

# Short Stories

## The Foundling

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### One

Shrouded in the darkness of the night, a willow basket descended into the goat pen at Luo Wenli's house.

The nanny-goat, startled, got up. Her limited intelligence had never been challenged this way before. The willow basket exuded the fragrance of moist, fresh grass, but inside it was not the evening feed, but rather a lady's cotton-padded jacket, wet with dew. The fabric was blue corduroy with a few evenly-spaced yellow sunflowers printed on it. The nanny-goat initially thought that a stranger had brought her a basket of sunflowers; but when she looked closer, there in the midst of the sunflowers was the little face of an infant! Well, sunflower or infant, it's not feed either way. Nonetheless, the nanny-goat stayed stubbornly by the willow basket, sniffing and trying to figure out the subtle scent coming from the baby. That fragrance reminded her of the grassy field of an early springtime morning, and of a

baby goat which she lost by the riverside last summer.

The sunflowers on the jacket appeared to be guarding the infant, sound asleep. The sunflowers, shining golden-yellow, faced off against the nanny-goat in a staring contest through the darkness. It didn't take long before the flowers emerged the victor. The nanny-goat cowardly relinquished her prerogative as the mistress of her pen, and slunk into a corner.

That night, there was a scattering of barks from the dogs in Maple-Poplar Village. On the opposite shore, in north Floriston, a pack of dogs barked in response. It was a competitive kind of response, filled with an innate haughtiness. Perhaps the dogs on either side of the river heard something, and perhaps they were just barking out of duty. The dogs fell silent soon, and the only thing that stirred was an eerie, maze-like atmosphere around the Luos' goat pen.

The three goats were the only eye-witnesses. Given the moonlight that night, they must have seen, outside the window, the

silhouette of whoever left the infant there. Goats are also keen of hearing, so they must have been able to tell the direction from which the footsteps came, and the direction to which the footsteps left. Unfortunately, the three goats were only goats, never tasked with the duty of guarding their home, but always remaining silent in the face of everything and anything.

Goats were stubborn and reticent like that. Their masters, Luo Wenli and his family, had no way of getting any information from them. Even if you were to give a goat all the green grass on either side of Muddy River, you could not entice it to speak. You can easily pay a man to talk, but whoever could bribe a goat into disclosing its secrets?

## Two

At first, they put the willow basket before their door, like at a lost-and-found. Qingfeng, Luo Wenli's eldest son, absentmindedly kept half an eye on the basket, squatting down one moment and standing up the next. He had a large bowl in his hands and was drinking porridge out of it. He would take a few mouthfuls and then yell, "Come take a look, come take a look! Who left a baby in our goat pen?"

All the men had left early in the morning to deliver cabbages to the prison in Floriston; the children had gone off to school. It was mostly the village women who heard Qingfeng's calls and came. They

scurried over, some with sickles in their hands, others with their knitting draped over their shoulders. Their plump bodies and dishevelled heads formed a fence, excitedly encircling the willow basket. Those who came too late could only peek through the cracks in this human fence. They only saw a few golden sunflowers in the basket. They stomped their feet and cried out to Qingfeng, "Where is the baby? We can't see it. We only see sunflowers!"

The women who got there first meticulously examined the baby girl in the willow basket. They oohed and aahed, exclaiming, "What a pretty little girl! How could they have dumped her? And she's not even crying. See, she's even smiling!"

Someone tactlessly asked Qingfeng, "Whose baby is that?"

Qingfeng glared at her and countered the question with another question, "If we knew whose she is, would we still be putting her out here on display?"

They knew that Qingfeng had a short temper, so they stopped talking to him. They squatted down beside the willow basket and discussed the matter amongst themselves in whispers. One of them said, "Her parents must have a heart of stone to dump her in the goat pen, of all places! So stupid!"

Qingfeng, standing outside the circle, was tapping the rim of his bowl with a finger. He retorted, "You're the stupid ones. Do you ever think before you speak? It's so cold out. If she was dumped outside, I'd be surprised

if she didn't freeze to death. The goat pen—so what? It's warmer in our goat pen than your house. Shut up if you don't know what you're talking about!"

