

Chapter 9

His brand, my brand

We had a classmate surnamed Ruan, he was small and thin, with both corners of his eyes noticeably drooping. I'm not sure which class he was in because he only appeared during meals twice a day to eat mantou. Another time you would definitely see him was when it rained; the heavier the rain, the louder his voice grew. It turned out he would wildly run around the campus during rain and tell everyone, "It's raining! It's raining!" People told me about the story of Classmate Ruan. He was from

Hubei, where they pronounced the word "rain" as "ru" in their dialect. His hometown was in a county along the Yangtze River in Hubei province. One day, there was a heavy rain that led to flooding in his house, engulfing everything—the house, the village, and vast stretches of land. He was swept away and ended up clinging to the top of an old tree. He held on to a branch, losing track of how long he endured. It was probably until he nearly lost consciousness when he was finally rescued. This scar would probably take a long time to heal, causing

him to dash around the campus shouting, "It's raining! It's raining!" day and night. When it became troublesome, the team leaders were called to force him into an empty room, where he continued to shout, "It's raining! It's raining!"

Now, that day – in mid-August of the 34th year of the Republic— while we were in class, a shout "It's raining! It's raining!" was heard from a distance. Everyone knew it must be raining outside. Gradually, the shouts moved closer, and it didn't sound like "It's raining!" anymore. One

classmate, with a bewildered expression, turned around and asked me, "Is it victory?" As the shouting reached the classroom door, a person pushed it open and yelled to our teacher Jiang and everyone, "It's victory!"

Despite the significance of the victory in the War of Resistance against Japan, it is still worth mentioning. It's just a question of how many words it would take to discuss such a major event. It's not surprising that some people predicted that in the future, nobody would want to read novels.

Comparatively, visual communication is more efficient. Merely give me thirty seconds, and through more than ten camera angles, I could describe the impact of the War of Resistance victory on the people in the rear with smiles, sorrow, tears - depicting a wide range of emotions. Just a second is enough to portray the scene vividly.

The celebrations for the victory of the War of Resistance in the small county of Fengxiang were quite impressive. Three Chinese opera performances

were staged consecutively on the main playground, with additional temporary stages erected east and west of the existing command platform, where three opera troupes simultaneously performed Qin opera. I stood in the middle of the playground with Wang Fucheng, unsure of which performance to watch. Wang Fucheng seemed more mature than me. He took me to see a line of sedan chairs. Local people referred to them as "sedan cars." They would disembark the mules, place a bench between the shafts, resembling a sedan chair. The

sedan curtains mostly hung down, some adorned with glass. Wang Fucheng particularly drew my attention to pairs of small feet sticking out from under the curtain; these belonged to the wealthy residents' womenfolk. Only in this special setting did so many affluent family members gather with their private sedan chairs. Unfortunately, we could only see their feet, discussing their foot size but not their faces.

Our school had the only large auditorium in the entire county of Fengxiang, where night operas were performed for

three days. Two nights featured Peking opera, while one night had Henan Bangzi opera. It was all put together from amateur efforts, and it was unclear where they sourced their resources. Fengxiang didn't have electricity. It was said even the county chief came to watch the performances. People would sit in the dim light until the performance was about to start when someone hurriedly hung up a couple of kerosene lamps. Having seen longer multi-act scene changes in plays in Baoji, this nondescribable "grand" scale

performance didn't amaze me.

Some classmates began packing their bags, as if they were about to embark on a journey home. In reality, the railway was smoothly connected through to Tongguan on the east. There was no information on the continuity of the Longhai and Pinghan Railways. In contrast, news of "Communist forces fleeing" and the "Communists hindering our takeover work" kept coming in succession, causing classmates to gradually sense that the fruits of victory were not as sweet as

imagined. It was my father who informed me of the victory in a letter from faraway Lanzhou. Solely to support the family, my father had ventured through Gansu to Lanzhou, but only those well-connected would go there. It wasn't said in the letter whether he could earn enough to support the family. However, I knew that whenever times got a little easier, my father would send some small money over. This time and the previous times he sent letters, no remittance slips were attached.

For most Chinese, the eight-

year War of Resistance left unforgettable scars on their hearts. For me, it seemed like the test had just begun. There were noticeable changes in the school. The director of education left for Xi'an, and I didn't see him return before I left. Two teachers had also left, with Mr. Li, who taught physics, hardly ever showing up for classes, and now he didn't come at all. After a month or maybe two, the "Songhua River Incident" occurred, and the severity of the situation became known to the students.

Of course, "The Songhua River Incident" is the name I gave it. It happened during dinner one afternoon when the mantou didn't arrive. We used to have two mantou for each meal and nothing else. Even our water was from the well. However, we would still gather together, sitting in groups of ten, waiting for the serving to come. That day, as evening approached, and we had waited for a long time without any mantou being brought over, a couple of students went to the kitchen, and soon nearly all of us had congregated in front of the kitchen. It seemed

like the fire had not been lit, everyone sat or leaned, gathering around stacks of wheat straw, waiting. As it grew dark, someone began to sing, "In my hometown on the Songhua River in the northeast..." Everyone sang along. By the time the song reached, "In my hometown, there are my fellow countrymen, and there are also the aged parents!" tears were streaming down some faces, and unexpectedly, even Wang Fucheng sitting beside me couldn't hold back his tears.

