

Chapter 5

The first time I saw her

Upon arriving at Guozhen, I saw the train station with a row of vendors forming a small street in front of it, but I didn't see the town. I guessed this peculiar name - Guo, specifically looked it up in the dictionary and found it pronounced as "guó," but the people from Shaanxi Province pronounced it with the sound of "guī," which must be related to the older sister of Yang Guifei called Lady Guo from the Guo kingdom.

The Zizhi Tongjian briefly

describes the death of Yang Guifei, with only fourteen words: "The Emperor ordered eunuchs to strangle Lady Guifei in the Buddhist Hall." This left much room for imagination, with some even saying she was saved by a Japanese monk. However, in previous and subsequent descriptions of Lady Guo and others, more words were used. Before, Yang Guozhong, Lady Han, and Lady Qin were killed by rioters; after, the wives of Yang Guozhong, his children, and Lady Guo continued to escape to the west and were captured near Chen Cang to

face justice. Chen Cang was the site of Zhang Liang's "build a platform during the day, secretly pass Chen Cang by night" strategy during the Chu-Han Contention, a winding and narrow pass through the Qin Mountains, near Guozhen.

The last time I took a train was in the twenty-sixth year of the Republic of China. I boarded in Shijiazhuang, traveled on the Pinghan Railway to Zhengzhou for a night, then took the Longhai Railway west to Xi'an. From Xi'an to Fengxiang, my uncle drove the large car of the Shaanxi

Provincial Bank. It had been four years since I last took a train. During those four years, I seemed to have matured and started to understand my father's hard work and sacrifices to fund my education.

We boarded the train with rows of three seats. My father sat by the window, I sat in the middle, and my mother held my sister in her lap along the aisle. My sister was four years old that year. Why am I explaining the seats on the train so clearly? It's not like we were on a plane. It's crucial because she

was sitting in the window seat opposite to us.

Before I tell you the story of my meeting with her, allow me to share another story about someone else. It happened during the wartime, probably around the same time as my story, in the year 1941, in a village in Sichuan Province. The protagonist was an Air Force pilot from a county in Sichuan Province. Back then, driving a car was already considered excellent; flying an airplane was extraordinary. One day when the pilot was on leave, dressed in clothes that

matched the local style, he visited his parents and grandmother. On his way back, he brought sesame seed malt candy and other local foods that his grandmother had given him. Unexpectedly, he was seized by the local conscription team.

What does being "seized by the conscription team" mean? Does it even need an explanation? This practice dated back to the Tang Dynasty, as described in a poem by Du Fu: "In the evening arriving at the Stone Moat village, nights had

officials capturing people." It detailed the capturing of able-bodied men during that era. However, in this case, instead of an elderly woman from Stone Moat Village, the pilot's grandmother gave up, leaving only their meals to cook. Because the elderly man ran off as soon as he heard a knock on the door. The film about family visits after the opening of mainland exchanges included a scene in which the protagonist Sun Yue was one of those seized to come to Taiwan as a soldier.

There is also a story, perhaps

fictional, about an old veteran who went to visit his deceased mother again after being away for a long time. Upon finding out that his mother had passed away, he brought only a half bottle of vinegar, which he carried through customs at Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Qingdao airports. When asked by customs officers about the contents of the bottle, knowing that flying with gasoline was not allowed, the old soldier remained silent. Instead, he just pulled out the cork from the glass bottle and let the officers smell it. They asked, "Is this vinegar?" to which the

old soldier nodded. He did not answer any other questions and just proceeded on his way.

After forty years of separation, the old soldier knelt before his mother's grave. He had no offerings prepared, only placing the half bottle of vinegar in front of his mother's tombstone, saying: "Disobedient son - Mom, I'm back. That day you asked me to buy vinegar from the village store. It has been forty years since that goodbye, and I am sure you must have scolded me in your heart, worrying from that moment, haven’t

you? Mom. I dare not imagine how you managed those forty years. Mom, I was also worried sick about you all these years. The vinegar is here, and I'll keep this bottle..."

I'll provide a translation of an excerpt of the story you shared:

Back to the story I was telling, the Air Force pilot from Sichuan I mentioned earlier, he was involuntarily conscripted in some unknown circumstances. Why didn't he explain clearly? Speaking with

a strong Sichuan accent and claiming to be a pilot, would they believe him? Why didn't he show his identification? I can provide an answer for that unfortunate Sichuan pilot. At that time, there were no national ID cards, and as for military personnel, I graduated on July 1, 1948, becoming a second lieutenant immediately after graduation. However, the military did not issue us uniforms. Each of us separately went to a cloth store in Chengdu to choose our favorite khaki fabric, then tailored our own military uniforms. We bought our

military caps in the market. In our graduating class of over a hundred people, with various styles, colors, and caps, it resulted in over a hundred different combinations. Were we considered military personnel? Of course, we were, and even Air Force officers! And this was three years into the war. Identification? Yes, after graduation, we had to take Air Force C-47 or C-46 aircraft to the designated location for registration. Didn't one need identification or a ticket to board a plane? Therefore, we were ordered to each

purchase a thin booklet called a "Military Personnel Pass," slightly smaller than a palm, from street vendors in Chengdu. It contained rules for young individuals, introductory remarks, and military training content. We used to memorize every detail, but now it's all forgotten. We gathered the passes, stamped them with the school's official seal at the administrative office, and the homeroom teacher’s personal seal, and that was it. This process was far less profound than when Lu Zhishen was ordained at Wutai Mountain and received a "Congratulatory

