself instead of weekend restaurant dinners, forgoing distant vacations or the designer items she could once easily afford, all while having to devote all her energy to caring for Xiao Lian, trying to heal her psychological wounds, my heart ached. Although our family's basic needs for food and clothing were still met by what was left, the drop from a millionaire's life to one just enough to get by like an ordinary civil servant's family made me feel an invisible burden. I wondered, was I too attached to my reputation as a scientist, a successful entrepreneur? Was losing my position at the university, losing the recognition of the academic world, part of a test for me to let go of the "fame" I was still clinging to? Was I too attached to material achievements, to the comfort and affluence of expensive cars, lavish meals, or luxury vacations, forgetting the true meaning of a cultivator's life? Those questions bored deep into my soul, forcing me to look inward, to confront the deepest layers of my own consciousness.

Rising from the Ashes, Towards the Light

The darkest days seemed to have finally hit rock bottom. My wife and I, despite losing almost everything we had built, persevered in our faith. The twenty-plus remaining employees, those who had chosen to stay when the company was on the verge of collapse, became a small but precious source of motivation for me. They were no longer just employees, but companions, sharing the same boat, trying to escape a deadly whirlpool.

During a chance meeting with an elderly fellow practitioner, who had lived in the US for many years and had also experienced ups and downs, I shared the strange calamities that had befallen my company and career. I told him about the unreasonably canceled contracts, the malicious rumors, my brother-in-law's divestment, and my mother's anxious warnings about the possible hand of the CCP. The fellow practitioner listened intently, then said thoughtfully, "Wang Ming, what your mother said is not without basis. In the US, the CCP's agents operate very subtly and brazenly. For your business to suddenly plummet like that when things were going so well, I fear it's not a coincidence. It's very possible their hand is in it, to sabotage those associated with Falun Gong or those who dare to speak

out about the injustices in the Mainland. You should try to investigate carefully; you might find a clue."

His words were like a wake-up call, illuminating the vague suspicions that had been lurking in my mind, especially after my mother's warnings. Before, I had somewhat dismissed them, thinking such things couldn't happen in the US, that I had to find fault in myself. But now, hearing it from an experienced fellow practitioner, the scattered pieces began to connect. I suddenly remembered the illogical details, the inexplicable incidents. Could my mother have been right? Could my naivete about a "completely free world" have made me complacent? With Qing Ling's encouragement, I decided I had to find out the truth, no matter how harsh it might be.

With the mindset of a scientist, I began to review the entire system, all transactions, personnel records, paying special attention to new employees hired around the time the company's problems began. I quietly asked a trusted friend, a cybersecurity expert, to check our company's entire computer system and communications. The results were stunning and painful. A new employee in the sales department, whom I had once considered energetic and sociable, showed suspicious activity: accessing data outside the scope of his job, unusual external communications, and more importantly, there

was evidence that this person had intentionally leaked project information and sabotaged key contracts.

Faced with the bitter truth that I had been sabotaged by another person of Chinese descent, an alleged plant from the CCP, an initial sense of indignation welled up in me. But I quickly reminded myself that I was a cultivator, remembering Master's teachings on Compassion and Forbearance. I could not let anger or resentment dictate my actions. After gathering sufficient evidence, my company's lawyer and I reported the entire matter to the US authorities. The undercover agent was quickly fired and faced legal investigation. Although it couldn't immediately undo the immense damage that had been done, removing this "worm" helped the company shed an invisible burden and, more importantly, it confirmed my suspicions, helping me better understand the nature of this persecution—it did not stop at China's borders.

With only a little over twenty dedicated people left, I understood the company could not continue with the old model. We had to restructure completely, find a new direction, a truly groundbreaking core product. In tense but constructive meetings, ideas began to form. Drawing from the lessons on cherishing traditional values and the harmony between man and nature that I had enlightened to from the Great Law, combined with my modern scientific knowledge, I came up with a bold idea: to develop a new line of pharmaceuticals that integrated

the essence of traditional Eastern medicine with the rigorous research and testing processes of Western science.

I shared this idea with the remaining team. Many were initially skeptical, as it was so different from what we had ever done. But my enthusiasm and vision, along with specific scientific analysis, gradually convinced them. We embarked on a new adventure, with limited resources but high spirits. Qing Ling and I, along with the remaining core scientists, worked tirelessly day and night in the laboratory. We studied hundreds of rare herbs from the treasure trove of Eastern medicine, finding ways to extract active compounds and combine them according to modern scientific principles to optimize efficacy and minimize side effects. The research process was arduous, with many failures that almost made us give up. In those moments, we would study the Fa together, finding tranquility and faith again. The image of Master and the teachings in the Fa gave us renewed strength.

