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Gold Mountain Dream



*Year eleven of the reign of Tongzhi to year five of the reign
of Guangxu (1872–1879)*

Spur-On Village, Hoi Ping County, Guangdong Province, China

The village lay within the boundaries of the township of Wo On in Hoi Ping County. Newfangled as its name sounds, the village was actually a couple of hundred years old. Legend has it that in the reign of the Qing emperor Qianlong, two brothers fled from famine-stricken Annam and settled here with their families. They cleared the land, tilled the soil, raised cattle and pigs and within a decade or so were firmly established. As he lay dying, the elder brother issued an exhortation to the whole family—they were to spur themselves on to ever-great efforts. Thus the village acquired the name Tsz Min, or Spur-On Village.

By the reign of Tongzhi, Spur-On Village had grown into a sizeable place, with over a hundred families. There were two clans: the Fongs, the dominant family and descendants of the Annamese brothers, and the Aus, outsiders who had come from Fujian. They were almost all farmers, with

the difference that the Fongs owned large, contiguous fields while the Au clan, who had arrived later, cultivated scraps of land which they cleared at the edges of the Fongs' fields. Later the two families began to intermarry, the daughters of one with the sons of the other. As the families merged, so, gradually, did the fields, and the differences in status between the Fongs and the AUs blurred too. This did not last: events took place which sharpened edges previously blunted ... but that was not until much later.

One boundary of the village was marked by a small river, while at the other end was a low hill. The fields lay in a depression between the two landmarks; after years of intensive cultivation, they were fertile and productive and, in good years, their produce was enough to support the entire village. In times of drought and flooding, however, sons and daughters were still sometimes sold as servants.

Apart from growing crops, the people of Spur-On Village also reared pigs, grew vegetables, and did embroidery and weaving. They ate a little of their own produce, but most was taken to market and the cash used to buy household goods. Almost all Spur-On families had pigs and cattle, but there was only one slaughterman among them: Fong Tak Fat's father, Fong Yuen Cheong.

Three generations of Fong Yuen Cheong's family had been slaughtermen. As soon he was weaned and able to toddle without falling over, Fong Tak Fat would squat bare-bottomed next to his father and watch him butcher pigs. The knife went in white and came out red but he was not the least bit scared. "The furthest I've been to butcher pigs is ten or twenty *li*," his father boasted to the other villagers, "but our Ah-Fat will travel thousands of *li* to butcher pigs." Only half of this boast was correct, the bit about thousands of *li*.¹ He was wrong about the butchering because before the time had come for him to hand his son the knife, Fong Yuen Cheong died.

Yuen Cheong's branch of the Fong family had been getting poorer with every generation. His father had still owned a few *mu*² of poor land, but by Yuen Cheong's time, they were reduced to renting a few patches here and

¹ One *li* is approximately one-third of a mile.

² One *mu* is approximately 0.16 of an acre.

there. After the rent on the land had been paid, the yield was only enough to fill half the family rice bowl. They relied on Yuen Cheong's butchering work for the other half. If he killed his own clan's pigs in Spur-On Village, he received only the offal. It was when he worked for families who were not related, like the Aus, or who were from other villages, that he could earn a few coppers. So the family rice bowl sometimes stayed half-empty. It depended on the weather, the number of animals to be killed, the agricultural almanac and the cultural calendar—at propitious times when there were more weddings and more houses being built, more animals were killed.

Beginning in year ten of the reign of Tongzhi, there were two successive years of drought. The river which ran past the village dried to a strip of ooze over which clouds of insects swarmed as the evening sun went down. The fish and shrimps were nowhere to be seen. The parched earth, like an infant mewling for the breast, longed for rain which never came. The harvests were poor and few pigs were killed. It got harder and harder for Fong Yuen Cheong to feed his family.

But then Yuen Cheong's fortunes changed. It happened one market day in Tongzhi year eleven.

He got up at the crack of dawn that day and killed a yearling pig. He had wanted to keep it until the end of the year and cure its meat but he could not wait. The family *wok* had seen not even a drop of lard for too long. The pig could not wait either—by now it was hardly more than skin and bones. When he had killed it, he set the head, tail and offal to one side and cut the body and legs up into several pieces to take to market. He hoped he could buy a few lotus seed paste cakes with the money; his younger son, Tak Sin, would be a year old the day after tomorrow. They could not afford a birthday banquet but at least they could share the pastries among the neighbours.

Before he set off, his wife, Mrs. Mak, laid a few lotus leaves lightly over the meat to stop the flies getting at it. Then she lit an incense stick before the statue of the *bodhisattva* and prayed that the sun would not get hot too quickly; fresh pork could not stand too much sitting in the hot sun. As Yuen Cheong went to the doorway, he heard her grumbling: "It's Red Hair's mum's sixtieth birthday and we're invited to the dinner but my skirt's full of moth holes." She wanted him to buy her a piece of material with the

pig money, and suddenly he felt a rush of anger. Putting down the shoulder pole, he rounded on his wife:

“They’ve got family in Gold Mountain, but we haven’t, have we? All you do all day is try and keep up with the neighbours!”

With a wail, Mrs. Mak slumped to the ground. Fong Tak Fat went to the door, grabbed the shoulder pole and thrust it firmly into his father’s hand. His father was still glowering but he put the pole back on his shoulder and walked out, sweat beading his forehead. Ah-Fat, as everyone called his older son, was a shrimp of a nine-year-old, a child whose body had not begun to fill out. He said little but he gazed at the world with piercing eyes. His father was secretly a little afraid of him.

