


## Immortality

 HIS STORY, AS THE STORY OF EVERY ONE OF us, started long before we were born. For dynasties, our town provided the imperial families their most reliable servants. Eunuchs they are called, though out of reverence we call them Great Papas. None of us is a direct descendant of a Great Papa, but traveling upstream in the river of our blood, we find uncles, brothers, and cousins who gave up their maleness so that our names would not vanish in history. Generations of boys, at the age of seven or eight, were chosen and castrated—*cleaned* as it was called—and sent into the palace as apprentices, learning to perform domestic tasks for the emperor and his family. At the age of thirteen or fourteen, they started to earn their allowances, silver coins that they saved and sent home to their parents. The coins were kept in a trunk, along with a small silk sack in which the severed male root was preserved with herbs. When the brothers of Great Papas reached the marriage age, their parents unlocked the trunk and brought out the silver coins. The money allowed the brothers to marry their wives; the wives gave birth to their sons; the sons grew up to carry on the family name, either by giving birth to more sons

or by going into the palace as cleaned boys. Years went by. When Great Papas could no longer serve the imperial masters on their wobbly knees, they were released from the palace and taken in by their nephews. Nothing left for them to worry about, they sat all day in the sun and stroked the cats they had brought home from the palace, fat and slow as they themselves were, and watched the male dogs chasing the females in the alleys. In time death came for them. Their funerals were the most spectacular events in our town: sixty-four Buddhist monks, in gold and red robes, chanted prayers for forty-nine days to lead their souls into the heaven; sixty-four Tao masters, in blue and gray robes, danced for forty-nine days to drive away any evils that dared to attach to their bodies. The divine moment came at the end of the forty-nine days, when the silk sacks containing their withered male roots were placed in the coffins. Now that the missing part had rejoined the body, the soul could leave without regret, to a place better than our town.

This was the story of every one of our Great Papas. For dynasties they were the most trustworthy members of the imperial family. They tended to the princesses' and the concubines' most personal tasks without tainting the noble blood with the low and dirty desires of men; they served the emperor and the princes with delicacy, yet, unlike those young handmaids who dreamed of seducing the emperor and his sons with their cheap beauties, Great Papas posed no threat to the imperial wives. There were wild rumors, though, about them serving as playthings for the princes before they reached the legal age to take concubines, and unfortunate tales of Great Papas being drowned, burned, bludgeoned, beheaded for the smallest mistakes, but such stories, as we all know, were made up to attack the good

name of our town. What we believe is what we have seen—the exquisitely carved tombstones in our cemetery, the elegantly embroidered portraits in our family books. Great Papas filled our hearts with pride and gratitude. If not for them, who were we, the small people born into this no-name town?

The glory of our town has faded in the past century. But may I tell you one boy's story before I reach the falling of Great Papas in history? As a tradition, the boys sent to the palace were not to be the only sons, who held the even more sacred duty of siring more boys. But the greatest among our Great Papas was an only son of his family. His father, also an only son, died young before he had the chance to plant more seeds in his wife's belly. With no uncle or brother to send them money from the palace, the boy and his widowed mother lived in poverty. At ten years old, after a fight with the neighbors' boys who had bragged about their brothers accepting gold bricks from the emperor's hands, the boy went into the cowshed and cleaned himself, with a rope and a sickle. According to the legend, the boy walked across the town, his male root dripping blood in his hand, and shouted to the people watching on with pity in their eyes, "Wait till I become the best servant of His Majesty!" Unable to endure the shame and the despair of living under a sonless and grandsonless roof, his mother threw herself into a well. Twenty years later, the son became the master eunuch in the palace, taking under his charge twenty-eight hundred eunuchs and thirty-two hundred handmaids. With no brothers to send his money to, he saved every coin and retired as the richest man in the region. He hired men to dig out his poor mother's coffin and gave her a second funeral, the most extravagant one ever to take place in our town. It was in the

ninth month of 1904, and to this day our old people haven't stopped talking about every detail of the funeral: the huge coffin carved out of a sandalwood tree, stacks of gold bricks, trunks of silk clothes, and cases of jade bowls for her to use in the next life. Even more impressive were the four young girls the son had purchased from the poor peasants on the mountain, all of them twelve years old. They were put into satin dresses they would have never dreamed of wearing and were each fed a cup of mercury. The mercury killed them instantly, so their peachy complexions were preserved when they were paraded in sedan chairs before the coffin. With burning incense planted in their curled fingers, the four girls accompanied the mother to the other world as her loyal handmaids.

