

The Green and Red Gang

青紅幫*

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The phone at the bedstead started ringing in the middle of the night. And it wouldn't stop ringing. Would the caller be so persistent if it wasn't an emergency? Though I was greatly unwilling to relive the tumultuous events of the previous evening, they now returned to trouble me. In a daze, I put on my nightgown and picked up the receiver. On the other end of the line I heard Shangqing's husky voice.

"They decided to take him off life-support. He's gone. . . ."

Now I was wide awake.

"I'm just telling you what happened. There's no need for you to mention it to anyone. . . ." The husky voice continued: "After he was taken off life support, I went back to the ward to see him. His eyes were still open, and tears were streaming down. . . . I'm thinking just maybe he was still conscious when they were discussing pulling the plug on him, aware of what was happening without being able to do anything about it. . . . I just can't calm down. . . ."

It was pitch black outside. I looked at my watch: almost three in the morning. I calculated how much time had passed.

I'd left the hospital at about ten o'clock. The doctor had called

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a meeting for members of the immediate family, so I'd had to say farewell to Yihong. Wanting to know what the family's decision would be, Shangqing had waited in the hall downstairs, refusing to leave. He told me the life support was turned off before midnight. Which meant that Yihong had left the world at least three hours ago.

Which also meant that Shangqing had been feeling an unshakable dread for the past three hours.

What, besides this indefinable dread, had he been thinking?

I could only wonder. But then I remembered a strange experience Shangqing had once related to me.

Many years before, his father had, like Yihong, gone into a vegetative state after suffering a stroke. After half a year in a coma, he had suddenly woken up and exclaimed: Hearing you and the doctor discussing pulling the plug on me scared me to death. . . . I kept trying to blink at you like my life depended on it. How come nobody noticed?

"Thank god I insisted. . . ." That's how Shangqing's story ended.

I knew that if he thought the same thing happened to Yihong he would never find peace. I decided to set his mind at rest.

"His tears were just a physiological response. . . ." I said. I was sure that my tone of voice left no room for doubt: "When a person's nose and mouth are stuffed full of plastic tubes, pressure gets put on the lachrymal glands. When you pull the tubes out, the eyes naturally fill with tears. That's all that happened."

I hoped that after hanging up Shangqing would be able to get some sleep, not expecting that I would be unable to get back to sleep.

I kept thinking about the Green and Red Gang.

My summer job that year was working in the kitchen of a vacation resort located in the mountains about a hundred miles north of New York City. That was the first time I made the acquaintance of the Green and Red Gang, "Evergreen" Shangqing and "Forever Red" Yihong. Because we all felt the work we were doing was beneath us, we were fast friends, and soon became bosom buddies. Our friendship would last a lifetime.

The name of the resort was The Concorde. At the time, the

supersonic jet of the same name had not yet started operating transatlantic flights, but I was sure that the sense of excitement and surprise I had on the day I reported for duty was just as intense as the feeling of passengers taking the Concorde for the first time. The Concorde must have seemed like a space capsule, while I felt I had entered a postmodern Grand Vista Garden—the garden in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

The resort featured massive recreational facilities, built exclusively with the vacation needs of the Jewish patrons in mind. In addition to over a thousand guest rooms, there were twelve indoor tennis courts. There was also a conference hall, a boardroom, a bar, a cafe, a swimming pool, a gym, a bridge parlor, a mahjong salon (I didn't realize until then that Jews also play Mahjong, and just as obsessively), and, it goes without saying, an auditorium with a stage for song and dance performances. Everything was aptly placed. And in addition to these indoor amusements, out-of-doors there were miles and miles of trails for walking, horse-riding and cycling winding through woods, traversing clearings and running along the lakeshore. Needless to say, there were rowboats and equipment for fishing and waterskiing. On the other side of the lake were the meandering fairways of a top notch golf course from the hand of a master designer.

So for the afternoon of the day I got there I was in heaven, adventuring, playing, roaming. The second day was boot camp—we were cast down into hell. On the third day, we were sent right out onto the battlefield.

We were thrust into the line of fire between the kitchen and the dining room three meals a day every day of the week. It wasn't a battlefield because it was such a large restaurant, but because we were constantly shouted at and terrorized by the foreman, a black fellow who made serving a course of soup seem like running the hundred meter dash.

Better to describe it as a psychological hundred meter dash. At any rate, it was all on account of the black foreman: he was so big and bulky that if he came and stood in front of you it was like being face to face with King Kong. For some reason, this black King Kong was

especially picky when dealing with the Chinese staff. Maybe it was because Chinese people are naturally of smaller stature, because we never spoke English to one another, or because he needed an outlet for his feeling of oppression by the white man, because he needed someone to oppress. Whatever the explanation, he was the reason why the restaurant was like hell on earth.

I met Shangqing and Yihong on the first day of our life in hell. Because we were all from Taiwan, we identified with one another from the moment we spoke. At the training there were some Chinese people from other places. In awe of the black foreman, we all naturally banded together. At that time the Green and Red Gang did not yet exist. It formed on the day of the “incident” that occurred about a month later.