That woman turned around and said to him, "Right, we don't know anything. You know everything. Since you're so smart, tell us, how did the baby come about?"

Qingfeng sneered. "You think you could stump me with that? How did the baby come about? A man and a woman \*\*\*\*ed and there it is!"

As Qingfeng grew up, he became increasingly annoyed, without rhyme or reason, with little things. He was particularly annoyed with garrulous women. He didn't want to keep guard over the willow basket anymore. As soon as he finished his porridge, he left. He walked out of the goat pen and yelled to his mother, "You go do the shouting! I got all these people to come, but everyone is here for the spectacle and none is here to claim the baby!"

At that, Lu Xingxian came out. Shaking the ashes off her apron, she exclaimed to the audience, "Someone explain to me what this is all about! I came out this morning to collect manure, but instead saw this basket, and what a fright it gave me! I've really had bad luck all my life. I've never ever found a single penny, but now, great, I've found a baby. Tell me, who in Maple-Poplar Village doesn't know that we're a poor family? Were they blind to dump a child at my house of all places?"

On the whole, the women agreed with Lu Xingxian. However, they didn't feel it was appropriate to point out which family was richer and thus better to leave a baby with. There was no point in adding fuel to the fire. As if they had read each other's minds, they looked in unison towards Floriston on the other side of the river, and started talking all at once. The basic gist was mainly this: "Xingxian, nothing that happens in the bellies of the girls here in Maple-Poplar Village has ever escaped your eyes. This isn't a Maple-Poplar Village baby. Floriston dumped her here!"

Of course, there was Chang Bing's wife, who as always felt obliged to demonstrate her sophistication on every occasion. Her voice rose above the common chatter; she curled her lip and said, "Xingxian, don't keep talking about money this and money that. No one comes into the world with money and no one leaves the world with it. We're all in the same situation. Poor as you are, you still have your goats. This little one isn't going to eat you out of house and home. Look at how adorable she is! Just keep her."

Lu Xingxian's gaze landed sharply on Chang Bing's wife. She replied, "If she were a goat, I would have kept her! Goats eat grass. You don't need money or food to keep one. But can't you see that this is a baby, not a goat? Would you have me feed her grass?"

"Who said anything about feeding her grass? All of us here grew up eating simple

fare. Xingxian, whether or not the baby should have been dumped here, it's fate that has given her to you. Just keep her."

"Can you eat fate? You must know that we already have too many mouths to feed and never enough food. Why do you keep telling me to do this?" Lu Xingxian crimped her apron resentfully. With every fold her eyes brightened. She turned to a neighbour and said, "You only have two girls in your family and you have enough food to go around. Haven't you been going on and on about how your daughters will eventually get married off and you won't have anyone to talk to? Why don't you take the girl with you to keep you company?"

Chang Bing's wife interjected, "She was abandoned at your goat pen. If she was abandoned at my place, I would definitely keep her."

Lu Xingxian pulled a long face and looked askance at Chang Bing's wife. There was now a tinge of menace in her voice. "Great! I'll keep her for a day then," she said, "and whoever finds the baby at their door tomorrow, they'll get to keep her!"

At that, Chang Bing's wife rolled her eyes and left. The other neighbours started panicking inexplicably and dispersed quickly. The lady who lived next doors reminded Xingxian before leaving, "Xingxian, no matter who the baby ends up with, you should still report it to the authorities. Finding a child isn't like finding a puppy or a kitten. An infant is a person, and has to be

registered at Floriston!"

"Register! Register! Of course I know she has to be registered!" Lu Xingxian dusted her trousers, using her apron like a towel. Suddenly, she stretched out an arm in righteous fury, pointing at a tray of dried turnips behind her in the courtyard. "When have I had time to do that? All of you have already finished pickling your vegetables. Can't you see that we're out of everything here in my home? We haven't even bought the salt for pickling turnips! Anyway, my son Qinglai has to go buy some salt at Floriston. If no one claims the baby, I'll have Qinglai take it to the Town Office when he's heading that way!"

### Three

It was nine o'clock in the morning. Across the river, young Luo Qinglai of Maple-Poplar Village arrived at Floriston.