This Great Papa's story was the brightest page in our history, like that one most splendid firework streaking the sky before darkness floods in. Soon the last dynasty was overthrown by republics. The emperor was driven out of the Forbidden City; so were his most loyal servants, the last generation of our Great Papas. By the 1930s most of them lived in poverty in the temples around the Forbidden City. Only the smartest ones earned a fair living by showing their bodies to Western reporters and tourists, charging extra for answering questions, even more for having their pictures taken.

THEN WE HAVE a short decade of republic, the warlords, two world wars, in both of which we fought on the winning side yet winning nothing, the civil war, and finally we see the dawn of communism. The day the dictator claims the communist victory in our country, a young carpenter in our town comes home to his newly wedded wife.

"It says we are going to have a new life from now on," the

young wife tells the husband, pointing to a loudspeaker on their roof.

"New or old, life is the same," the husband replies. He gets his wife into bed and makes love to her, his eyes half closed in ecstasy while the loudspeaker is broadcasting a new song, with men and women repeating the same lyrics over and over.

This is how the son is conceived, in a chorus of *Communism is so great, so great, and so great*. The same song is broadcast day after day, and the young mother hums along, touching her growing belly, and cutting carefully the dictator's pictures from newspapers. Of course we never call him the dictator. We call him Our Father, Our Savior, the North Star of Our Lives, the Never Falling Sun of Our Era. Like most women of her generation, the mother is illiterate. Yet unlike others, she likes to look at newspapers, and she saves the pictures of the dictator in a thick notebook. Isn't she the woman with the greatest wisdom in our town? No other woman would ever think of watching the dictator's face while pregnant with a son. Of course there has always been the saying that the more a pregnant woman studies a face, the greater the possibility of the baby owning that face. Years ago, young mothers in the cities liked to watch one kind of imported doll, all of them having a foreign name, Shirley Temple. Decades later, movie stars will be the most studied faces among the pregnant mothers. But at this time the dictator is the only superstar in the media, so the mother has been gazing at the dictator's face for ten months before the baby's birth.

The son is born with the dictator's face, a miracle unnoticed by us at first. For the next ten years we will avoid looking at him, for fear we will see his dead father in his face.

The father was a hardworking man, nice to his neighbors, good to his wife. We would have never imagined that he would be an enemy of our newborn communist nation. Yet there are witnesses, not one, but a whole pub of evening drinkers.

What gets him killed is his comment about heroes and sows. At this time, we respect the communist power above us as our big brother. In our big-brother country, the Soviet Union, it is said, women are encouraged to produce babies for the communist cause, and those who have given birth to a certain number of babies are granted the title *mother hero*. Now that we are on the same highway to the same heaven, the dictator decides to adopt the same policy.

The young carpenter is a little drunk when he jokes aloud to his fellow drinkers, "Mother heroes? My sow has given birth to ten babies in a litter. Shouldn't she be granted a title too?"

That's it, a malicious attack on the dictator's population policy. The carpenter is executed after a public trial. All but his wife attend the meeting, every one of us sticking our fists high and hailing the People's victory, our unanimous voice drowning out his wife's moan from her bed. We shout slogans when the bullet hits the young man's head. We chant revolutionary songs when his body is paraded in the street. When we finally lose our voices from exhaustion, we hear the boy's first cry, loud and painful, and for a moment, it is difficult for us to look into one another's eyes. What have we done to a mother and a baby? Wasn't the dead young man one of our brothers?