After work that evening, we held a meeting in the dormitory. Someone recommended complaining to the restaurant manager. Another said we should just go on strike, but, considering the likely consequences, many of us couldn’t help hesitating—many of us needed this job. In the end, Yihong offered to take the matter into his own hands: just leave it to me, he said.

At midnight, in the woods behind the kitchen, Shangqing and Yihong ganged up on King Kong. They forced him to the ground and thrashed him without mercy. I don’t know how they subdued that black beast. Witnesses said that Yihong dislocated “its” shoulder in no time, leaving it groaning on the ground. Shangqing immediately got out the hempen rope he’d brought along and soon the mighty black King Kong was laid low, trussed up like a rice cake wrapped in a banana leaf and tied with string for the steamer.

That exploit established the prestige of the Green and Red Gang, not just with the Chinese but with the rest of the restaurant staff, the servers, dish washers and cleaners. Everyone seemed to come together with a sense of common cause. The black behemoth had been on the receiving end for once, and he had to keep it secret. He didn’t dare report the incident to his superiors. And his old manner—kicking you in the backside if he thought you were slacking off or patting you on the head and calling you “good boy” if he were in a good mood—had

totally vanished.

I once asked Yihong how he'd handled the black behemoth. He said: I wasn't afraid to die; he was. I asked Shangqing, too, the same question, and he said: after the fight was over, Yihong told that fat foreman lying immobilized on the ground—if you report, the worst that could happen to me is I'd get fired, but if that happens, I promise you, the least that will happen to you is you'll lose an eye!

That was the first time I realized how seamlessly two people could cooperate, acting with a single mind, but with one of them unconsciously taking a leading role.

Before we left that hotel in the hills, it was even clearer to me who was in charge.

The two of them had a fight. Originally it had nothing to do with me, and I didn't even know what had happened. But then Yihong came and told me about it. He wanted me to help him take care of his "little brother."

Why should I help him do his duty for him?

I can be a bit obtuse sometimes—and in this case it was only then that I finally understood the significance of the rumors I'd heard other Chinese staff members tell about Shangqing and Yihong. In rare moments of free time, the two of them liked to slip off and go rowing or wander through the woods. One time I'd discovered the two of them sitting on a bench by the lake. Shangqing's head was resting on Yihong's broad shoulder.

A year later, Yihong got married. Shangqing got wasted at the wedding. He didn't make a scene or anything, but when I was driving him back to his flat, he just lay in the back seat and let me prattle on, without saying anything.

Honestly, I could not know what arrangement the two of them made for the subsequent decades, no matter how much I cared about them. All I knew was that one never married, while the other seemed to outsiders to have a happy family, while in my eyes he was just going through the motions, just fulfilling his personal obligations.

So were Yihong's final tears for real?

I shivered.

Shangqing would never believe my purely physiological explanation. But he could never tell me his true feelings, not even now. I thought I'd been so clever, but I hadn't even scratched the surface.

One winter afternoon, we sent Yihong off on his final journey at the Fernleaf Cemetery in suburban New York.

In appearance and character, Fernleaf upholds the old traditions. But though it is Western-style, many Oriental things have been added over the past few years as more and more Asian people are buried there. Near Yihong's grave is a Japanese maple, a variety of the species referred to as a "lion's head." Judging from its appearance, it cannot be more than a hundred years old; but this particular variety cuts a prematurely aged figure. The trunk tends to grow wide rather than tall, the branches thick rather than long, so that the tree, as if within a narrow confine, takes on a warped and twisted appearance. When you look closely it looks like a contortionist with the stature of a dwarf. It is even a bit unbearable to behold. Yet if you step back and view it from afar, you'll see, especially in winter, that the countless stunted branches form an intricate structure. A sense of the tree's deformity will immediately be replaced by an apprehension of its dignity.

If you view one in winter, you can well imagine that, come spring, the whole tree will be covered in tender, red buds, that a flesh and blood radiance will emanate from its solemn frame.

I stood by the grave in which Yihong would be laid to rest. I saw the "lion's head" from a distance, on the other side of the gathering of mourners. It had shed all its red leaves, leaving only a skeleton behind. I sensed there was something incoherent ruminating inside of me.

Staring blankly at the "lion's head," I was getting more and more upset. In the haze of dusk, the "lion's head" was solemn and dignified, its visage now and then faintly revealing an almost ferocious mien.

The "lion's head" appeared in my mind, its spirit shifting shape over and over again.

I didn't even notice when the ceremony ended.

But when the mourners had almost all departed, a pair clad all in black, a man and a woman, came into my line of sight.

One was Shangqing, while the other, as I suddenly realized, was Yihong's widow—that woman. She was our close friend's wife, but we'd never referred to her as Sister, as is customary among the Chinese people.

I saw with my own eyes that the two mourners were actually hugging. And Yihong's widow was patting Shangqing on the back, trying to comfort him.

This time, tears that seemed nothing like a physiological response were about to well up and brim over.

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