Shooing away some half-starved dogs, Yuen Cheong padded barefoot along the mud track out of the village. When he reached the river, he went down to the dried-up bed, where he could see that a puddle of water had collected in the crack between the rocks. Scooping up a handful, he washed his face. The little eddies distorted his reflection so that his eyes and nose appeared to jump off his face. He pursed up his thick, heavy lips as if he were going to smile, but then did not. The water ran down his forehead and gradually cooled him. His heart felt lighter. He knew why he had hit out at his wife, and it had nothing to do with her skirt. It was all to do with Red Hair.

Red Hair was a distant cousin. He got his nickname because, with his high nose and deep-set eyes, he looked a bit like one of those White foreigners who were supposed to have reddish hair on their heads. By now, few people remembered his real name. As children, the pair of them used to catch fish and shrimps in the ponds, grope for loaches in the paddy fields and steal melons from other people’s melon patches. Red Hair was older by a few years, but he was a bit of an oaf. Yuen Cheong was the smarter of the two and bossed Red Hair around. That only changed when, a few years ago, Red Hair married an Au girl in the village who had a cousin in Gold Mountain. Then, somehow, he stumbled onto the boat and off he went too.

There were lots of stories in the village about Red Hair in Gold Mountain. One went like this: he had gone to some remote mountains to pan for gold. The water he collected in a wooden bucket dried up under

the fierce sun and he found solidified gold dust left. According to another story there was a plague in Gold Mountain a few years back. Red Hair stuffed his mouth with a thick cloth, carried corpses for the *yeung fan*³ and got a dollar a corpse. He also used to deliver gruel to the leprosy hospital for three coppers a bowl. People asked his mother whether these stories were true, but she just gave a smile and would not say yes or no. No one really knew what it was that Red Hair did in Gold Mountain, but they did know that he had made a lot of money and sent dollar letters home every month. In fact, every time his mother got one of these letters, she was on cloud nine. No one else cared one way or the other, but Yuen Cheong was furious. He knew Red Hair inside out. He was too stupid even to wipe his own arse properly.

But Red Hair had become a rich man while Yuen Cheong still slaved away at that half-a-rice-bowl work.

As Yuen Cheong carried the pork meat to market that day he had no idea of the extraordinary turn his life was going to take. Fate had something completely different in store for the simple, impecunious slaughterman—and his family were to find themselves transported from a life of abject poverty to the heights of riches along with him.

Yuen Cheong meandered on his way and finally arrived in town—to find all quiet and hardly anyone around. This being a market day, the streets should have been jammed with people so tightly packed that they stepped on each other's toes. He eventually came upon a couple of hawkers, and discovered that the town had been attacked by bandits the night before. They had swept through the house of one of the richest families like a hurricane, plundering and killing two people. Government troops were now patrolling the town but its inhabitants were too frightened to stir out of doors.

Yuen Cheong had come all this way and could not turn back now, so he put down his shoulder pole and sat down at the roadside to try his luck. By midday he had sold only one trotter and one piece of tenderloin. The sun rose high above his head and the shrilling of the cicadas drilled holes in his

³ White Canadian

eardrums. In the wicker baskets, the meat gradually turned pale and sweaty. Yuen Cheong cursed furiously at the lousy hand fate had dealt him. If only he had known, he would have salted down the pig meat. That way, the meat and the lard could have flavoured their meals for a few more months.

A moment later a couple of swarthy fellows dressed in short jackets appeared. They ran frantically down the street and thrust a bag into his hands. "Look after this carefully, brother, and don't move from this spot," said one in low tones. "We'll be back for it in a few hours—and we'll make it worth your while." Yuen Cheong had sharp eyes and he could see the weapons bulging at their waists. He said nothing but began to tremble like a leaf. As he watched them dart into a nearby alleyway, he felt something warm trickling down his thighs—he had wet his trousers.

Yuen Cheong hugged the heavy bag to himself and waited at the roadside until the sun dipped down towards the horizon, the night wind got up and the few market-goers dispersed. Still those fellows did not come back. He looked carefully around, then surreptitiously pulled a corner of the bag loose and peeked inside. What he saw made him go weak at the knees and his eyes glaze over.

The bag was neatly stacked with gold ingots.

He chucked the bag into his basket and covered it with the meat wrapped in lotus leaves. He put the heavy carrying pole on his shoulder, pulled his bamboo hat down low over his eyes and crept away into a side street.

It was almost midnight by the time he got home. The three children were asleep and only his wife waited up for him. She sat on a stool by the stove airing her feet. Since water was now so scarce, she could only wash her feet every couple of weeks. This was quite a business—just unwinding the wrapping cloths took a long time. The women of Spur-On Village always worked alongside their menfolk in the fields, so most of them had feet of a natural size. But Mrs. Mak was from San Wui Village and her feet had been bound from the age of five. As she aired her feet, she embroidered the edging for a woman's hat which she would sell in the market. It was black with tiny pink oleanders around the brim. To save on oil, Mrs. Mak had trimmed the lamp till the flame was pea-sized. She frowned over her work but could hardly see the needle in her hand. Hearing the dog bark,

she threw the embroidery down and hobbled on the tips of her bare feet to open the door.