What we do not know, at the time, is that a scholar in the capital has been thrown in jail and tortured to death for predicting a population explosion and calling for the dictator to

change the policy. Nor do we know that in a meeting with the leader of the big-brother country in Moscow, the dictator has said that we do not fear another world war or nuclear weapons: *Let the Americans drop the atomic bombs on our heads. We have five hundred million people in our nation. Even if half of us are killed, we still have two hundred and fifty million, and these two hundred and fifty million would produce another two hundred and fifty million in no time.*

Later, when we read his words in the newspaper, our blood boils. For the years to come, we will live with our eyes turned to the sky, waiting for the American bombs to rain down on us, waiting to prove to the dictator our courage, and our loyalty.

THE BOY GROWS up fast like a bamboo shoot. The mother grows old even faster. After the carpenter's death, upon her request, the Revolution Committee in our town gives her a job as our street sweeper. Every dawn, we lie in our beds and listen to the rustling of her bamboo broom. She has become a widow at the age of eighteen, as beautiful as a young widow could be, and naturally some of our bachelors cannot help but fantasize about her in their single beds. Yet none of our young men offers her another marriage. Who wants to marry a counterrevolutionary's widow and spend the rest of his life worrying about being a sympathizer of the wrong person? What's more, even though the dictator has said that men and women are equal in our nation, we still believe a widow who wants another husband is a whore inside. Our belief is confirmed when we read in newspapers the dictator's comment about one of his close followers who has become an enemy of the nation: *A man cannot conceal his*

*reactionary nature forever, just as a widow cannot hide her desire to be fucked.*

So the young mother withers in our eyes. Her face becomes paler each day, and her eyes drier. By the time the boy is ten, the mother looks like a woman of sixty. None of our bachelors bothers to lay his eyes on her face anymore.

The boy turns ten the year the famine starts. Before the famine, for three years, we have been doing nothing except singing for our communist heaven and vowing to liberate the suffering working class around the world. Farmers and workers have stopped toiling, their days spent in the pains and joys of composing yet another poem, competing to be the most productive proletarian poet. We go to the town center every day to discuss the strategy of how to conquer the world under the leadership of the dictator. When the famine catches us unprepared, we listen to the dictator's encouraging words in the loudspeakers. He calls for us to make our belts one notch tighter for our communist future, and we happily punch more holes in them. The second year of the famine, the dictator says in the loudspeakers: *Get rid of the sparrows and the rats; they are the thieves who stole our food and brought hunger to us.*

Killing sparrows is the most festive event in the three long years of famine. After months of drinking thin porridges and eating weed roots, on the morning of the sparrow-killing day we each get two steamed buns from the municipal dining room. After breakfast we climb to the roof of every house, and start to strike gongs and drums at the Revolution Committee's signal. From roof to roof, our arrhythmic playing drives the sparrows into the sky. All morning and all afternoon we play, in different shifts, and whenever a sparrow

tries to rest in a treetop we shoo him away with colorful flags bound to long bamboo poles. In the evening the sparrows start to rain down on us like little bombs, dying in horror and exhaustion. Kids decorated as little scarecrows run around, collecting the dead sparrows for our dinner.

The boy is trying to sneak a sparrow into his sleeve when a bigger boy snatches his hand. "He is stealing the property of the People," the big boy shouts to the town.

"My mom is sick. She needs to eat something," the boy says.

"Hey, boy, what your mom needs is not this kind of bird," a man says, and we roar with laughter. The buns in our stomachs and the sparrows in the baskets have put us in a good mood.

The boy stares at the man for a moment and smacks into him with his head.

"Son of a bitch," the man says, bending over and covering his crotch with his hands.

"Beat the little counterrevolutionary," someone says, and we swarm toward the boy with fists and feet. The famine has made us angrier each day, and we are relieved to have found someone to vent our nameless rage.

The mother rushes into the crowd and tries to push us away. Her presence makes us hit the boy even harder. Some of us pick up bricks and boulders, ready to knock him out. Some of us bare our teeth, ready to eat him alive.

"You all look at his face. Whoever dares to touch him one more time, I'll sue him for his disrespect for our greatest leader," the mother yells, charging at us like a crazy woman.