Pass." Military passes were not meant to be carried at all times. Even when I traveled as a military personnel on mainland China to cities like Beijing, Nanjing, and Guangzhou, no one ever asked to see my pass.
So, that Sichuan pilot likely had no identification on him, and when he was conscripted, how could he explain.
What happened next? you might ask. It could be turned into a compelling story, or perhaps a ludicrous comedy; chances are someone has already turned it into something. So, let’s return to

the process of the first time I saw her.
We had been on the train for a while but hadn't departed yet. Delays were commonplace during that era, attributed to military carriages being requisitioned or Japanese air raids. Gradually, I noticed another train alongside ours. My father called it the “sardine car" since it had metal carriages with large iron doors, small square windows on each door, and passengers needed to stand up straight to see outside. Clearly, the train on the other side was packed with people, with heads squeezing

against the windows, all men.
I asked my father, “Who are those people crammed on the train opposite us?”
He replied in a hushed tone, “Likely... conscripts.”
“Conscripts? What are conscripts?”
“They are new recruits heading for battle,” my father peered outside, “they’re eastward-bound, passing through Xi'an and Tongs Pass, then reaching the front line. They're about to eat.”
“How will they eat?” I quickly leaned out the window to see two men carrying a large basket of steamed buns, while

a soldier in uniform and military cap held a gun. The “sardine car" apparently only opened its doors outward, and the two men exerted great effort to push the iron doors aside. Inside, the car was indeed filled to the brim with people. The cloth covering the buns was lifted, and a soldier beneath the car commanded loudly, “Pass them out one by one, hand each person only one, no taking extra, count them.”

At that moment, a young man standing close to the door inside suddenly jumped out. The soldier shouted, “Get back

in! No moving!” After a moment's hesitation, the young man seemed to make up his mind, swiftly heading west. The following events unfolded rapidly; my memories are hazy, except for a faint sound, barely noticeable amidst the chatter inside our car and my father’s exasperated sighs. Immediately, my father’s large hand covered my eyes. My mother asked, “What’s going on?” My father replied, “The shot was precise, hitting the back of the head.” My mother followed up, “Did he die?” To which my father responded, “Why ask?”

In the darkness, I could no longer see anything, even the concept of time and space seemed to freeze; only the muffled sounds inside our carriage filled the air with murmurs and noises indistinguishable. I even forgot where and when I was, or how much time had passed.
When my father’s hand moved away, the train was already in motion. I hastily leaned back out the window to notice that the train loaded with new recruits was no longer visible. The scenery whizzed by faster and faster; slowly, I regained my seat, redirecting my gaze

from the window to the interior. Exactly! On the seat next to the window facing ours, I saw her, glimpsed into her eyes and tears, just as before. Like encountering one's own soul, I glanced at her once more; she continued to weep, her teardrops like curtains hanging down in front of her. It seemed as though she, through her own curtain of tears, could see me as well. Yet, my memory of subsequent events has become fleeting.
The first thought after this encounter, why did he run?
Did he have no choice?
Was he a newlywed?

Did he think of his mother? Did his mother know he was going to the battlefield? Comparatively, the individual in Taiwan who ultimately managed to offer half a bottle of vinegar at his mother's grave was much more fortunate. I told myself vehemently, I will never become a soldier in my life. For me, I vow to fight against soldiers, even Japanese soldiers who kill and loot, force the train station master to wet himself at gunpoint, engage in unjust actions of violence and cruelty, and Chinese soldiers who thoughtlessly kill innocent

deserters. This world should uphold morals, righteousness, integrity, and justice!
Like glimpsing one's soul, I once again raised my head and glanced at her. She continued to weep, untouched by wiping her tears, the streams like veils covering her eyes. As if she too noticed me through the veil of tears.
Nonetheless, I soon lost track of what transpired afterwards. This encounter with her, unlike the enlightenment experience of Jia Baoyu, was not a dream or an illusion; it was an actual event, buried and obscured by the sands of time but still vivid

and gleaming. The sardine car's windows filled with heads, the iron door rolling aside, the car stacked with passengers, the young man leaping from the train, the sound of a gunshot – all cast a haze over my recollections... And her, her eyes, her tears.....