

Chapter 1

The Man Who Took a Slap

The incident happened like many other earth-shattering events in history - starting quietly, with nobody foreseeing its impact on the world at that moment.

On that afternoon, I entrusted a young man named Zhusheng to run an errand for me. His father and I were old classmates and friends. When Zhusheng took my ID card and saw my date of birth, he

scrutinized me carefully and said, "Mr. Feng, you're 81 years old! You don't look like it."
"Not like 80? So I look like 90?"
"Mr. Feng, you misunderstood. I meant you don't look as old as 80."
"How old do I look then?" I often responded to young people this way. "Like 79, or maybe even younger, like 78?"
"You're quite the joker," he said as he took my ID card, and then suddenly remembered, "Oh, a person

who lives to 80 must have a wealth of experience and many stories to tell. I'll be back in about an hour. Promise me you'll tell me a good story."
He helped me sit down in a chair, treating me in the way he thought an 80-year-old should be treated, and then gestured to indicate, "Don't bother to take me to the elevator as usual," as he closed the door behind him.
Just before leaving, he added, "Don't forget, I'm looking forward to hearing your story."

Seated back in the chair, I wondered, do I really need to tell a story? For a person who has lived 80 years, how could there be no noteworthy past events unless they suffered from senile dementia or had shameful secrets behind their experiences? But for me, the most important events in my life were only two: her and Marcus. How could I explain them in a way that would be understood? Perhaps not mentioning her or Marcus at all, but sharing vivid stories that could appeal to modern

young people. One particular memory that came to mind immediately was the scene of a person being slapped, even though it had been thirty years, I believed that even in another thirty years, I wouldn't forget it.

It was around 1963-1964, in the afternoon around 5 o'clock, I had just finished eating a bowl of chicken leg noodles at a well-known noodle shop on Wuchang Street. This noodle shop was almost as famous as the beef noodle shop on Taoyuan Street. The beef

noodle shop on Taoyuan Street was known for maintaining the same style - not even a single bean of red pepper flakes would be removed or added to the chili sauce. In contrast, the pork rib noodles on Wuchang Street were constantly changing. Every six months or even three months, if you didn't visit it, you would notice that their pork ribs or chicken legs were even larger than before. Perhaps this was due to the increasing average income of the population. As I savored the

pleasure of the increasing size of the pork ribs, I felt the taste of economic prosperity. Unknowingly, Taiwan had already become one of the four little dragons in Asia.

I have always placed great importance on food. After enjoying a bowl of noodles with a large chicken leg, my heart was filled with happiness. I walked along Chongqing South Road towards the bus stop, where the final stop for Bus Route 48 was located, ensuring there

would be a seat available when boarding.

The incident took place on the pedestrian crossing from Chongqing South Road to Xiangyang Road, probably during rush hour, as the pedestrian crossing was crowded to the point of being almost impassable. Somehow, a small sedan managed to squeeze its way onto the pedestrian crossing, despite the fact that it seemed unwilling to stop and let the pedestrians pass, even though

the pedestrian light was green, and the crossing was full of people. Whether it was a human wall or a "sea of people," the solid cars made of steel, including myself and all the other pedestrians, had no choice but to stop and let the car pass first. The crowd that had stopped in their tracks must have been very angry, and I was too. However, one pedestrian's reaction was more intense than just being angry - he slapped the car's hood with his palm.

To everyone's surprise, the small sedan that initially appeared to be in a rush suddenly came to a stop. The driver got out of the car and went over to the pedestrian who had smacked the car's hood, with a scene as clear as a movie. He skillfully extended his right hand and delivered a slap to the pedestrian's face, first on the left, then on the right. After that, he returned to his car, opened the door, started the car again, said not a single word, and drove off. I was completely stunned, only

to see the pedestrian who had been slapped bend down to pick up his glasses. He was around forty years old and appeared to be a civil servant. Whether the green light was on for an unusually long time or if the traffic light had changed during this ordeal, I crossed the pedestrian crossing in a daze, as if sleepwalking, following the crowd. Everything had happened so quickly that I didn't even recall what color clothing the man was wearing.

Over thirty years have passed since that moment, but I wonder, does the mark left on the face of that middle-aged man who wore glasses still remain today? I firmly believe that every step we take leaves a footprint behind. A mature life is made up of numerous painful imprints, and he probably could never erase that experience, just as I myself can't shake it off.

