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Further News of Defeat

A RUNNER ARRIVED AT XINCHUN VILLAGE TWO DAYS AFTER THE FALL OF Taiyuan. Out of breath, his Kuomintang uniform soaked in sweat, the soldier collapsed into a fly-infested ditch on the edge of a sorghum field. That evening, San saw him on her way back from tending her family's two goats, the man lying there snoring, and when she told her parents about him, they didn't believe her. San, nine years old, often lied to her parents. One week she'd say the Japanese were here, the Russians the next. Her parents knew San hated shepherding and dismissed her pleas to save the young man from becoming pig fodder. After putting her to bed, San's father slung a hoe over his shoulder and walked across his fields under moonlight to the place his daughter had mentioned. He couldn't lift the man out of the mud by himself, even after taking off his own shoes and using his bare feet for traction. He ran to the village chief, who sent a neighbor to help him. Together with one man lifting the head and another the legs, they carried him to the granary and dropped him beside sacks of recently harvested sorghum.

The man remained unconscious the entire time. The villagers, observing the soldier clearly in the light, saw that he was only a boy: a scrawny, malnourished teen in a faded uniform and an oversized cap.

"I can't believe how heavy that kid was," Bu Dan said, wiping muddy sweat from his brow. Bu Dan's family farmed the land to the very west of Xinchun and he was his parents' only son. The strongest man in the village, he was often called upon to perform tasks that others couldn't: push a stubborn mule, transport tub-sized jugs of rice wine, carry replacement limestones for those worn away at the ancestral shrine.

"The mud weighed him down," said the village chief. He pointed to the canisters that rattled on the boy's belt. "We should've undressed him first."

Bu Dan slapped the boy a few times and still he would not wake. The village herbalist was called in and only after inserting slices of ginger into his nose did the boy finally start to shudder. He coughed out thick, brown water. San's father brought a bowl of rice porridge up to the boy's mouth and the boy extended his thin neck to drink it.

After thanking the villagers squatting in the darkness in front of him, he broke into tears. "It's over," he said. "The Japanese flooded the Yellow River. Taiyuan was sacked."

The villagers glanced at each other. "What do you want us to do?" the village chief asked.

"I don't know," the boy said. He wiped his nose with his sleeve and sank his head below his shoulders. "My lieutenant never tells me anything. I think the Chinese army wants you to stay where you are."

"That's a strange message," San's father said.

"Useless," Bu Dan added, running his fingers over his scalp. "So we shouldn't flee?"

The chief told the two men to calm down. He gave the boy another gulp of water. "What would they do to us?" he asked. Rumors of Nanking had already reached the village. A hundred thousand dead in the span of six weeks. Men rounded up and gathered on the shores of the Yangtze, shot and burned and used for bayonet practice.

"I don't know," the soldier said. "They might not kill anyone outside the cities. How else are they going to get food?"

The villagers helped the boy up to his feet and filled a pouch with leek cakes and water and slung it over his shoulder. "Why don't you stay until morning?" the chief offered.

The boy shook his head. "I'm not tired anymore, and there are others who don't know."

Under the cover of night, they saw him off.

"Come back if you hear more news!" Bu Dan shouted.

San awoke excited the next morning. She put on her moss-colored coat and ran barefoot across the field to the fly-infested ditch near where her parents were gathering sorghum. Her father took off his straw hat, squinted at the sun, red as a morning rooster, and yelled for San to fetch him water.

"Where is my soldier?" San yelled back.

"He's gone!"

"What a shame," San whispered, looking down at the muddy ditch, which still traced the outline of the collapsed body. She had always wanted to be friends with a soldier.



They arrived four days later. One truck, one jeep. The villagers gathered in the town square: two brick-and-stucco buildings on sloped dirt ground, one used for a granary and the other for town meetings. The soldiers in the jeep got out first. The officer wore a brown suit with a black strap across his chest. He had a thin moustache and rested his gloved hand on the hilt of a sheathed saber. The other soldier, who had driven the jeep, ran around and unhooked the back latch of the truck, from which twenty soldiers came streaming out. Two of them carried a long pole. They attached a Japanese flag to one end, then stuck the other in the dirt. The rest of the soldiers formed a perimeter around San and her family and the villagers, blocking them from reaching the officer.

"You." The officer pointed at Lu Han, a carrot and cabbage farmer who lived adjacent to San and her family. "Begin the count."

The officer had a heavy accent and Lu mistook his meaning. He began to

count—*yi, er, san, si*—and a soldier hit him with the butt of his rifle. The officer pointed in quick succession to each villager in the front row. “Begin again,” he said, and the villagers counted off—*yi, er, san, si*—until everyone had a number. “From now on you are known by your number. Every morning at seven, you will stand in the position you are in now and we will do the count. If someone is missing, the people whose number come before and after will be shot.”

