

## Prologue

The peaks behind Red Flag Tree Farm turned gold as the sun broke through the dark clouds. Yan Tao stood at Elephant's Ear lookout, gazing down into Bewitching Valley.

The sun rose quickly, revealing the valley floor 600 metres below, a few early autumn leaves fluttering in the breeze. There was no sign of fog.

Turning, he nearly collided with a group of loggers right behind him, looking down into the valley. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Go and get ready."

One young man fired back cheekily as they retreated, "Why are you here, Director Yan? Looking for the fog? I thought you hated the fog." Yan Tao pretended to chase him and the men scattered, laughing.

"Damned fog!" Yan Tao murmured.

*It's so dark it can blot out the sky and swallow up the earth. It's so solid you can hold it in your hand. It's as tough as cotton.* That's how the local Sichuan people talked about the fog on Wawu Mountain. It was also cripplingly cold. It seeped into the dormitories, soaked the furniture, dampened the bedding and caused terrible arthritis.

Still, Yan Tao had been looking forward to the fog rolling in ever since young Shi Ding had bewitched the whole farm with the stories he told on foggy days when everyone could skip work and come and listen to them.



The local people of Sichuan had named it Wawu, the tiled-roof house, because Wawu Mountain was out of reach, like the tiled-roof houses

that the common people could only dream of. It had all the beauty of its famous neighbours – Mount Emei and Qingcheng – on the Sichuan–Tibet border, but no visitors ever attempted the steep climb to its summit. Even powerful vehicles struggled, and if a tree-farm truck and a car met on the narrow sections, it took ages of painstaking reversing and shifting to resolve the impasse. At its steepest, the road rose at a 40-degree angle and there was always the danger of an engine stalling, leaving the driver to end up taking a bath in the River Liu down below.

The inaccessibility of Wawu Mountain meant that a great deal of top quality timber remained on its slopes, and for hundreds of years only loggers had bothered to climb it. The workers of Red Flag Tree Farm were now the sole occupants of the mountain. Except for the isolation, the loggers' life was not bad: fresh air, tasty game birds, nutritious mushrooms, and spectacular views almost every day. A path behind their dormitories led to the summit, 300 metres above the farm, where ancient fir trees soared up to the sky and clouds floated underfoot. Wawu had once been a hide-out for Daoists. A stone pavilion built against the cliff had supposedly been the chess room of the Lord of Heaven and the Daoist Superior. The loggers enjoyed sitting inside after work and imagining they were among the immortals. The only thing worth complaining about was the autumn fog.



But now the first question of the day was, “Has the fog closed in?” They all knew to look for the stagnant vapour – “the leaven” – at the bottom of Bewitching Valley that heralded the fog, and the lookout had become a favoured morning gathering point. It was well into the autumn of 1971. Normally, there would have been two or three fogs by now, but so far there had been no sign of it. The entire plantation was engulfed in disappointment. Yan Tao's daughter, Yan Zhu, was the most distressed. She had been mute since a bout of pneumonia at the age of six. This made her a keen listener and she was crazy about Shi Ding's stories. No one was more important to Yan Tao than his

daughter and he didn't want to see her unhappy.

Shi Ding was a purchasing agent for Wenchuan Turbine Factory, but he had been living at the farm for three weeks after being injured on his way up the mountain. He was a quiet young man, from Beijing. Still in his twenties, he was tall and slender, he wore glasses and he spoke perfect Mandarin. But his calm aura vanished when he told his stories, his eyebrows dancing, his face radiant, and his voice, first loud then soft, full of emotion. Storytelling – the Sichuan natives called it “scaffolding the dragon's gate” – was a local custom, but Shi Ding's stories were extraordinary; to the loggers they were dragons' gates on a grand scale.

He had just finished *Pride and Prejudice*. The loggers loved the descriptions of the Bennet family, and they had learned that not only in China was having daughters a loss-making business. Married men saw their wives in the gauche, shrewish, self-opinionated Mrs Bennet, while their wives responded by saying that irresponsibility was obviously a universal male attribute. Everyone loved Mary accompanying herself to sing in a “weak voice” and “affected manner”; they ached with laughter at the arrogant Lady Catherine de Bourgh and the fawning Mr Collins, and revelled in the twists and turns of the love between Elizabeth and Darcy.

But Shi Ding was now fully recovered and ready to leave. Except he had not yet finished *Anna Karenina*, his new story about adulterous affairs in Russia.