Yuen Cheong came in pouring with sweat. His wife's foot bindings lay curled on the stool like a sloughed snakeskin and the air was thick with a fetid smell. He held his nose before giving an almighty sneeze. Then he put down the carrying pole and slumped to the floor, staring straight ahead of him. His wife looked searchingly at him, but he said nothing.

She could see that little of the meat had been sold, and guessed that Yuen Cheong was tired and angry. She ought to offer some words of comfort but did not dare open her mouth. Finally, she went into their room and brought out a towel for her husband to wipe the sweat from his face.

"Tomorrow, I'll send my younger brother to Canton to buy a skirt for you," Yuen Cheong said feebly, rolling his eyes.

It took only half a day for Yuen Cheong to go from being a poverty-stricken nobody to a stupendously wealthy member of the Fong clan. Then it took his family another half-dozen years to slide back into poverty again.

With the money which had dropped into his hands, Yuen Cheong bought up neighbouring fields and built a residential compound with three entrance courtyards on one of them. He had a low opinion of the village bricklayer, so instead sent for a master bricklayer from Fujian, and paid through the nose for it. The walls were of pure red brick, the tiles were glazed green, and the ground was covered with large grey-black flagstones. Each courtyard was laid out in exactly the same way, with an open paved area, main hall, side hall, east chamber and west chamber. Guests were received and offered tea in the main hall, while the side hall was the study. Fong Yuen Cheong could hardly read, but he knew the value of literacy and wanted his sons to be well read. The second and third courtyards were to be used by his sons when they grew up and married. For this reason, they each had a side entrance so that if by any chance the wives did not get along, they could use their own gates. Yuen Cheong had it all worked out.

Spur-On villagers had seen little of the world and had never seen a courtyard residence like this before. Compared with the houses built by the Gold Mountain workers for their families, this was rather more stylish.

When the Fongs moved in, the villagers gathered in droves to watch as Yuen Cheong and his children set off firecrackers, sending the village chickens and dogs into a frenzy. Red Hair's mother was among the bystanders, standing silently on the far edge of the crowd.

The Fongs' land was rented out to tenant farmers, but Yuen Cheong continued to butcher pigs and cows—not for the offal or for cash, but to keep his hand in. He found that if he stayed at home for days on end, he would wake up in the night to a swishing noise coming from his knives hanging on the wall. He would get up the next morning and go house to house asking if anyone needed butchering done. He looked so restless that the villagers would even give him their chickens and ducks for slaughter, and he was happy to oblige them.

The Fongs' compound now housed half a dozen farm labourers, manservants and maids, and Mrs. Mak did not have to worry herself about either the heavy work in the fields or the housework. But Mrs. Mak had spent a lifetime working too and could not rest now. So every day she taught her daughter Ah-Tou how to sew and embroider, in preparation for the time when she would make a good marriage. Her younger son, Ah-Sin, was a toddler and spent his days chasing the chickens and scrapping with dogs in the courtyards. Her oldest son, Ah-Fat, went to a tutor school every day.

There was a teacher named Mr. Ding, in Spur-On Village itself. He was from neither of the two village clans, but had moved in with his Au family in-laws on marriage (only the most indigent men did that). He knew the classics, and spent his time writing letters for the villagers, and painting couplets for them to hang beside their doors at the Chinese New Year or when there was a death in the family. He also taught a few of the village children to read and write. But Yuen Cheong felt the pedantic old stick was not worthy to teach his son, and asked around for a suitable teacher in the township. Mr. Auyung Ming was found. He was an erudite young man who was well versed in the classics. He had also studied Western subjects with a Christian priest in the city of Canton, and taught both kinds of learning at the tutor school he set up in the township. In fact, he was only interested in teaching the exceptional students and rejected any child who might be a bit slow. To reinforce this message, the school fees were set very high. This was just what Yuen Cheong wanted for his son, and he got a friend to take the

boy along for an interview. Mr. Auyung looked him up and down, and said simply: "What a shame." After that, every day, come rain or shine, Ah-Fat walked the dozen or so *li* to attend Mr. Auyung's lessons.

Life burned brightly for Yuen Cheong in those days—the way a pile of brushwood thrown together goes up with a whoosh when a favourable wind happens along. But the fire burned hotly, and extinguished itself too soon.

The reason was Yuen Cheong's addiction to opium.

Fong Yuen Cheong smoked his opium in the most refined way. The main hall in the first courtyard of his residence was turned into his smoking room. It had a four-panelled screen covered with embroidered animals, birds, fish and flowers in the Suzhou style. All the furnishings—couch, chest and table—were of carved rosewood. Yuen Cheong's pipe was made of Burmese ivory and he smoked the highest-grade raw opium exported by the East India Company.

Mrs. Mak became expert in attending to her husband when he smoked. Just before the craving came on, she would prepare the pipe so that the opium bubbled up ready for her to put it into his hand. She had learned just the right height for the pillow, the right angle for the footstool, and the choice and arrangement of the snacks. As soon as he lay down on the couch, five little dishes would be artfully laid out on the table ready for him. Jerky strips, *char siu* pork buns, and various cakes made of green beans, sesame or lotus paste were the usual fare, together with a cup of milk. His smoking implements were rubbed until they glistened and were laid out neatly in the chest until the time came for them to be used.