Our bodies freeze. We look at the boy's face. Even with his swollen face and black eyes, we have no problem telling that he has the face of the dictator, young and rebellious, just

as in the illustrations in the books about the dictator's heroic childhood. The boy stands up and limps to his mother. We look at his face in awe, not daring to move when he spits bloody phlegm at our feet.

"Remember this face," the boy says. "You will have to pay for this one day." He picks up a couple of sparrows and walks away with his mother. We watch them supporting each other like husband and wife.

FOR YEARS WE do not know if it is a blessing or a disaster that a boy with the dictator's face lives among us. We treat the boy and his mother as the most precious and fragile treasure we have, never breathing one word about them to an outsider.

"It may not be a good thing," our old people warn us, and tell us the story of one of our Great Papas, who happened to have the same nickname as the emperor and was thrown into a well to drown. "There are things that are not allowed to exist in duplicates," the old people say.

Yet none of us dares to say one disrespectful word about the boy's face. As he grows older, he looks more and more like the dictator. Sometimes as we walk past him in the street, there is a surge of warmth in our chests, as if the dictator himself were with us. This is the time when the dictator becomes larger than the universe in our nation. Illiterate housewives who have used old newspapers as wallpaper and who have, accidentally, reversed the titles with the dictator's name in them are executed. Parents of little first-graders who have misspelled the dictator's name are sent to labor camps. With the boy living among us, we are constantly walking on a thin layer of ice above deep water. We worry about not paying enough respect to the face, an indication

of our hidden hatred of the dictator. We worry about respecting that face too much, which could be interpreted as our inability to tell the false from the true, worshipping the wrong idol. In our school the teachers never speak one harsh word to him. Whatever games the students play, the side without him is willing to lose. When he graduates from the high school, the Revolution Committee has meetings for weeks to discuss what is an appropriate job for a young man with a face like his. None of the jobs we have in town is safe enough to be given to him. Finally we think we have come up with the best solution to the problem—we elect him as the director of the advisory board to the Revolution Committee.

The young man prospers. Having nothing to do, and not liking to kill his time over cups of tea with the old board members, he walks around town every day, talking to people who are flattered by his greetings, and watching the female sales assistants in the department store blush at his sight. His mother is in much better shape now, with more color in her face. The only inconvenience is that no girl will date the young man. We have warned our daughters that marrying him would either be the greatest fortune or the greatest misfortune. Born into a town where gambling is genuinely disapproved of, none of us wants to marry a daughter off to a man like him.

THE DAY THE dictator dies, we gather at the town center and cry like orphans. On the only television set our town owns, we watch the whole nation howling with us. For three months we wear black mourning armbands to work and to sleep. All entertainments are banned for six months. Even a year or two after his death, we still look sideways at those

women who are growing bellies, knowing that they have been insincere in their mourning. Fathers of those children never receive respect from us again.

It is a difficult time for the young man. Upon seeing his face, some of us break into uncontrollable wails, and he himself has to spend hours crying with us. It must have tired him. For a year he stays in his own room, and the next time we see him, walking toward the town center with a small suitcase, he looks much older than his age of twenty-eight.

"Is there anything wrong?" we greet him with concern. "Don't let too much grief drag you down."

"Thank you, but I am in a fine state," the young man replies.

"Are you leaving for somewhere?"

"Yes, I am leaving."

"Where to?" We feel a pang of panic. Losing him at this time seems as unbearable as losing the dictator one year ago.

"It's a political assignment," the young man says with a mysterious smile. "Classified."

Only after he is driven away in a well-curtained luxury car (the only car most of us have ever seen in our lives) do we catch the news that he is going to the capital for an audition as the dictator's impersonator. It takes us days of discussion among ourselves to figure out what words like "audition" and "impersonator" mean. In the end the only agreement we come to is that he is going to become a great man.

Now that he has disappeared from our sights, his mother becomes the only source for stories of him. A proud mother as she is, every time we inquire of her regarding his whereabouts, she repeats the story of how she gazed at the late

dictator's face day and night when her son was growing inside her. "You know, it's like he is the son of our great leader," she says.