Bu Dan stood near the front of the line. His number was fourteen and he made sure to shout it loudly and clearly. His family had the most to lose if he angered the Japanese. Not only did they own the most *mu* of land amongst all the villagers, Bu Dan was also quick-tempered. He enjoyed drinking wine and often doused himself with liquor after a hot day in the fields. As an only son, he understood that if something happened to him, his family would never survive a season.

San daydreamed during the count. When her number came—seventy-eight—her father counted for her. She was thinking about the soldier she had seen in the ditch, imagining him fighting these Japanese all by himself. She picked at the moss-colored coat her mother had made for her during the Spring Festival. It had once had two mandarin ducks embroidered on each side, as if kissing, and because her mother was clumsy with a needle, the silk thread began unraveling a week after San had started to wear it. Now, half a year later, only one duck remained, and already it was losing its webbed feet. San tugged off another loose thread and smoothed her coat.

Brushing a strand of hair away from her face, she thought the soldier standing in front of her looked ridiculous. His face was smeared with mud and he wore a strange gray hat that made him look like a bunny. She was standing beneath him, her father’s hand stroking her hair, and she could smell the soldier’s boots, the scent of polish. The soldier smiled at the pig-tailed girl staring up at him, then gave her a wink.

The officer drove off in his jeep that same afternoon, but one of his lieutenants remained with ten men. They brought in a table to the meetinghouse and set up a radio. Two soldiers guarded the entrance to the granary. When the villagers deposited wheat and sorghum, the soldiers put their nose to each bag. Bu Dan, sickened by the noise of the soldiers’ high-pitched salutes and their radio static every time he made a deposit, hid half of his harvest in his outhouse.

Each morning after count, San sat on the ground with her back against the Japanese flagpole, petting her goats and watching the soldiers march from one building to the other. They didn’t seem so bad. Some even helped older villagers carry bags of sorghum into the granary. She picked out the soldier who’d winked and gave him a name, Jian—or pointy—because the earflaps of his hat extended sharply up to his forehead, as if he’d cut them with a pair of scissors.

One morning, Jian was moving a bag of wheat from the granary to the townhouse and slipped on some goat droppings wet from rain. San couldn’t stop laughing—so loud the entire village might have heard. Even the lieutenant sitting

inside came out and put on his glasses for a closer look. Jian brushed himself off. His lieutenant nodded towards the girl, saying something in Japanese. San was still laughing when Jian was standing in front of her. He unslung his rifle and stomped the butt-end into the ground. San rose with a start. She rubbed her nose with her hand to avoid coughing. The soldier stared at her, his earflaps blowing in the wind. San saw that he had more lines on his forehead than even some of the older villagers. She couldn't tell how many of the lines were wrinkles or scars, and couldn't guess his age. After a moment, the soldier turned around and slung his rifle back onto his shoulder.

"You don't scare me!" San shouted.

Jian stopped, slowly pivoting his head towards the girl. All of a sudden he charged at her with his rifle forward. In terror, she ran full bore all the way back to her house, through tall wheat stalks and muddy leek fields.

Her father was furious. "Where are the goats?" he yelled.

Her mother clutched San, who was crying, and yelled at her husband, "Forget your goats! Your daughter is frightened!" She sat on the furnace, cradling San in her lap. "What did those men do to you?" she whispered.

"My goats better not be in the hands of the Japs! Tomorrow morning if I smell goat stew coming from the townhouse—"

"Yell louder, so the whole town can hear," she said. Then she turned to San. "Look at your coat. Your duck looks so lonely and sick! When the Japanese are gone, we'll go to the city and I'll buy another spool of silk and fix him up."

That night, San dreamed about Jian. She saw him coming at her with the rifle, this time with a bayonet attached. He drew closer and closer until suddenly his bayonet was buried inside her goat, and he was cutting off the goat's leg and carrying it back to the townhouse, where a huge cauldron and ladles sat on a stove, and everyone in the village was gathering for goat stew except her.

Early the next morning, before the sun had risen, Bu Dan brought one of the goats back to San's family. The animals belonged to Bu Dan almost as much as they belonged to San's father. Bu Dan's ram had sired them and the two families had agreed, when the time came, to share the meat and have a banquet.

He knocked on San's father's door, and when it opened, told him that he had been passing by the town square yesterday, carrying a sack of grains, when he saw a soldier holding the leashes to their goats. He had argued with the soldiers, but they only gave him back the one.