However, would this story be suitable for young ears? They might ask, "You lived for eighty

years, and this is the only story you remember?" Or they might say, "That person was asking for trouble by hitting the car's hood. Haven't you heard that people nowadays don't stare at others easily? You might get stabbed just for looking at someone, so getting slapped isn't a big deal." How would I respond?

The young man I mentioned, Zhusheng, wasn't exactly young. His father, Roger, was a small man, who sat in the front rows in the classroom,

while I sat in the back row. Our class had over a hundred students, and we never spoke to each other in school. After graduation, we were dispersed to various locations across the country on July 1, 1948. There were still many places available for assignments at that time - from Lanzhou in the west to Shanghai in the east, from Beiping in the north to Guangzhou in the south. I was assigned to Beiping, but where Roger went, I do not know. Less than eighteen months later, by the end of 1949,

people from across the country had started pouring into Taiwan. In early 1950, we were concentrated in Danshui and awaited further deployment to various parts of Taiwan. It was only then that I just got to know Zhusheng's father. It seems Roger was married around 1969 or 1970, and I attended his wedding. So Zhusheng was probably born around 1960, making him over thirty years old. There were many classmates and colleagues gathered at the Dahua dormitory in Tamsui,

requiring five or six tables for meals. Roger and I sat at the same table, and everyone called him Xiaoluo. We became friends after a big quarrel. Sitting with Xiaoluo, I noticed he was very picky eater, he never touched peanuts, and seemed uninterested in vegetables like cabbage and radish. There was hardly any fish or meat on the table, and he would rather soak his rice in the vegetable soup than eat the vegetables he didn't like.

Unexpectedly, one day after

breakfast, Xiaoluo came to me and said he wanted to go out for a walk. I agreed. Tamsui in the spring of 1950 was truly lovely. At the end of the street, there was a barber shop called "Huwei Bed," and I guessed "Huwei" was another name for Tamsui, while "Bed" referred to the barber shop. Across from Huwei Bed was a tea room or café called "Zaihui," selling unknown items. Further down the road was the seawall, extending from the fish market. Continuing forward, there was a Japanese shrine. It would

have been a beautiful sight to sit on the seawall, chatting and listening to the sounds of the tide. But it was different back then because we had different feelings.
As soon as we sat down, Xiaoluo's tone was off. He said, 'Lao Feng, you have a bad habit that needs to change.' Surprised, I replied, 'What are you talking about?' Despite being in our twenties and both being Air Force lieutenants, I still saw him as a kid due to his thin, small, and pale appearance. Moreover,

our conversations were usually light-hearted. But he continued more seriously, 'I noticed every time you eat steamed buns, you peel off the skin and throw it away. That's ridiculous! Who peels off the skin of steamed buns?' Was this true? I didn't even realize it. In response, I immediately thought about his aversion to peanuts and countered, 'Someone is even more ridiculous - not eating peanuts, uninterested in cabbage and radishes, only interested in meat, only fish.' 'Lao Feng, let me tell you -' his

tone had softened considerably, 'you need to understand, steamed buns, cooked rice, they are all food. We all need food to survive.'
'Xiaoluo, let me tell you, peanuts, cabbage, and radishes are all vegetables. It's bland to eat only rice; food without vegetables is very dull. You Jiangnan people are so lucky, the land of fish and rice, only caring about fish and meat, looking down on radishes and cabbage.'
'What? Did you say I'm a Jiangnan person?'

'You little white-faced boy, are you from somewhere else other than Jiangnan?'
'I'll tell you!' Saying he was from Jiangnan seemed to upset him, and his voice suddenly rose, 'You utter fool, I'm from Henan! Do you understand? I'm from Henan, I wish I were from Jiangnan!'
I wanted to laugh - there was only a one-letter difference between Henan and Jiangnan, was it worth making such a fuss? But the expression on his face intimidated me. That time, as we had just arrived in

Taiwan, there was a sense of unease among us all, with some talking about the last plane leaving from Changchun and how bullets were flying at the airport. Some would constantly mention a woman they met just before evacuating. It's as if we all had a premonition, knowing it might be a long time before we could see our families again, yet no one was willing or able to express their true feelings of homesickness directly. We could only find fault with each other. Accusing Xiaoluo of

being from Jiangnan must have struck a nerve with him, and I realized he was lost in a painful memory. His eyes glistened with tears - yes, tears because he couldn't hold them back, 'Have you ever gone three months without food, only surviving on boiled peanuts?' His eyes were fixed on Guanyin Mountain across the Tamsui River, but I knew he might be thinking of his mother or father much like another classmate surnamed Ning. 'As we continued to eat, the peanuts started to mold.