"Yes, all of us are sons of our great leader," we nod and say. "But surely he is the best son."

The mother sighs with great satisfaction. She remembers how in the first few years after her son was born, women of her age produced baby after baby, putting framed certificates of mother heroes on their walls and walking past her with their eyes turning to the sky. Let time prove who is the real hero, she would think and smile to herself.

Then she tells us about her son, every bit of information opening a new door to the world. He rode in the first-class car in a train to the capital, where he and other candidates have settled down in a luxury hotel, and are taken to the dictator's memorial museum every day, studying for the competition.

"Are there other candidates?" we gasp, shocked that she may not be the only woman to have studied the dictator's face during pregnancy.

"I am sure he is the one they want," the mother says. "He says he has total confidence, when he looks at the leader's face, that he is going to be the chosen one."

In the years to come, some among us will have the chance to go to the capital and wait in a long line for hours to take a look at the dictator's face. After his death, a memorial museum was built in the center of our nation's capital, and the dictator's body is kept there in a crystal coffin. *Let our great leader live for ten thousand years in the hearts of a hundred generations* is what the designer has carved into the entrance of the museum. Inside the entrance we will pay a substantial fee for a white paper flower to be placed at the

foot of the crystal coffin, among a sea of white flowers. For a brief moment, some of us will wonder whether the flowers are collected from the base and resold the next day, but instantly we will feel ashamed of ourselves for thinking such impure thoughts in the most sacred place in the world. With the flowers in hand we will walk into the heart of the memorial, in a single hushed file, and we will see the dictator, lying in the transparent coffin, covered by a huge red flag decorated with golden stars, his eyes closed as if in sleep, his mouth in a smile. We will be so impressed with this great man's body that we will ignore the unnatural red color in his cheeks, and his swollen neck as thick as his head.

Our young man must have walked the same route and looked at his face with the same reverence. What else has passed through his heart that does not occur to us? we will wonder.

He must have felt closer to the great man than any one of us. He has the right to feel so, chosen among tens of candidates as the dictator's impersonator. How he beat his rivals his mother never tells us in detail, just saying that he was born for the role. Only much later do we hear the story: our young man and the other candidates spend days in training, and those who are too short or too weak-built for the dictator's stature (even they, too, have the dictator's face) are eliminated in the first round, followed by those who cannot master the dictator's accent. Then there are the candidates who have everything except a clean personal history, like those born to the landlord class. Thanks to the Revolution Committee in our town, which has concealed the history of our young man being the son of an executed counterrevolutionary, he makes it into the final round with three other men. On the final day, when asked to do an improvised

performance, the other three candidates all choose to quote the dictator announcing the birth of our communist nation (which is, as you remember, also the beginning of our young man's own journey), while he, for reasons unknown, says, "A man cannot conceal his reactionary nature forever, just as a widow cannot hide her desire to be fucked."

For a moment, he is horrified by his blunder, and feels the same shame and anger he once felt as a dead sparrow turned cold between his fingers. To his surprise, he is chosen, the reason being that he has caught the essence of the dictator, while the other three only got the rough shape. The three of them are sent with the rest of the candidates for plastic surgery, for, as our old men have said, there are things that are not allowed to exist in duplicate.

OUR YOUNG MAN becomes the sole face that represents the dictator in the nation, and thus start the most glorious years of his life. Movies about the dictator, starring our young man, are filmed by the government-run movie factories. Back in town, we cram into our only theater and watch the movies, secretly blaming our mothers or wives for not having given birth to a great face.