The sky had turned completely

dark, and I didn't know what I was thinking. Did I cry? I'm not sure, but amidst a chorus of sobs, I drifted off to sleep. Someone woke me up and handed me a cold mantou, not the usual steamed bun we ate. I took a bite in half-awakened state, and oh, what a flavor! It was then when she appeared! Not with her eyes but with her voice: "Don't throw it away! Remember when we had stale noodles in Baoji? Carefully peel off the mantou skin, it's still edible." I was fully awake now, unable to find her figure but saw a green layer on the mantou skin in my hands. I

painstakingly peeled it off and consumed it, still feeling satisfied. Thank you! Thank you, universe.

Later, I found out that the flour needed for dinner that day didn't arrive the day before. The school authorities worked hard to scrounge for food for us everywhere. Borrowing flour had become urgent, so they had to find mantou for us at the last minute. The efforts of the school authorities, displaying more concern than just providing us with mantou, showed in their subsequent arrangements for us students

who were like homeless individuals in need of care.
In less than half a month, the police academy located in Haitangxi, Chongqing, specifically sent people to our school in Fengxiang County to recruit students. Soon after, the air force academy also came for recruitment. One classmate with the surname Wu in our class applied for the air force academy but didn't pass. The school announced that all graduates accepted into various schools would receive high school diplomas, bearing the name and seal of Xi'an Zhengzhong High

School.

What should I do? I had sworn never to join the military. At that time, there were two universities in Shaanxi province - one in Wugong between Xi'an and Baoji known as Wugong Agricultural College or Northwest Agricultural College, which didn't have an engineering department, and the other in the south of Shaanxi, beyond the Qinling Mountains, called Northwest University, an actual university. Regardless of which school I wanted to attend, it was essential to know about

their academic programs. When to apply, when to take exams—this is called "information." The school went to great lengths to help us find tuition-free military and police academies for recruitment but failed to provide any other study-related information. At this moment, I was just talking to myself; even if the school provided it, considering my education level was only until the first half of the third year of high school, I might not even pass. When the air force academy came for recruitment a second time, I also signed up. Why take seriously the

childish oath of a small student?

During the first physical examination, I discovered I couldn't become a pilot as I already had myopia. This explained why during geometry classes, I would often struggle to read the chalk on the blackboard, assuming it wasn't clean. They allowed me to take the written exam, probably because the standard in our school was quite low. Out of the many applications, only around five or six applicants were selected, including me and Wang Fucheng. The

military officer in charge of the oral examination sat in the deputy director's office, wearing air force uniform different from the army's. He informed me that I could attend the Air Force Mechanical School, contributing to the nation. I had to agree. Wang Fucheng was designated to study at the Air Force Communication School.

Of course, I had to go back to Baoji to report to my parents. My father had returned from Lanzhou to Baoji, his face still marked by the weather elements. As a child grows

older, their parents also age a bit more. It's a simple logic. However, I had been in Fengxiang for sixteen months, and it seemed my father aged more than just those sixteen months. His first words to me were, "Are you sure you're going to Officer School? Not enlisting as a soldier?" I explained about the air force officer school as per the bulletin board and a newspaper advertisement. He stood up immediately, holding my hand and said, "Come, let's go to the educational hall entrance to read the newspaper." To my surprise, I

noticed some trembling in his grip on my left arm.

Obviously, there was no air force recruitment ad in the newspaper. Those ads weren't posted daily. It was November and not the season for schools to publish enrollment ads. While returning home, my father stayed silent, as he usually did, walking ahead, me following behind. Our relationship had always been like this. He was just being my father, taking care of me and teaching me as his duty. Love or even apparent 'concern' would never be displayed.

Sitting back home, he asked what I wanted to eat - an unheard-of event as usually, my father's choice was final. How could he ask the child? Nevertheless, before I could answer, he told my mother, "Let's have dumplings, pork and Chinese chive filling - we haven't had it in quite a while." Then, sitting across from me, I glanced up at him. Finding that he dodged my gaze quickly, I once again lowered my head. An awkward moment seemed to stretch out, the air palpably tense. He finally spoke, "Your uncle, he—," hesitated, and then stopped. This wasn't the

father I remembered from my childhood—engaging in jovial conversations with friends and demonstrating his knowledge of French, which he learned from a Frenchman in Taiyuan. He was an excellent storyteller, always eliciting hearty laughter from his friends. Why was he acting this way now? Had the toil of the past eight years snatched away the spirit of the ambitious man that was my father? After a long pause, having waited in vain, I presumed his halted sentence and continued, "I understand, I fully understand. If it weren't for uncle's misfortune, maybe I

could have joined a good school in Xi'an. I could have fulfilled your dream, graduating from university." Father attentively listened, nodding solemnly, yet turning his head away. Continuing, I said, "But as it stands, being an Air Force Officer is different; I just have to study well and excel in the future, maybe—."

All of a sudden, my father turned back to face me, his face flushed with redness, and tears pouring down his eyes, he choked out, "But when will you come back!" Bid farewell a thousand times with

reluctance, the tragedy of leaving children first instead of the parents. As an only child, leaving this time was akin to a permanent farewell, for we never reunited after. Depending on my little sister in their old age, my early departure left them waiting - my father waited till 78, my mother till 80. I sincerely hoped they believed Taiwan had only banana peels to eat and forgot their son was long gone. To avoid further agony in their increasing age, unable to ease their longing for their missing son and disrupting sleep.

The sense of guilt towards

my parents is like a vast river that cannot be washed away. Despite the inconvenience of my blurry vision in old age, I must tell you about Malacose, even if it is one way for me to atone.

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