After nearly a year of relentless effort, finally, a new product was born. It was a medication to help treat chronic diseases, formulated entirely from natural ingredients based on Eastern medical knowledge, but standardized and verified for efficacy and safety through rigorous clinical trials according to strict Western standards.

The day the product was launched, my heart was full of anticipation. We dared not expect much after all we had been through. But positive signs began to appear. At first, it was good feedback from a few patients in the trial, then gradually, doctors and medical experts also began to take notice of the product's uniqueness and effectiveness, especially its safety and near-lack of side effects. The product's reputation was gradually built on real results and word-of-mouth from users. Orders began to increase noticeably, bringing hope and the first revenues that helped the company slowly stabilize.

My small company, from the brink of bankruptcy, suddenly began to make positive strides. My reputation in the pharmaceutical industry, though severely damaged before, also began to be restored step by step. With these promising signs, I had a foundation to gradually rebuild the company, possibly inviting back some dedicated former employees when conditions allowed, and cautiously expanding the scale of production.

But more important than the signs of financial recovery, my wife and I felt a deeper joy. We had turned adversity into opportunity, not only to revive our careers but also to create products that were truly beneficial to people, embodying both the wisdom of traditional medicine and the transparency of modern science. The road ahead was open again, not just the future of a business, but the

future of people who had dared to hold fast to their faith, dared to face tribulations, and found light from their own cultivation. I understood that all the hardships we had gone through were to temper our will, to cleanse our attachments, and to enable us to walk more steadily on the path of return.

A Song of Hope from the Storm, Spreading the Light

Our life in the United States, after the horrific turmoil in Mainland China, had seemingly stabilized, but true peace did not last long. Financial and career difficulties came one after another, pushing my beloved company to the brink of bankruptcy and causing both my wife and me to lose our teaching positions. After a long period of facing adversity without initially knowing the cause, we finally uncovered the CCP's covert sabotage and, step by step, rebuilt our careers from the ashes with a new direction that integrated Eastern and Western medicine.

Overcoming that storm not only helped us revive our careers but also tempered our will, cleansed our attachments, and strengthened our faith in the Great Law. And it was at this time, as life gradually stabilized

again, that Qing Ling and I felt our responsibility become even greater.

Returning from China, carrying not only a new family but also the burden of the truth about the brutal persecution taking place there, we felt we had to speak out. We could not remain silent knowing that millions of innocent people were suffering for their belief in Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, when the horrific crime of live organ harvesting was still ongoing behind the world's back.

Spreading this truth was not easy, especially when faced with the indifference, skepticism, or even apprehension of a segment of the Western public. But the images of Kang Yu, Chen Mai, Uncle Liu, Mrs. Chen, Sister Lan, and so many others we had met, along with the horrifying experiences I personally endured in detention, compelled us to act.

We started with those closest to us: family, friends, and open-minded colleagues. We recounted our journey, shared the beauty of Falun Gong and the harsh truth of the persecution. Gradually, the sincerity in our words and the positive changes in ourselves made many people begin to listen and think more seriously.

But personal sharing alone was not enough. We proactively participated in activities organized by the

local Falun Gong practitioner community. On weekends, we would stand peacefully with other practitioners in front of the Chinese Consulate, participate in parades, and organize documentary screenings and the Art of Zhen, Shan, Ren (Truth, Compassion, Forbearance) exhibitions. Qing Ling, with her language skills and cultural understanding, would often introduce Falun Gong and answer questions. I would help collect petition signatures and send letters to lawmakers and human rights organizations.

Every activity, no matter how small, was an effort to break the silence. We faced many difficulties: indifference, covert obstruction from the Chinese authorities, and sometimes even misunderstanding. But seeing other practitioners, many of whom were also refugees who had escaped the persecution, still persistently, peacefully, and tenaciously speaking the truth year after year, gave us renewed strength. We understood that spreading the truth was not only a responsibility towards those suffering in China, but also a responsibility to our own conscience and the future of the world. Because silence in the face of evil is complicity with evil.