The marriage of the young man becomes our biggest concern. He is over thirty now, an age generally considered indecent for our young daughters. But who will care about the age of a great man? The old-style ones among us hire matchmakers for our daughters, and send with them expensive gifts to his mother. Others, more modern and aggressive, knock on his mother's door with blushing daughters trailing behind. Dazed by the choices, his mother goes to the town center and makes long-distance calls to him every

other day, reporting yet another suitable candidate. But he is no longer a man of our town. He has been flying all over the nation for celebrations and movies; he has seen more attractive women than our town can provide. Through his apologetic mother, he rejects all of our offers. Accepting that our town is too shallow a basin to contain a real dragon, most of us give up and marry our daughters off to local young men. Yet some among us cling to the nonexistent hope, waiting for the day when he will realize the incomparable beauty and virtue of our daughters. For a number of years, scores of girls in our town are kept untouched by their parents. Too much looking forward makes their necks grow longer each year. It is not an unfamiliar sight to see a girl with a crane-like neck walk past us in the street, guarded by her parents, who have grown to resemble giraffes.

The young man is too occupied with his new role to know such stories. He appears in the national celebrations for all the holidays. His most loyal audience, we sit all night long in front of the television and wait for his appearance. On the screen, men and women sing and dance with hearty smiles on their faces like well-trained kindergarteners. Children four or five years old flirt with one another, singing love songs like joyful parrots. At such moments, those of us who think a little more than others start to feel uneasy, haunted by a strange fear that our people are growing down, instead of growing up. But the worry vanishes when our young man, the dictator's impersonator, shows up. People on the screen stand up in ovation and hold out their hands to be shaken. Young women with the prettiest faces rush to him with bouquets of flowers. Kids swarm around him and call him by the name of the dictator. Nostalgic tears fill everyone's eyes. For



a moment we believe time has stopped. The dictator is still alive among us, and we are happily living as his sons.

BUT TIME HAS sneaked by while we were mesmerized by our young man's face. Now we have Sony and Panasonic; we have Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson. We have imported movies in which men and women hold hands freely in the street, and they even kiss each other without a trace of fear in their eyes. Our life, we realize, is not as happy as we have been taught to think. People in those capitalist countries are not waiting for us to be their liberators. They never know of our love for them.

This must be a difficult period for our young man as well. Biographies and memoirs about the dictator appear overnight like spring grass. Unlike the books written collectively by the government-assigned writing groups, these books spell trouble the moment they appear. Soon they are decided to be illegal publications, and are confiscated and burned in great piles. Yet some of the words have spread out, bad words about the dictator. Mouth to mouth the rumors travel, how under his reign fifty million people have died from famine and political persecution. But if you looked at the number closely, you would realize it is far less than what the dictator was once willing to sacrifice to American nuclear bombs. So what is all the fuss about?

Still, we start to think about what we have been led to believe all these years. Once doubt starts, it runs rampant in our hearts like wildfire. Our young man's face appears on the television regularly, but the face has lost its aura. Those of us who have been waiting for his proposal are eager to sell our daughters to the first offer available. The young man's mother, now a garrulous old woman, walks in the street and

grabs whomever she can to tell his stories, none of which impresses us anymore. From his mother we have learned that he is touring across the nation with our present leader, a trip designed to inspire our national belief in communism. So what? we ask, and walk away before the mother has the chance to elaborate.

The tour ends early when a protest breaks out in the capital. Thousands of people rally for democracy in the center of the capital, where the dictator's memorial museum is less and less visited. Threatened and infuriated, our present leader orders the army to fire machine guns at the protesters. Astonishing as the event is, it slips out of our memory as soon as the dead are burned to ashes in the state-supervised crematoriums. The leader has said, as we later read in newspapers, that he is willing to kill two hundred thousand lives in exchange for twenty years of communist stability. Numbed by such numbers, we will echo his words and applaud his wisdom when we are required to publicly condemn those killed in the incident.

In no time the big-brother country above us no longer exists. Then one by one our comrades in arms take turns exiting the historical stage. Confused as we are, we do not know what to think of them, whether we should envy, despise, or pity them.

LIFE IS PRESENTING a big problem to our young man at this time. Although out of habit we still call him our young man, he is no longer young but in his forties. Even worse, he is a man in his forties who has never tasted a woman in his life. Can you believe it? we will ask one another after all that is to come. Incredible; we will shake our heads. But it is true: our young man spent most of his twenties wanting a

woman but we were unwilling to hand our daughters to him; when we were ready, he had become a man too great for our daughters. Time passes ruthlessly. Now that none of our daughters is available anymore, he starts to fantasize about the women he should have had long ago.