"They killed the others this morning," he said. "I'm taking care of this last one myself. You have a coward for a daughter."

San's father took a sip of his tea and then spat out the leaves. "We should feel lucky they aren't roasting *her*."

Furious, Bu Dan kicked over a bucket of coals before leaving. San's father stepped back inside and fetched his wife and daughter for morning count.

At the town square, the villagers were surprised to see that the officer was back. A dozen soldiers stood by the jeep and truck. Both vehicles kept their

engines running, and the two lead soldiers blew their bugles to quiet the crowds.

“Today is a glorious day for this village,” the officer said. As he talked, the villagers counted off. They had been doing this for over a week now, barking their numbers and turning to the next person in swift, militaristic motions. “Today,” the officer continued, “the Imperial Japanese Army will be taking volunteers to serve in its prosperous coalmine. You will be given food, uniforms, and a chance the Kuomintang never gave you: a chance to leave this village. You will have worker status, and a new life under a new government. Please raise your hand, as spots are limited.”

“What is he saying?” San whispered to her mother.

Her mother paid her no attention. They stood in the back, and San tried to peer through people’s legs, but she couldn’t see her soldier or hear the bells of her goat. There was only the hum of the truck and jeep, and the thickly accented Chinese that she could barely comprehend.

Two soldiers brought out a table and chair and placed them in front of the officer. The officer set his saber on the table and then sat down. He took out a pen and used his left hand to keep the paper from floating away. The other man from his jeep—his second officer—came forward. “Volunteers!” he yelled. “Step up!”

Nobody moved. The stillness held only the sound of the wind. Dust kicked up and gathered around the officer. The villagers thought the Japanese looked silly, their officer sitting at the desk beside the flagpole on the bumpy, sloped ground. They thought if the wind blew any harder the desk would slide past the granary and down into the garlic patch. Some hid smirks. “Japanese dogs,” Hairy Taiping whispered to the person next to him. Hairy was a known troublemaker and got his nickname for serving pig feet without bothering to remove the hair. “How stupid do they think we are?” he added.

“If there are no volunteers,” the officer said, “then we will have to conduct a draft.” He nodded to his second officer. “Every tenth male.”

The second officer counted in Japanese as the soldier in front of him grabbed men by the arm and pulled them forward. Husbands were separated from wives, sons from mothers. Some villagers tried to flee but behind them a crescent of bayonet-wielding soldiers waited. Hairy Taiping tried to run through the lines and was shot instantly. He was not respected in the village, but even the women who had never cared for him burst into tears as he lay on the ground clutching his stomach, his cries silenced by two bayonet blows to the skull. San’s mother covered her daughter’s eyes and wheeled her around towards the officer. “Look up at the flag,” she said. “Look up at the way it blows.”

San was crying. “What did Taiping do?” she asked.

By this time, the second officer had reached San’s family. The tenth male was her father. Just as a soldier was reaching to pull him out of the crowd, another soldier—Jian—pushed San’s father away. “Not this one,” Jian said. “I’ve seen him work. He’s lazy.” And so the eleventh was picked.

When the soldiers finished, they loaded a total of twenty-three men into the

truck. The crescent of soldiers also climbed in. The officer stepped into his jeep and the vehicles began their descent down the hill. A third of the villagers ran after them, their feet kicking up as much dirt as a herd of cattle.

When the town square began to clear and only a few families remained, San saw Jian kneeling down, his hands motioning for her to come over. She hid behind her mother's leg. He held up his index finger and kept it there in front of him as he backed up into the meetinghouse and brought out several pieces of candy wrapped in glittering yellow paper. San let go of her mother and ran to him. She took two pieces from his hand and unwrapped one. The candy was creamy and sweet: preserved squid in honey. Suddenly two hands lifted her by the armpits. He twisted her around so that she was facing him and hanging from his hands.

"Let go," San shouted. She bashed at him, her fists clenched. Jian's breath smelled like mushrooms and his tortoiseshell hands were cold and sweaty on her torso.

Her father ran over and took San from the soldier. Jian took off his hat and grinned. San glanced back several times, one hand holding her father's and the other clutching the candy, at Jian waving to her as she made her way back to her father's sorghum fields.

That same day, after Hairy Taiping was mortally wounded, Bu Dan had stormed toward the shooter and was met with the butt of Jian's rifle. Jian dragged Bu Dan's unconscious body behind the granary into the garlic patch. It wasn't until later that night that Bu Dan, awakened to a full moon, a headache, and the smell of budding garlic, trudged back home and found his mother crying by the furnace: His father had been one of the men taken.