Time flew by since the day we rebuilt everything. Our new life with Xiao Lian, with our efforts to cultivate ourselves and spread the truth, had become a ceaseless journey. Looking back on the path we had traveled, I

couldn't help but feel emotional. From a medical professor, an entrepreneur who believed only in empirical science, I had undergone a complete transformation in consciousness and faith. That journey had taken me from skepticism to curiosity, from discovery to acceptance, from initial belief to an unshakeable faith in Falun Dafa, in the existence of gods and Buddhas, and in the profound principles of the universe.

I had once stood at the pinnacle of fame and success by worldly standards, yet I felt empty. Now, after going through life-and-death tribulations, confronting extreme evil, and witnessing boundless Compassion, I had truly found the real meaning of a being's life. It is not the enjoyment of material things or the struggle for worldly fame and gain, but the return to one's pure, innate nature, the assimilation with the supreme characteristic of the universe: Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance. The path of cultivating in the Great Law is the ladder to heaven.

The hardships we endured, though painful and harsh, were the necessary tests to temper our will, eliminate karma, and elevate our mind-heart nature. Each time we faced danger, each time we had to choose between our own safety and our conscience, was a time we were blessed by the Great Law, our faith and courage strengthened. The tragedy of Kang Yu and Chen Mai's

family, the brutality of the persecution—none of it made us fearful or retreat. On the contrary, it made us see more clearly the evil nature of the CCP and the greatness and righteousness of the path we had chosen.

I believe fervently in the power of Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance to move people's hearts. This light not only illuminates the path for us cultivators, but also has the power to inspire and awaken the conscience of all people in the world. Although the darkness of evil still shrouds the land of China, although the persecution continues brutally, I believe it is only the final frenzy before the dawn.

Because Falun Dafa has spread throughout the five continents, taking deep root in the hearts of hundreds of millions. True cultivators, with their firm belief in Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance, with their peace and boundless compassion, are working day and night to clarify the truth, break through the lies, and expose the crimes of the evil regime. Like pure lotus flowers rising from the mud, they are using their very own kindness and forbearance to face violence, using truth to triumph over deceit.

I believe the day when the people of China realize the true face of the CCP, the day the truth about the persecution of Falun Gong is fully exposed to the public, is not far off. On that day, the darkness will have to

dissipate, evil will be eliminated, and a bright future of freedom of belief, where traditional moral values are revived, will truly come to the ancient land of China. The East will truly dawn.

And I realize, Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance is not something foreign or belonging only to the East. They are values that, deep in their souls, perhaps everyone aspires to. In a modern world that can sometimes lead people astray, Falun Dafa has been like a cool, clear stream, helping me find balance, elevate my morality, and better understand the true meaning of life. I believe that what is good and righteous will naturally have the power to spread.

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EPILOGUE

When the stories in *Red Dust*, *Golden Light* draw to a close, perhaps what lingers with the reader is not the plot details or the fate of each character, but rather a quiet yet powerful contrast: between the dusty mortal world and a pure light that ever seeks to manifest.

At first glance, this is a collection of separate lives, each with its own sorrows, its own burdens, its own struggle between worldly gains and losses. They are swept away by the currents of destiny, of ambition, of trauma and error. This is the very tapestry of the Red Dust realm—suffocating, chaotic, and alluring.

Yet, when one steps back to observe, a shimmering golden thread has quietly woven a common tapestry. In the darkest moments, amidst the most difficult choices, the Golden Light has appeared. That light is not a miracle sent from on high to the rescue, but a choice born from the very depths of human nature: an act of selflessness, a word of forgiveness, a moment of letting go of attachment, or a kind thought held fast in the face of adversity.

This work, therefore, does not just tell their stories. It holds a mirror to us. Each reader is walking through their own world of red dust, with their own burdens and their own choices.

And perhaps, the most important question the book leaves us with is not what the characters found, but rather: Amidst the endless dust of life, will we recognize and hold on to our own light?

Sophia Bell

THE LIVES MEDIA

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR & THE LIVES MEDIA PROJECT

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophia Bell is an independent writer who explores themes in politics, culture, society, science, and spirituality. Her work seeks truth, awakens conscience, and gives voice to reflections on the fate of humanity.

Her works often originate from real-life interviews, recorded with honesty, emotional depth, and a spirit of enlightenment.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This book is part of a series published by THE LIVES MEDIA – an independent publishing initiative with a global vision and a mission to preserve and spread timeless echoes. Without chasing the daily news cycle, we aim for books that can deeply touch the human consciousness.

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**Thank you for taking the time to read this book!
May God and Buddha bless you on your journey of
discovering the truth.**