Once the desire is awakened, he is no longer able to live in peace. He watches women walking in the streets, their bare arms and legs in summer dresses deliciously attractive, and wonders how it would feel to have a woman of his own. Yet which woman is worthy of his greatness? Sometimes his blood is so unruly that he feels the urge to grab anyone passing by and make her his woman. But once his desire is subdued, after successful masturbation, he is no longer driven by blind craving. At such moments he sees his life more clearly than ever, and he knows that no woman is great enough to match him.

"But you need a wife to give birth to a son," his mother, eager for a grandson, reminds him when he calls long distance to speak to her. "Remember, the first and the foremost duty of a man is to make a son, and pass on his family name."

He mumbles indistinct words and hangs up. He knows that no woman's womb will nurture a son with a face as great as his own.

NOW THAT THE dictator's life has been explored and filmed thoroughly, our young man has more time on his hands. When there is no celebration to attend, he wanders in the street with a heavy coat, his face covered by the high collar and a pair of huge dark glasses. Sometimes he feels the temptation to walk with his face completely bare to the world, but the memory of being surrounded by hundreds of people asking for autographs stops him from taking the risk.

One day he walks across the capital, in search of something he is eager to have but unable to name. When he enters an alley, someone calls to him from behind a cart of newspapers and magazines.

"Want some books, friend?"

He stops and looks at the vendor from behind his dark glasses. "What kind of books?"

"What kind do you want?"

"What kind do you have?"

The vendor moves some magazines and uncovers the plastic sheet beneath the magazines. "Yellows, reds, whatever you want. Fifty yuan a book."

He bends over and looks from above his dark glasses. Underneath the plastic sheet are books with colorful covers. He picks one up and looks at a man and a woman, both naked, copulating in a strange position on the cover. His heart starts to beat in his chest, loud and urgent.

"That's a good yellow one," the vendor says, "as yellow as you want."

He clasps the book with his fingers. "What else do you have?"

"How about this red one?" The vendor hands him another book, the dictator's face on the cover. "Everybody loves this book."

He has heard of the book, a memoir written by the dictator's physician of thirty years, banned when it was published abroad, and smuggled into the country from Hong Kong and America.

He pays for the two books and walks back to his room. He studies the dictator's portrait and compares it with his own face in the mirror, still perfect from every angle. He sighs and plunges into the yellow book, devouring it like a

starved man. When his erection becomes too painful, he forces himself to drop the book and pick up the red one.

He feels an emptiness that he has never felt before, switching between the books when one becomes too unbearable. In the yellow book he sees a world he has missed all his life, in which a man has an endless supply of women, all of them eager to please him. Yet for all he knows, the only man who could have as many women as he wants is the dictator. He leafs through the red book one more time, looking at the pictures of the dictator in the company of young attractive nurses, and realizes that he has misunderstood his role all these years. To be a great man means to have whatever he wants from the world. Blaming himself for this belated understanding, he stands up and goes out into the night.

He has no difficulty locating a prostitute in the dimly lit karaoke-and-dance bar. As a precaution he keeps his dark glasses and heavy coat on the whole time they are bargaining. Then he goes away with the young woman to a nearby hotel, sneaking through a side door into a room the woman has reserved, while she deals with the receptionist.

What comes next is perplexing to us. All we can figure out from the rumors is that when he is asked to undress, he refuses to take off either his dark glasses or his heavy coat. To be a great man means to have a woman in whatever way he wants, our young man must be thinking. But how is a man like him able to resist the skillful fingers of a professional like the woman he has hired? In a confusing moment, he is as naked as the woman, his face bare and easy to recognize. Before he realizes it, the woman's pimp, dressed up in police uniform, rushes in with a pair of handcuffs and a camera. Lights flash and snapshots are taken, his hands cuffed and clothes confiscated. Only then does the couple

recognize his face, and we can imagine how overjoyed they must be by such a discovery. Instead of the usual amount, they ask for ten times what others pay, because our young man is a celebrity and should pay a celebrity price for the pictures.