Mrs. Mak was distressed to see the family fortune dissipate in the smoke from the opium pipe, but she had her own way of calculating the losses and gains. Her husband had been a vigorous and energetic man who would not stay put at home, and who spent his time eating and drinking and getting into fights. It was far better that he should be tied to the house by an opium pipe. She knew too that if she did not attend to his needs, he might go and buy himself a concubine and get her to attend to him instead. That was what men did when they had enough money.

Once his urge for a smoke was satisfied, Yuen Cheong became the mildest of men. He was not yet thirty years old, but when he smiled, there was a touch of an old man's benevolence in his expression. He spoke gently

and even with a touch of wit. He liked his wife to parade around in front of him in the clothes and finery he bought her in Canton. Sometimes this was in front of the servants, in the opium-smoking room. At other times, it was when they were in their bedroom; then he would shut the doors and windows and would use more than his eyes. Mrs. Mak minced around in an attempt to evade his groping hands, her face flushed just like in the heady days when they were young.

Not only were the jagged edges of Yuen Cheong's once-fiery temper rubbed smooth by the opium—so too were the rough edges of the wide world. He was at ease with the world and it with him. As his twinkling gaze swept over everyone around him, he had no idea that, thousands of *li* away, the Empress Dowager in Beijing's Forbidden City was desperately shoring up what remained of the Qing Empire after the onslaught by Western armies. He also had no idea that, much closer to home, his tenant farmers and household servants were stealthily nibbling away at his family's property like so many hungry mice.

When he had had his fill of opium, Yuen Cheong would make his eldest son sit beside him and, breaking off a piece of sesame or green bean cake, put it into Ah-Fat's hand. "And what did Mr. Auyung teach you today, son? Did you practise your calligraphy?" He had seen straightaway that his eldest was a quick learner. Maybe one day his son might pass the Imperial examinations. He racked his brains to see if he could remember any Cantonese operas in which a slaughterman's son passed the Imperial examinations creditably enough to achieve an audience with the Son of Heaven in the Golden Carriage Palace—but could not think of any.

Looking at the smoking equipment scattered around the opium couch, Ah-Fat said nothing but his eyebrows drew together in a worried frown. His father was used to this expression on his son's face; since the moment he was born, the boy had seemed grown up. Yuen Cheong soaked a piece of beef jerky in the milk to soften it and stuffed it into Ah-Fat's mouth, saying gently: "Isn't Daddy good to you then, son?"

Ah-Fat swallowed the morsel before it choked him: "Mr. Auyung says foreigners sell us opium to break our spirit," he said. "If the spirit of the people is broken, then the country is broken too." Now it was his father who could think of nothing to say. After a few minutes, he ruffled his son's

head. “How many years has your old dad got left then? After that, it’ll be you the family depends on. So long as you don’t smoke, you can save the family. I’ll be passing the responsibility on to you sooner or later.”

Ah-Fat sighed: “Mr. Auyung says, if the young Emperor can break free of the Dowager and ascend the throne, he can use his knowledge of the West and work out a way to contain the Western powers...” but his father quickly put his hand over his son’s mouth. “Isn’t he afraid of losing his head, saying things like that?” he cried. “Us ordinary folk shouldn’t meddle in politics. I just want you to look after your family.”

But circumstances put a premature end to all Fong Yuen Cheong’s plans for his son’s future. Six years after he so unexpectedly came into his fortune, he overdosed on opium and died on his couch. In retrospect, he was lucky to die when he did. Even if he had not, it might still have been his last smoke. By the time he died, almost all the Fongs’ land had been sold, and the family’s remaining valuable jewellery had been pawned. All that was left was his stone-flagged residence—and the queues of creditors waiting at the gates.

That was how Fong Tak Fat, aged fifteen, became head of the household in the space of a night.

Most of the Fong compound was sold and Ah-Fat lived with his family in the first courtyard. They rented back some of the land they had sold, and Ah-Fat was the main labourer. With her bound feet Mrs. Mak could not do farm work, but she did have one special skill. Her brocaded cloth was the finest in the township. She sewed beads onto the cloth and worked it with flower designs in gold and silver thread. She made aprons, shoe uppers, hats and belts which she could sometimes sell on market day for a few cents. She was in demand in the village too, to embroider garments for weddings, funerals, births and longevity birthday parties. She did not charge a fee, but in exchange for her work the family would send a strong, young farmhand to help Ah-Fat in the fields at sowing and harvest times.

The winter that Yuen Cheong died, his youngest son, Ah-Sin, had an epileptic fit. While eating his dinner he suddenly fell from the stool and bit off a piece of his tongue. When he came to, he seemed only half there. From that day on, he had fits everywhere—in the fields, on the ground, in bed, at the table, in the toilet—all completely without warning.

Mrs. Mak wove and embroidered from morning till night. Eventually eyestrain, together with her worries about Ah-Sin's epilepsy, led to severe conjunctivitis. Her eyelids swelled up and the rims of her eyes were thickly smeared with pus. She could not sew any more and the entire responsibility for the Fong family now fell on Ah-Fat's shoulders.

To raise money to treat Ah-Sin's illness Mrs. Mak was forced to sell off her daughter, Ah-Tou, to a family who lived twenty *li* away.