Over the next few days, San's fear of Jian gradually abated. Taking her position by the flagpole after morning count, she continued to observe the soldiers. Her father wanted to pull her away, but her mother reminded him that if it weren't for his daughter's connection with the soldier, he'd be working in a coalmine. "They're not going to do anything to a little girl," she said. "What can it hurt?" Sometimes Jian would bring her cookies from Japan, green tea-shortbread that dissolved in her mouth. He would ask her to do little things—spin around five times, show him her belly button, or sing him a song—before giving her the treats. She didn't know why Jian liked her so much. Maybe he missed his daughter back home. Maybe he had lots of sisters while growing up. Maybe he just thought she was pretty.

Whereas the adults harvested their crops under constant alarm, San had almost forgotten about Hairy Taiping's death. Her parents never told her why he was murdered, and San assumed he had made fun of a soldier. Hairy had often given her a hard time when she had shepherded the goats. He called her "goat girl" and slapped them on the rear to make her chase after them.

One afternoon, about a week after the officer had taken away the twenty-three men, San heard screams coming from the meetinghouse. She knew at once

that these were not Chinese screams. They were too high-pitched, too succinct. She ran to the granary and saw Jian with two soldiers carrying one of their own on a stretcher made of bamboo and empty sorghum sacks. He pushed her away with one hand. He was crying, which surprised San, since she had never thought Jian—or any Japanese (or any man, for that matter)—capable of crying. He yelled something incomprehensible at her, and she ran home.

The Japanese dug a grave and buried the dead soldier behind the meetinghouse in the garlic patch where he had been found dead, his neck slit open. Then they fired off three shots in unison.

Two days later, the officer returned again to Xinchun, this time with two trucks. Soldiers created two perimeters, one surrounding the people at the town center and another loosely encircling the entire village. They wore backpacks and helmets, and it was clear that these soldiers were better trained than those that had come before them.

“I have been more than lenient,” the officer began. Four soldiers had gotten out of the jeep. They stood in pairs, two behind the officer and two upfront, bayonets fixed. “And I will continue to be lenient, if someone will step forward and tell me who committed this crime.”

The villagers were silent. Two soldiers brought out a large framed picture from the jeep, and held it up for all to see.

“This is the man you killed,” the officer continued. “Here he is with his family in Tokyo. His wife is pregnant with a girl, and this afternoon I wrote to her that her husband will never see his daughter. Now”—he paused—“who killed this man?”

Silence. Half a mile away, the rapids of the Yellow River churned.

Bu Dan gave no indication that he was the one who had killed the Japanese soldier. Why are they waving that picture? he thought. Hairy Taiping had never been photographed in his life. Nor had his father or any of the other villagers who had been driven away to die in a coalmine. The soldier in the picture had shown no hesitation when he yanked those men from the lines and sent them off to work as slaves. Why should he be pitied?

Bu Dan had stalked him for two days. He watched him from the fields, taking note of his patrol route, observing when he rested and when he worked. Every time the soldier laughed with his friends, ate from his canteen, or saluted his superior, Bu Dan’s hatred grew. At home, he told his mother what he would do to the soldier if given the opportunity. “Don’t be a fool,” his mother said. “Your father could still be alive. This is no time for vengeance.” He accused his mother of not loving her husband, and on the following day he waited until the soldier was by himself pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with a heavy sack of sorghum. Bu Dan approached, and the soldier dropped the wheelbarrow and lifted his rifle. Raising his arms, Bu Dan gestured that he only wanted to help the soldier with the sack. The soldier nodded. He was young, no older than twenty, and his end of the sack dragged as they carried it into the granary. “Heavy,” the

boy said in Chinese, embarrassed. Bu Dan closed the door and shoved him to the ground. He pressed the boy's face to the dirt, his palm flat over the boy's mouth and nose, took out a pocket knife, and slit the boy's throat.

"If no one is brave enough to step forward," the officer said, "then the man must have fled the village. You will all help us look for him."

The soldiers set the framed photograph on the table and instructed the villagers to gather in two long lines. Then they marched two sorghum fields away to the town's main well, where three dozen soldiers were already waiting at the top of the hill.

"We must prepare for the long search," the officer said. "We will first make sure no one gets thirsty."

Around the well there were ten buckets tied to levers, and the opening was so big that villagers often joked that they could push in an elephant. Moss covered the limestone bricks, stenciled with children's handprints. During the fall and winter, the well was used as a means of preserving meat and steamed buns. A couple of families shared a single bucket and disputes often broke out as to whose food belonged to whom.