When we peeled them, the nuts inside were green. Eventually, even the molded peanuts were eaten -' I asked seriously, 'What did you eat then?' 'If we had peanuts, that was considered good. My family was way luckier than others. We had a multi-story building. When the water came rushing in, my dad, mom, sister, and brother grabbed the wheat and peanuts from the underground storage and moved them upstairs. Bags of peanuts were lighter, and even my sister and brother grabbed

several bags of floating peanuts. Other families had it tough. Many of my classmates' homes were miserable. The vast expanse of yellow water, yellow mud! You foolish man who peels steamed buns, do you know? Do you understand? Do you know what it's like to have nothing to eat, whatever you find you eat?' This incident occurred in August 1939. Many books discuss major floods worldwide and the management of the Yellow River, with records of this flood that claimed two

hundred thousand lives and left ten million people homeless. In high school, a classmate from Henan mentioned the flooding was to resist the Japanese invasion. Government troops were ordered to breach the Yellow River embankment to stop the Japanese army from advancing south. Xiaoluo's father was a primary school principal, and his family survived on peanuts that turned green. When spring arrived, green shoots emerged from the yellow mud, and they

dug them up to eat. It wasn't until food vendors came around that they were truly saved. 'I'm sorry, how did I start talking about Xiaoluo when thinking of Zhusheng. Unfortunately, Xiaoluo passed away in 1985 due to rectal cancer. If he could have lived a few more years, he could have visited his father in Henan. His father was an intellectual who valued his children's education. These are things Zhusheng should know, not the stories I wanted to tell. I feel like maybe I truly have a

connection with Zhusheng. Perhaps he is the confidant of my Malaquias. So I've decided -

"Decided, I need to think about how to tell him this secret. I brewed a cup of premium fragrant tea from Beijing for Zhusheng. 'Once you pour hot water in, the aroma is intoxicating!' - this is what my mother used to say when recalling her tea-drinking experiences in Beiping while reminiscing during her evacuation to Shaanxi, where she couldn't find good tea

leaves. I also prepared a chair for Zhusheng, let him sit across from me, so that speaking would not require too much effort. At that moment, the doorbell rang.
It was strange, I felt as if I were waiting for a lover who was running late, my heart beating a little faster. Looking at the time, it should be Zhusheng coming back from his errands, was it really him? Or just a bill collector? I opened the door, and indeed, it was Zhusheng.
"Mr. Feng, they looked at your ID and asked me, is that Feng

Pengnian, the weather reporter? I said yes, it's him, very nice man, they quickly processed it, and also asked, isn't he living in America? I said no, he only occasionally goes, did I give the right answer on your behalf? You see, they still remember you." I took the ID and casually placed it on the table, then hurriedly turned back, saying, "Come, sit, I brewed a cup of premium fragrant tea from Beijing for you."
"I can smell it," he seemed to remember something, "My dad

also likes this flavor, is it true that you Northerners don't drink green tea?"
"Nonsense, you wanted to hear a story, right?"
"Yes, on my way back, I was still thinking, Mr. Feng must be a celebrity..."
"That's all in the past, it doesn't matter, what matters is that you said you want to hear a story."
"After all, celebrities must have fascinating stories, so please go ahead."
Thank you, thank you Zhusheng, thank you for sitting

on the chair opposite me, and thank you for really wanting to listen.
I took a sip of the fragrant tea, "My story is about a person and an event..."
At that moment, a strange tone came from a corner of the room. Before I could find the source of the sound, Zhusheng had already opened his phone. While listening on the phone, he said to me, "Continue your story, it's not a problem, not a problem." Then I heard him say four words, "Yes... yes... alright... okay..." He hung up

the phone, stood up, and apologetically said, "Mr. Feng, I'm sorry, I have something urgent and need to go back to the office immediately. Let's listen to your story next time, I know, your story must be very exciting."
I slumped back into the chair, not even pretending to see him off, letting him open the door, letting him 'bang' as he closed the iron gate. I was a little mad at him, but why? However, my feeling was definitely deeper than just 'disappointment.' The fragrance of the tea still

lingered in the air, and the waves of Malaquias were still resonating in my chest. Anyway, I need to sort out the long-hidden secret. If Zhusheng doesn't come back or doesn't want to hear my story, I'll call this segment: 'A monologue of an octogenarian'."