Witnessed by the elders of the clan, she put her thumbprint on an irrevocable title deed. It read as follows:

Through this deed, Mrs. Fong-Mak gives her daughter, Ah-Tou, to Chan Ah Yim of Sai Village as a maid and has today received fifty silver dollars in recompense for this gift. From the day on which her daughter is given over, she shall have nothing more to do with the Fongs. Each side shall be satisfied with this agreement and there shall be no dissenting voices on either side, the signing and witnessing of this deed being the written guarantee thereof.

Signed the fifth day of the eleventh month of year four of the reign of Guangxu (1878)

Ah-Tou was sold to a family that had a small dyers business. The head of the family was fifty-eight years old, and had a wife and two concubines, but none of them had borne him a son and heir. He had a bit of money but the family was not especially well off, and he could not afford more concubines. His solution was to buy in girls from poor families, to use partly as maids, partly as concubines. All the time and effort Mrs. Mak spent teaching her daughter elaborate needlework was wasted. Ah-Tou would only be doing rough work from now on.

Ah-Tou was only thirteen when she left home. Mrs. Mak arranged to meet the Chans in town to hand her over, but fearing her daughter would refuse to go, lied to her. Ah-Tou thought they were going to market. Just before they left, Mrs. Mak put two hard-boiled eggs into Ah-Tou's handkerchief. It was a long time since Ah-Tou had had an egg to eat. "Have Ah-Fat and Ah-Sin had any?" she asked. "No, only you," said her mother. Ah-Tou peeled one and ate it so fast that it stuck in her throat. Eventually she

managed to summon enough saliva to swallow it, after choking and spluttering till purple veins stood out on her forehead. When it came to the second egg, she cracked the shell but then gave it back: "Let's leave it for Ah-Sin," she said, "he's just a little kid." Mrs. Mak quietly took out a silver dollar from inside her jacket: "Keep it safe," she said, giving it to her daughter. "Don't let anyone see it." Ah-Tou gripped the dollar tightly in her sweaty palm and was silent. Finally she asked: "What shall I buy in the market with so much money?" "Whatever you like." Ah-Tou thought for a moment. "I'll go to the Christian priest's pharmacy in town, Mum," she said finally, "and get a bottle of eyewash for you. With what's left, I'll get four walnut cookies, one for Ah-Fat, one for me, and two for Ah-Sin." Ah-Tou was the in-between child, two years younger than Ah-Fat and six years older than Ah-Sin. She had carried Ah-Sin around on her back ever since he was a baby, so she was as much a mother to him as an elder sister. Mrs. Mak turned away: "Eat it all, child, it's all for you. Don't leave any for anyone else," she said, the tears running down her face.

When they reached the market, Mrs. Mak saw the Chans and gave her daughter a little push. "Go for a walk with Auntie Chan," she said. "I'm going to the toilet." She walked away a few steps, and then hid around the corner of a wall. She watched as Ah-Tou, dragging her feet behind the Chan woman and looking around for her mother, receded into the distance. Mrs. Mak felt as if a piece of her heart had been cut out.

She made her way home in a daze. It was nearly nightfall. She did not light the fire or get dinner ready, just sat staring blankly at the stove. Ah-Fat came in from the fields. "Where's Ah-Tou?" he asked. "I haven't seen her all day." There was no answer. He persisted and she finally said through gritted teeth: "I've cut out my own flesh to feed to the dogs." When Ah-Fat finally realized he would never see his sister in this life again, he threw down the bowl of water, ran out and squatted by the roadside. It was many years before the Spur-On villagers forgot the sounds of his sobbing. He did not cry loudly, in fact he choked the tears back until they sounded like the broken whimpers of a dying dog. Life had been terribly hard these last years and the Spur-On villagers had seen and heard enough weeping to turn their hearts to stone. But Ah-Fat's grief still brought tears to their eyes.

The next day, Ah-Fat went to say goodbye to his teacher. Mr. Auyung was stretched over the table doing calligraphy. When he heard Ah-Fat's news, he threw down his weasel-hair brush, spattering the table with ink. "There's no cure," he said, "it's terminal." Ah-Fat knew he was not referring to himself.

Before Ah-Fat left, Mr. Auyung chose a few books for him to take home. "Even if I can't teach you," he said, "you should still read your books." Ah-Fat shook his head. "If you have any books on farming and keeping livestock, you can give me a couple of those." His teacher was silent.

Ah-Fat did not eat his dinner when he got home. In the middle of the night, Mrs. Mak was woken by a rustling, a noise like a rat nibbling at rice straw. She pulled her clothing around her shoulders and got up. By the light of the lamp's tiny flame, her son was ripping up sheets of paper. She was illiterate but she knew these were the copybooks and textbooks he used at Mr. Auyung's school. Over the years he had stored a stack of them carefully away. She nearly seized them from him, but what was the use? They had already been reduced to confetti. Mrs. Mak felt comforted too, for she could see that Ah-Fat had accepted his fate.

From that day on, Ah-Fat threw himself into farming.

Six months after Yuen Cheong died, Red Hair came home from Gold Mountain.

Ah-Fat heard about Red Hair when he was transplanting rice seedlings, with a farmhand whose help his mother's needlework had secured for him. The other villagers had finished theirs, but he had had to wait a few days for the man to arrive. The paddy water was cold in early spring, and his feet, planted in the mud, soon went numb. He was not good at farm work. Years spent at home and at school had distanced him from the land. The land knew he was an outsider and bullied him. He felt like his calves and back were bound together with wire. Every time he bent down, the wire pulled taut and cut into his flesh, giving him sharp jabbing pains. The farmhand walked in front of him, working swiftly and planting neat rows of evenly spaced seedlings, compared to his own, which were messy and crooked. When he thought of his mother's infected eyes and his epileptic

brother, his skin crawled and terror gripped him. Above him the lowering sky pressed down on him like cotton wadding.