Extramarital affairs had always been a subject of great interest, and never more so than now. Since the start of the Cultural Revolution, catching adulterers had become the duty of every revolutionary committee member. For the sake of social purity, some would lie in wait for hours, in the icy chill of winter or the scorching heat of summer, to snare adulterers in the act. Of course, they would then make sure their captives suffered more than they had. The boldness of Vronsky and the openness of his affair with Anna amazed Shi Ding's listeners. They were dying to know what happened in the end and their only chance lay in a foggy day break.

On this particular morning, the loggers had already changed into their thick canvas overalls, strapped on safety gear and picked up their tools, ready to go. Shi Ding was measuring the pile of timber assigned to the Wenchuan Turbine Factory.

“How’s it going, still a lot more needed?” one logger greeted Shi Ding.

“Almost there,” Shi Ding replied.

“How’s your leg? Still giving you pain?” asked another.

“Not really. I will be off soon.”

“How soon?” several voices called in chorus, miserable faces turned to Yan Tao.

Yan Tao yelled at his workers, “Ready? Let’s go!”

Just then, a shrill cry rang out from the lookout. “The fog! The fog is closing in!” It was the guesthouse cleaning woman.

Yan Tao rushed over and saw the milky air creeping into every corner of the valley floor. Once the floor was covered, the fog would rise until it filled heaven and earth. He knew this would only take a few minutes. “Put the equipment inside and go to the guesthouse meeting room. Quick!” he commanded.

People ran in every direction, putting tools away, changing into their non-work clothes, grabbing a stool or a mat, and crowding into the guesthouse. Yan Tao switched on the lights and looked around for his daughter. He watched as the fog spilled up over the edges of the plateau like boiling milk. Feet were covered, then knees disappeared, leaving upper bodies seeming to float ...

“Yan Zhu! Where are you?”

Yan Tao’s daughter emerged from their rooms, holding a colourful quilt above her head as she raced towards the guesthouse. Yan Tao followed and saw her head, only a head, fly through the guesthouse door before the fog swallowed everything. He stopped, let out a long breath, and slowly fumbled his way to the guesthouse.

The meeting room was packed. Shi Ding sat at one end in a bamboo armchair softened by Yan Zhu’s patchwork quilt. His dull grey Mao jacket, with its stiff folded collar and four symmetrical buttoned

pockets, contrasted oddly with the splashes of colour behind and beneath him. With all eyes eagerly on him, he began.

“Pressures on them came from everywhere, causing Anna and Vronsky to become increasingly unhappy.”

“Oh,” a sigh rose from the listeners.

“Anna was distressed. It was Vronsky who had pursued and pestered her before winning her heart. He had destroyed her peace and had been the cause of all her troubles.”

“That’s true,” a woman from the kitchen said. “He was shameless.”

“Come on!” said a logger. “Flies only love cracked eggs. It was Anna who fancied Vronsky for his good looks. That’s women for you.”

“What about you men?” the woman fired back, before Yan Tao shushed them.

“Vronsky was all she had now,” Shi Ding continued. “So of course, Anna became very possessive. Whenever he went out, she couldn’t help imagining him with other women.”

“That’s very likely,” the woman from the kitchen piped up, immediately sticking out her tongue to show remorse.

Shi Ding smiled. “Do you think I could finish Anna’s story before the fog disappears?”

Everyone laughed.

“Vronsky was annoyed by her unpredictable moods and stayed out more often. She became desperate.” Shi Ding then told his audience how Anna’s husband also prevented her from seeing their son and how her friends shunned her. She was isolated while Vronsky was enjoying the company of his new female friends.

“So,” Shi Ding concluded, “on the one hand, jealous Anna was trying every trick to hold Vronsky, and on the other, Vronsky was determined to get away from her. She missed her son and felt ashamed that she had sacrificed the boy to her love affair. She had had enough. ‘You’ll be sorry for this,’ she promised Vronsky as she headed to the train station after yet another quarrel.”

Shi Ding stood up, looking very stern. He pushed the quilt away and climbed onto the armchair. “Now,” he said to his listeners,

standing up straight and towering over them, “Anna stood at the edge of the platform.” He inched towards the edge of the chair, raising a gasp from his audience. “What would she be thinking now?”

He looked around but his eyes landed on no one. “Anna stood there watching the crowds. Everyone appeared disgusting. The entire world was false and evil. Think about this,” Shi Ding suddenly raised his voice. “If you learn that someone you love to distraction doesn’t give a damn about your feelings, this is evil, isn’t it?”

He looked at his audience, fixing them one by one, with his gaze. He looked flushed.

“Yes, it is,” a soft voice murmured. “What was she going to do?”

“Punish!”

“Who? How?”

Shi Ding exploded. “Punish whoever she wanted to. Don’t you understand?”

The listeners looked at one another, puzzled. Shi Ding paid no attention to them. “A goods train was approaching. *Chi dang kuang dang, chi dang kuang dang*. Slowly, the train approached.”