The two lines of villagers stopped at the entrance to the well. For every five or six people, a soldier stood on either side of the lines. San and her father were in one line and her mother was in the other. They were about a third of the way up the hill. "What's happening?" San asked. "We're getting water," her father said.

Bu Dan stood towards the back of the line. He first suspected that something was wrong when he heard the hollow echo of buckets crashing down into the water at the bottom of the well. The lines started moving, and then he heard screams. "They're stabbing us with bayonets and throwing us into the well!" someone shouted. The lines were moving fast. In front of Bu Dan, villagers were running away and getting shot. He turned to the nearest soldier, grabbed him by the arm, and kneeled before him. "I'm the one you want," he said. "Tell them you've found me. I killed your friend." But the soldier shoved him aside and Bu Dan realized that he didn't understand what he was saying. The soldier must've thought he was begging for his life. Bu Dan held his arms over his head, surrendering. "I'm the one you want!" he shouted, but nobody, neither the villagers nor the Japanese, seemed to be hearing him.

San watched her mother being dragged away to the opening of the well. A soldier stabbed her twice, then lifted her legs and threw her in. Another soldier did the same to San's father. San tried running away but a hand caught her elbow. When she looked up, she saw that it was Jian. He pulled her to the opening of the well, and for a second she stood there shivering, waiting for him to stab her. "Jump!" Jian said. "Jump before someone kills you!" San couldn't understand him through his accent, and when she didn't move, he lifted her up. She felt his facial hair jagged against her scalp, and then he was moving away from her, her vision closing off into a circle, becoming smaller and smaller until she hit the piled up bodies at the bottom and felt knuckles nicking her spine.

The well's walls were damp and jagged, lined with sharp stones. She was lucky not to have hit the sides. A thin beam of light shot down from the opening and half-illuminated the bodies. The well was almost a third full. The people who had landed in first had drowned in well water, and those lying in the middle were suffocating and bleeding. San stayed close to the wall to avoid the bodies that kept falling.

Below her came cries and groans. She listened for her parents, but all the voices sounded the same. Every few seconds there would be a scream, and then a thump, and then another body would be next to her. Sometimes the man or woman was still alive when they landed.

She hugged her legs into her arms and looked at the one remaining mandarin duck on her coat. It was barely visible, but she could tell that it wasn't green anymore, that there was blood on it. She wondered if she was seeing all of this through the eyes of her own ghost. She wondered if she were also dead, like the other duck that had once been on her coat before she pulled it off slowly, month after month. Why had she done that? Why couldn't she have resisted the urge to tug at the thread and just let it be?

After a while, the bodies stopped falling and the well grew silent. They reached all the way up to the opening. San waited until the sun began to set and the voices of the soldiers had grown distant. Then she started climbing. She didn't know where she would go after she got out. She had never been outside of the village before. She thought of Jian, of how he had saved her life. If she hurried, she might be able to find him.

It was becoming difficult to see. The opening was orange-red, the color of the setting sun. Sometimes she would grab onto an arm and it would slip, sending her several bodies down. She grappled for a hand, a foot, or—if she could—a head; she found that her small hands held onto hair the best. When she was at the top, she reached for a rope tied to a bucket and brought her legs over the stone ledge.

A full moon was beginning to rise. She heard the distant rumble of trucks and started running in that direction. But, tired from the climb, she collapsed near the town entrance, and fell asleep in a patch of wheat.



The day after the massacre, though he had heard no news of it, the runner returned to Xinchun. He was not initially surprised when he didn't see anyone in the streets or out in the fields. He had heard about the coalmine, and suspected that the entire village might have been transported there. In some ways he felt relieved. He was able to go from house to house and search for food and supplies without asking anyone.

He went to the granary and found the entire stock of sorghum empty. "What a shame," he said. He gathered old pears and scattered cloves of garlic, and made his way from the west of the village to the east.

He was walking up to the well to refill his canteen when he noticed the

smell. Flies as thick as falling rain hovered around the opening. Halfway up the hill, he saw an arm falling over the ledge. He didn't need to walk any further. He turned around and began eating a pear, trying to divert his nose from the smell of the rotting corpses.

Upon reaching the town's entrance, he saw a girl lying in a wheat field. She wore a faded green coat made from imitation silk—peasant fabric. Reaching a hand over to see if she was still alive, he saw the subtle rise and fall of her body, hidden before by the rustling wheat. He knelt down and took her pulse: as quick as a hopping rabbit. He thought about waking her up, but then he thought about the twenty-mile walk back to his division's camp. He backed away. Having had his rest, he took off in a light jog, making his way out of the valley and then up the mountain, back to his lieutenant to deliver this further news of defeat.