Even though it was overcast today, he knew that sunset was a long way off. When will it all end? he wondered, with a sigh that stirred eddies in the paddy field.

“The Gold Mountain uncle! He’s arrived!” the children’s cries went up. Ah-Fat spotted them racing excitedly along the dyke.

Behind the children came a dozen porters, each pair carrying a trunk between them. The trunks were of camphor wood, two to three feet high, and reinforced at each corner with gleaming metal bands. They hung low from the carrying poles which rested on the porters’ shoulders and creaked as they went along.

“It’s Red Hair, Ah-Sing’s relative. He’s come back to get married,” said the farmhand.

Red Hair was a widower, and this would be his second marriage.

The first was ten years ago. When his wife was three months’ pregnant, he left for Gold Mountain, but she died in childbirth, and the baby too.

His new bride came from the Kwan family. She was only fourteen, and a good-looking young woman. Red Hair had been away in Gold Mountain for a long time and his views about women were different from those of the other villagers. He did not like women with bound feet, and he wanted someone tall and buxom. He hoped she could read and write a bit too. He put all his requirements down in a letter to his mother and she listed them to the matchmaker, who did not look encouraging. There were certainly girls without bound feet, but southern girls were generally short. Tall, well-built girls were hard to find, especially ones who could read and write. Luckily the matchmaker had found the Kwans.

Mr. Kwan was a scholar who had failed the county-level Imperial examinations, and made his living as tutor to a wealthy family. The Kwans were poor but his children were literate in the classics. Not only did the pair’s horoscopes match, but the girl fulfilled Red Hair’s requirements in every other way too. Red Hair was delighted and decided to invite all the villagers to the wedding banquet.

The day of the wedding feast, Ah-Fat was in the fields thinning the rice seedlings. By the time he had finished, it was getting dark. He went to wash his muddy feet. From where he sat on the riverbank, he could see a hazy red glow, looking a bit like a forest fire, over the village far in the distance. These were the lights from the banquet, he knew. He rolled his trouser legs down, brushed the mud off himself and headed straight to the village without bothering to go home.

The wedding feast was in the open air. Ah-Fat counted the tables carefully—thirty altogether. There were dishes of chicken, duck and fish, and half a gleaming suckling pig on every table. Ah-Fat sat with the other youngsters, all of them ravenously hungry. Grabbing at the suckling pig, they wolfed it all down, but Ah-Fat was quick and sneaked a piece for his little brother. Ah-Sin gripped the meat and nibbled at it, savouring every mouthful. The fat ran down his wrist and he stuck out his tongue and licked it clean. Ah-Fat thought he looked like a beggar on a street corner but did not admonish him. Since their dad died, none of the family had tasted even a morsel of meat.

They drank rice wine brewed a few months before by Red Hair's mother in preparation for his arrival. As soon as the jars were opened, the fumes from the wine threatened to knock them out. Red Hair staggered drunkenly from table to table, clutching a big bowl of wine and encouraging his guests to drink toasts. He wore a long, sapphire blue brocade gown embroidered all over with gold *ruyi* designs and, tied across his shoulders, a length of red silk with a big bow. His skullcap was adorned with a glittering piece of translucent jade carved with a dragon and a phoenix. That evening Red Hair's cheeks were flushed red too, and the sweat formed shallow pools in his deep-set eye sockets. His tongue thickened till it seemed about to drop out of his mouth and the muscles of his face jerked spasmodically as he beamed lopsided grins in every direction.

Red Hair reached the table where the youngsters were sitting. It fell to Ah-Fat, as their senior, to offer formal congratulations, but his elders at nearby tables put a stop to that. "He's the bridegroom, so even a stray dog can tease him today. No need to go bowing and scraping to him." Someone pointed to Ah-Fat and Ah-Sin: "These are Yuen Cheong's kids." Red Hair ruffled Ah-Sin's hair: "Your poor dad," he said. "Such a good head on his

shoulders. Who would have thought it, eh?” And he got two small boxes out of his pocket and put one into each boy’s hand.

Ah-Fat opened the box and peered at its contents. It held things that looked like black beans, but bigger and rounder. He put one in his mouth and chewed. It crunched between his teeth, and for a moment he was scared a tooth had come out. When he looked closer, he realized there was an almond hidden inside the bean. The dark coating was sweet, with a peculiar kind of fatty sweetness he could not put into words.

It was only much later, when he was in Gold Mountain, that Ah-Fat learned that these black beans were called chocolate.

Ah-Fat quickly grew drunk at the wedding feast and it was his own doing—no one forced him to drink toasts. It was his first taste of alcohol, and it slid smoothly over his tongue, burning its way down his throat and into his belly. It did not stay there long, but soon crept up to his head. Now it was several times more powerful, and exploded in a great fireball in his brain. Ah-Fat felt his body shrinking away like a jellyfish. Crawling out of the crater left by the fireball, he floated gently in some distant place in mid-air. From his vantage point far above the earth, he peered mistily down at the banqueting tables and the village scattered beneath him.