To this day we still disagree on how our young man should have reacted. Some of us think he should have paid and let himself go free, money being no problem for him. Others think he did nothing wrong by refusing to cooperate, but he should have gone to the police and reported the couple, instead of thinking such things would pass unnoticed. After the night, rumors start to spread across the capital, vivid stories about our young man's regular visits to the illegal brothels. The pictures he has failed to secure are circulated in different circles, until everyone in the capital claims that he has seen them. None of us in town has seen the pictures. Still, our hearts are broken when we imagine his body, naked and helpless, and we try our best to keep our mind's eyes away from the familiar face in those pictures.

He is considered unsuitable to continue as the impersonator of the dictator, for, as it is put in the letter addressed to him by the Central Committee of Cultural Regulation, he has soiled the name he is representing. Never before had it occurred to him that a man like him could be fired. There is no other face like his in the world, and who would replace him, the most irreplaceable man in the nation? He goes from office to office, begging for another chance, vowing never to touch a woman again. What he does not understand is that his role is no longer needed. A new leader has come into power and proclaimed himself the greatest guide of our communist cause in the new millennium. Talent scouts are combing through the nation for a new perfect face different from his own.

So our no longer young man comes home on a gloomy winter day. Stricken by shame, his mother has turned ill overnight and left us before he makes his way back. The day he arrives, some of us—those who remember him as the boy with a sparrow in his hand, who have secretly wished him to be our son-in-law, who have followed his path for years as the loyal audience of his mother, and who have, despite the pain of seeing him fall, lived for the joy of seeing his face—yes, those of us who have been salvaged from our mundane lives by loving him, we gather at the bus stop and hold out our hands for him to shake. He gets off the bus and ignores our earnest smiles, his dark glasses and high collar covering his face. Watching him walk to his mother's grave, with a long shadow limping behind him, we decide we will forgive him for his rudeness. Who would have the heart to blame a son like him? No matter what has happened to him, he is still the greatest man in our history, our boy and our hero.

TRUST US, IT breaks our hearts when he cleans himself by his mother's tomb. How such a thought occurred to him we will never understand, especially since, if we are not mistaken, he is still a virgin who has so much to look forward to in life. The night it happens, we hear a long howl in our sleep. We rush outside into the cold night and find him in our cemetery. Even though we have grown up listening to the legends of our Great Papas, the scene makes us sick to our bones. We wonder what the meaning of such an act is. No one in our town—not we the small people, not our Great Papas—has reached the height that he has. Even our greatest Great Papa was only the best servant of the emperor, while he, with the face of the dictator, was once the emperor himself. Watching him roll over on the ground, his face

smearred with tears and blood, we remember the story of the ten-year-old boy, his male root in his hand, his face calm and proud. This is a sad moment for us, knowing that we, the children of our Great Papas, will never live up to their legends.

But lamenting aside, we still have a newly cleaned man to deal with. Some of us insist on sending him to the hospital for emergency treatment; others consider such a move unnecessary, for the act is done and there is no more harm left. Confused as we are, none of us remembers to collect the most important thing at the scene. Later, when we realize our mistake, we spend days searching every inch of our cemetery. Yet the missing part from his body has already disappeared, to whose mouth we do not want to imagine.

He survives, not to our surprise. Hadn't all our Great Papas survived and lived out their heroic stories? He is among us now, with a long barren life ahead. He sits in the sun and watches the dogs chasing one another, his face hidden behind dark glasses and the high collar of his coat. He walks to the cemetery in the dusk and talks to his mother until the night falls.

As for us, we have seen him born in pain and we will, in time, see him die in pain. The only thing we worry about is his next life. With his male root forever missing, what will we put into the silk sack to bury with him? How will we be able to send a soul to the next world in such incompleteness?

For the peace of our own minds, every day we pray for his health. We pray for him to live forever as we prayed for the dictator. He is the man whose story we do not want to end, and as far as we can see, there will be no end to his story.