The room was quiet. Some women covered their mouths with both hands.

“Anna’s mind was clear. She had found her way out, out of her misery and out of the humiliation others had dumped on her, and, most importantly, she could punish him, Vronsky, the man who had abused her love.” He pointed at the imaginary train in front of him. “Look, look under the carriages.”

Everyone craned their necks to look.

“Look at the joints and at the chains, and see the distance between the front and rear iron wheels. There, the middle point between the two sets of wheels – that was the place Anna would thrust herself into.”

The listeners abruptly stopped looking. Their mouths were wide open, but no sound came out.

“But first, Anna had to make herself ready.” Stepping down and standing close against the chair, Shi Ding leant back as if he really was

trying to avoid an approaching train. “Now, the only thing left was waiting, waiting for the moment when the middle point between the wheels was exactly opposite her. *Chi dang kuang dang, chi dang kuang dang ...*”

You could have heard a pin drop in the meeting room.

“It’s coming, it’s right here!” Shi Ding called out and thrust his body forward. The quilt slid off the chair and fell around him but he took no notice. “The enormous, relentless mass knocked her on the head and dragged her by the shoulders. All the darkness in her life was lifted away and Anna, finally, was free.”

Shi Ding’s body went limp and he collapsed on the floor. A piece of red patchwork chancing to be beside his head looked eerily like blood.

His listeners sat shocked. No sound and no movement. A minute or so passed. Shi Ding remained motionless on the ground. Was he all right? they wondered. The story really seemed to have taken it out of him.

The woman from the kitchen cried, “It’s too cruel! A beautiful woman shouldn’t die this way. Oh, heavens, I can’t imagine ...”

Another echoed her, “Why the train? There are other ways.”

An older logger stepped in. “Look, I think Anna choosing the train to kill herself was not accidental because she had seen a railway worker die like that at the beginning. But she didn’t *throw* herself under the train, and that’s where I’m not convinced.” Realising he had the floor, he cleared his throat and continued. “Suicide is committed on impulse, a fleeting thought. No one can keep a clear head like Anna did, measuring the distance, thinking what would be the exact point to squeeze herself into. I find this a bit much.”

“Mm –” Most of the listeners nodded in agreement.

“It’s true,” the loud woman from the kitchen said. She stood up, stared at the ceiling, imitated some of Shi Ding’s actions, then looked back down and concluded: “There was too much planning going on. I would write it differently.”

The room rocked with laughter. “Of course you would, you’re

semi-literate,” someone called out, to more laughter.

Shi Ding raised himself from the floor. All the colour had drained from his face.

Yan Zhu sat there with tears in her eyes. Yan Tao whispered to her, “What do you think?”

She scribbled something on a piece of paper. Yan Tao read it and said to Shi Ding, “My daughter wants to know what about the boy Anna abandoned.”

Shi Ding looked intently at Yan Zhu. Then he tore his eyes away and said quickly, “He had his father.” He got up and walked to the door.

“Hey, don’t go out! You won’t see a thing!” Yan Tao warned him.

“I need some fresh air. I’ll be careful.”

Shi Ding felt his way along the railing to the lookout. He stood there, breathing deeply. Anna’s story had awakened memories of his father’s suicide. If the loggers regarded Anna’s detailed suicide plan as implausible, what would they make of his father’s, if they ever had the chance to know it?

He had imagined that moment so many times that it felt real. He saw his father in that dimly lit workshop of the Beijing Turbine Factory, carefully lying down under the punch machine. He even saw him wriggle a bit to adjust his position, to make sure the punch head was aimed at the middle of his chest. And then he saw his father’s right arm reach for the operating button. He pressed it.

Shi Ding closed his eyes.

Yan Zhu’s question ate at him. What about the abandoned boy? Did his father think about Shi Ding, his only son, at that very last moment? What was in his mind? Shi Ding wished he could, like Tolstoy, extract every piece of his father’s last thoughts. Was there resentment, disgust, any last minute hesitation, as in Anna’s mind? Nothing was clear except the solid fact: if his father’s intention, like Anna’s, was to punish, he had certainly punished his son.

The fog blocked everything out. Shi Ding could imagine the clamour of voices in the meeting room, but all he heard was his

own breathing. He went to take a few steps, but was seized by the sensation that he was about to fall into a bottomless chasm, even though he was grasping the rail. His heart leapt with fright and he bent down, gasping for breath. After a long moment, he stood up straight, and shouted into the unseen world the question that he had asked thousands of times: “Why did you do it? Why?”

The valley was silent, except for the faint echo that bounced back: “Why?”