Suddenly he felt the black beans grappling with the rice wine in his belly. His guts knotted up, and he hurriedly shoved his way through the diners and made for some waste ground by the road. He pulled his shirt up and his trousers down just in time to release a stream of liquid shit so foul-smelling it almost knocked him down. He grabbed a banana leaf, cleaned himself up and kicked some dirt over the mess. This, at least, had sobered him up; he was down from mid-air and had both feet planted solidly on the ground.

The noise of the revellers had faded far into the distance. Around him the only sound was the night wind rustling the leaves in the treetops. The frogs in the pond croaked loudly and got on his nerves. He threw a stone into the water and the splash shut the frogs up but disturbed the birds roosting at the water’s edge so that they flapped up and away, their wings etched against the night sky. The clouds cleared, revealing a mass of stars right down to the horizon.

Was that where Gold Mountain was? he wondered. What kind of a place was it that could turn Red Hair into such a fine figure of a man? Were the six huge, heavy trunks he had brought back laden with Gold Mountain gold?

Ah-Fat sat down at the roadside and fell into an uneasy doze.

Some time later, he felt movement around him and awoke. A half-starved dog come to lick up the shit, he thought, but then he turned his head and saw a little girl about two years old looking at him with a foolish smile on her face. She was wearing a long red brocade gown and a red hat embroidered with clusters of peonies on each side. It was certainly an eye-catching outfit. Ah-Fat remembered the ghost stories told by the villagers. He broke out in a chill sweat and the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. Then he got to his feet and saw behind the girl the vague outline of a shadow. Reassured, because he knew that ghosts did not have shadows, he asked: "And who are you?"

The girl did not answer. Instead she stuffed her fists in her mouth and a dribble of saliva ran down her chin on each side. Ah-Fat felt in his pocket for Red Hair's black beans and put one in her mouth. She did not have enough teeth to chew it, but she sucked it noisily and the dribbles gradually turned brown. When she had swallowed it, she held out her hand for more. There was something odd about her hand and, looking carefully, Ah-Fat saw something growing out at an angle next to her thumb—a sixth finger.

Just then there was a shout and a woman with a lantern hurried over to them. It was Auntie Huang, one of the servants from Red Hair's household. She grabbed the child, crying frantically: "Oh my God, Six Fingers! Where have you been? You're so quick on your feet, you were gone in the blink of an eye. Whatever would I say to the bridegroom if I lost you even before the wedding feast was over?" "Is she a relative of Red Hair's?" asked Ah-Fat. "How come I've never seen her before?" "She wasn't, but she is now," Auntie Huang smiled. "This child is the bride's little sister. She was born with six fingers. Her mum and dad were afraid they couldn't marry her off and couldn't afford to keep her so they sent her off with the bride to Red Hair's family." Ah-Fat smiled. "Red Hair is a rich man," he said. "It's nothing for him to take in Six Fingers."

As Auntie Huang led the child away, Six Fingers dragged behind. She kept turning to look back at Ah-Fat, fixing her luminous dark eyes on him.

She's going to be quite a girl when she grows up, thought Ah-Fat to himself.

This time Red Hair stayed home more than a year, long enough to see his bride safely delivered of a son. Only then did he make preparations to go back to Gold Mountain.

And this time he took with him a companion—Fong Yuen Cheong's son, Fong Tak Fat.

The idea of going to Gold Mountain first occurred to Ah-Fat the day he saw Red Hair's porters arriving in the village with those weighty Gold Mountain trunks slung from their shoulder poles. In the beginning, the idea was only a vague one but he kept it tucked away in his breast and would not give it up. It had no shape but it grew on him till he felt like he was going to explode. Eventually, he sought out his old teacher, Mr. Auyung.

"Do you have any idea what life is like in Gold Mountain?" asked the teacher. Ah-Fat shook his head. "Uncle Red Hair doesn't want to talk about it." After a moment's hesitation, he went on: "I don't know what it's like there but I do know what it's like here—a tunnel with no light at the end." Mr. Auyung struck the table with his fist. "That was what I was hoping you'd say. There's nothing for you here. Over in Gold Mountain you can at least fight for your life." Suddenly Ah-Fat's vague idea took form and substance. He had got the advice he wanted.

He still needed the money for the journey so he mortgaged the family's remaining quarters in the compound for a hundred silver dollars. When he ran over to Red Hair's home with the dollars bundled in a handkerchief, Red Hair sighed. "If I say I don't want you coming along, your mum will say I'm refusing to take care of Yuen Cheong's son." After a pause he said: "OK, OK, if you're not afraid of hardship, then you can come."

Ah-Fat was up early on the day of their departure. He had a cloth bundle packed and ready: it held just one new suit of clothes, three pairs of cloth shoes, five pairs of thick cotton socks and a few ordinary items of clothing. He also took a few tins of salt fish to eat on the ship. His mother had spent night after night painstakingly sewing the shoes for him. By now she was almost blind and the stitching was all over the place. "Don't waste

your time," Red Hair told her. "Cloth shoes won't see Ah-Fat through a Gold Mountain winter, it's far too cold. He'll need to buy leather shoes." But Mrs. Mak made the shoes very loose-fitting so Ah-Fat could wear three pairs of socks inside them. She could not imagine there was anywhere on earth where three pairs of thick cotton socks would not be warm enough.

