“Chen nainai, I bought you some dinner that my mother prepared.” The words puffed out of my mouth and into the cold. Mother warned me she probably wouldn’t respond. Go in anyways. There was no lock on the door of her house. The piece of wood barely fit into the door frame, too swollen on top and too gaping on the bottom.   
  
There wasn’t much in Chen nainai’s room. A window with snow frosted on the ledge, even though it was sunny outside. A water basin where ice was forming over the surface. A mattress with a bamboo mat on top, the mat discolored and caving in the middle. On the other side of the room, there was a framed portrait of President Mao wrapped in a lumpy, cotton quilt. A candle flickered.  
  
Chen nainai was sitting on a stool we gave her, wearing layers and layers of sweaters. All different colors of grey, hunched over like that, she looked more like a rock than a person. Like a reverse Monkey King, but instead of being born from a rock, she died into a rock.  
  
The stool used to be ours. When I was little, I would sit on it and help Mother clean green beans. When the weather was nice, we’d sit outside, right by the kitchen door. Her with a large metal bowl, me with a small plastic bowl. No matter how fast I peeled them, no matter how much bigger her bowl was, I could never beat Mother. Sometimes she’d let me win. I cried when she gave the stool away.  
   
Chen nainai was the village widow, and we took turns taking care of her. She had no children. She was given this place to live after the Cultural Revolution. Mother told me that this place used to store all sorts of meats so be careful where you step. I don’t know why Mother couldn’t let me change out of my school uniform before sending me over here. With my free hand, I grabbed my red scarf protectively, and squeezed through the entrance. My scarf was still perfectly tied and I wanted it to keep that way. I couldn’t get it dirty.  
   
The floor was sticky. Each step I took went creak creak, slitck slitck. Like once the floor got ahold of me, it didn’t want me to go. I imagined little monsters clinging to the soles of my shoes. Scuttling sounds came from the corners of the room.   
  
“Chen nainai, why do you have your bamboo mat out? Don’t you know that’s for the summer?”   
  
She didn’t reply.  
   
“Do you want some help rolling–” I stopped talking, realizing that no sheets covered the mattress.   
  
“Chen nainai,” I tried again, holding out the lunch pail I was carrying. “I brought you some food. Mother just finished cooking. You should eat it when it’s still warm.”   
  
Wind tore through the building, and the cold rammed against my chest. The portrait blew over and fell with a clang. The candle extinguished.   
  
Chen nainai rushed to right the portrait, her too-long pant-legs dragging across the floor. Her fingers were like tree branches, long and dark and curled.   
  
“What’s the use of food,” she said, “if this place is so goddamn cold that it even rattles Mao zhuxi’s bones?”