Awake before dawn, Ah-Fat kicked out at his little brother who was curled up fast asleep at his feet. Since the epilepsy, Ah-Sin slept almost round the clock. Ah-Fat kicked out again, this time with more force. Ah-Sin grunted, then turned over and went back to sleep again. His brother gave up and got quietly out of bed, pulling the thin blue-patterned quilt over the child. Ah-Fat could not know that this would be the last time he would see Ah-Sin. Even before his ship arrived in Gold Mountain, Ah-Sin was dead. As he cut grass for the pig, he was taken with a fit and fell down the grassy slope to his death. For years after, Ah-Fat regretted not having woken Ah-Sin up that morning. He would like to have said a few kind words to him.

Ah-Fat felt at the top of the bed for the cloth bundle, then groped his way to the door. There he tripped over something soft. It stirred and he heard a snuffling sound. By the faint light of the stove, he saw it was his mother, wiping tears from her eyes. She had already heated up the green bean porridge for him to eat before he left.

She blew her nose and, in a muffled voice, told him to light the oil lamp.

Ah-Fat did not move. "It's getting light, I can see without it."

He did not want to see his mother's face. It was hard to believe that her eyes, reduced now to two tiny holes, had so many tears left. Sometimes he felt as though her tears were tentacles dragging him down, and that he would be devoured by her grief. But he also knew that today he had only to lift his foot over the threshold and he would be out of reach of her tears in a place where her grief could not touch him any more.

"Ah-Fat, light the lamp." Her voice was suddenly harsh.

He did as he was told. His mother gripped the door jamb and pulled herself to her feet. She pointed her finger in his face and ordered him: "Kneel down. Kneel before your dad."

Ah-Fat knelt before his father's portrait. The flagstones felt hard and cold through the thin cotton of his trousers. His father's face wore a weary, even sleepy expression in the faint glow of the lamp. His father could not look after him now.

Ah-Fat felt the tears well up. He twisted the end of his sleeve into a lump and stuffed it into his mouth. By swallowing hard a few times, he got himself under control.

"Dad, my uncle's going to till our fields, with your blessing and protection," he said.

Then he went on: "Dad, I'm going to Gold Mountain. But I'll be back, rich or poor, dead or alive. I'll never let the incense go out at your tomb."

His mother knelt by his side. Her nose was stuffed up from crying and he could feel her laboured breaths fanning his cheeks. Her bound feet in their pointed slippers looked like upturned conical bamboo shoots as they trembled gently under her long loose cotton jacket.

"Ah-Fat's dad, please let him die rather than touch opium. If he ever gets addicted to opium, ever, he'll be stripped of your family name, and then he'd better not think of ever crossing this threshold again."

By the time Ah-Fat walked out of the courtyard, the sky was turning pale. The neighbours' chickens had been cooped up all night and now scurried impatiently along the field verges hunting for scarcely wakened worms. Two belligerent young cockerels fought over a large black worm, flapping their wings fiercely. Ah-Fat threw a clod of earth at them to break up the fight, and they flew off with loud squawks, scattering feathers in the air. In the distance he could hear the squealing of the water wheel as it began to turn. Many villagers started their work before the sun was up.

Ah-Fat picked a stalk of bristle grass from the verge. It was heavy with dewdrops. These were God's tears, he remembered his mother saying. He twisted the strands together and pushed it up his nose. The thunderous sneeze he gave seemed to shake every bit of his body loose—bones, muscles, veins. All the accumulated mess and muddle which had weighed on him for all of his sixteen years was sneezed out through his nostrils and he felt cleansed and fresh.

He found Red Hair's family and the porter he had hired waiting outside their house. Red Hair was a man of the world, and his baggage was different

from Ah-Fat's small bundle. At each end of the carrying pole hung a brightly gleaming rattan box. Red Hair's mother shielded her eyes and peered at the sun to reckon the time. It was a month since Red Hair's wife had given birth and she was no longer confined to the house. With her forehead wrapped in a scarf against the morning chill, she stood cradling her infant and holding Six Fingers by the hand. She talked to Red Hair in low tones. Then she placed the baby's palms together. "Daddy's going to Gold Mountain. Say a nice bye-bye to Daddy," she said, her voice breaking before she had finished the sentence. The baby stared fixedly at his father and suddenly began to bawl so loudly the veins stood out purple on his forehead. Red Hair's wife rocked him and shushed him, and finally pacified him by letting him suck on her finger.

Then she used her leg to give Six Fingers a hard shove forwards. "What did I teach you last night? What do you say?" Even though she had grown a lot this year, Six Fingers was a skinny child with sticklike arms and legs, who looked as if a gust of wind would blow her over. After a good many pushes of encouragement, she finally bowed her head and whispered: "My two elder brothers are off to Gold Mountain. Come back soon and send us lots of money."

Those standing around her burst out laughing. "You're letting that kid Ah-Fat off too lightly. He's not your elder brother! He may be a big lad, but he's still your nephew!" Overcome with shyness, Six Fingers fled into the house, refusing to come out again.

The three men set off.

The porter was heavily laden but he still set a good pace and left Ah-Fat and Red Hair far behind. The sun gradually rose high into the sky, the dew dried up and fine dust covered the road. Sharp-pointed lotus buds stuck up from the pond surface. At some point, the water wheel had stopped turning and the cicadas had not yet started chirping. Apart from the sound of their footsteps, all was quiet around them.

"Uncle Red Hair," began Ah-Fat, "is there really gold everywhere in Gold Mountain?"