The willow basket in hand, Luo Qinglai walked down the wharf. There was a great commotion there. He saw a group of people in white shirts and blue trousers drumming in front of the transport warehouse. A cadre from the Cultural Center was directing the rehearsal, an electric megaphone in hand. The boys were lined up at the back, beating on big red drums. After every few rounds of drumming they lifted their drumsticks all at once and shouted in unison, "Long live Chairman Mao!" The girls had little waist-drums tied around their waists with pieces

of red satin. They were in several circles and danced around their circles. As they danced, they beat on their waist-drums; after every few rounds they all tilted their bodies to one side, lifted their heads to the sky, and shouted, “Long live our Motherland!” Many people walking by the wharf slowed down to watch. Luo Qinglai watched for a while too, standing on the stairs. Then, he said out loud, “What kind of drumming is that? It’s all out of sync.” There was a man next to him, likely the parent of one of the drumming students. He glared at Luo Qinglai with displeasure and said, “Out of sync? You have a go, then.” Luo Qinglai’s face turned red all of a sudden. He turned around and ran. As he ran, he yelled, “I don’t want to beat a drum. I’d rather beat you on the head if I have to beat anything!”

Inside the willow basket he had in his hand was an unfamiliar baby girl, a stranger. She was abnormally well-behaved. Luo Qinglai kept waiting for her to cry. If she started crying, he would need to find a quiet place to feed her. But she didn’t cry. And so he could keep going. His mother had stuffed a milk bottle, modified from an IV bottle, into the basket, and in the bottle was warmed goat’s milk. She had said, “The baby has already pooped. If she cries, it must be that she’s hungry. If she’s hungry you can feed her some milk.” Luo Qinglai knew that all babies cry, and this knowledge was making him more and more uncomfortable. This baby couldn’t cry! She didn’t cry at all! Luo

Qinglai kept walking towards August First Road, where the Town Office was, and as he walked he looked doubtfully at the baby girl in the basket. He saw that the baby girl remained unruffled by the careless, bumpy ride in the willow basket. What a rosy, mysterious face! On her cheeks there was a light coat of fine golden fuzz. Her jet-black eyes suddenly opened wide to take in the sunlight, but as soon as sunlight met them, they shut again abashedly.

Luo Qinglai said out loud, “I’m glad you aren’t crying. I’m not feeding you if you aren’t crying. Thanks for not crying, and saving me from having to do a woman’s job!” He studied the baby girl’s sunlit face, and a bizarre thought sprang into his head. “You look quite like a baby goat. Goats don’t cry either. Perhaps you’re a goat-person? Do you eat grass?” Luo Qinglai spotted a pot of chrysanthemums on the window sill of a nearby house. The mums had withered, but there was a bunch of green grass in the dirt. He went to pull up the grass. He got the grass, but hesitated, and eventually gave up the idea of experimentation. He tossed the grass into the willow basket, saying, “Just kidding. You’re so little. I really shouldn’t pick on you.”

Floriston was a blend of the new and the old. The silence and desolation of the past hid behind the latticed wooden windows and the mossy old walls; the new cement pavement on the streets were always bustling with activity. As much as Luo Qinglai

avoided the crowded places, there would be busybodies who ran after him and his willow basket, asking, “Hey, what kind of goodies have you got in your basket?” When he passed by the Supply Cooperative, he remembered that his mother had asked him to buy salt, and that he should check if the price was 60 cents a *jin*.<sup>1</sup> He left the willow basket outside the glass door, and poked his head inside to look at the little red tag above the salt barrels. Before he could make out the price, he heard a woman cry out behind him in surprise and delight. “What a clever child! He put his sister in a basket! I have never seen such a thing before!”

Luo Qinglai retorted, “What makes you think she’s my sister? She’s a goat!”

Luo Qinglai didn’t want to waste words with women. He thought to himself that he could get the salt on the way back anyway. He picked up the basket and ran towards August First Road, but as he passed by Old Du’s billiards stall, indecision stalled his pace. He saw Luo Xiaozheng, his friend from primary school, standing there hunched over, shooting billiards methodically. Just as Luo Qinglai started to wonder since when Xiaozheng became this good at billiards, Xiaozheng caught sight of him. Xiaozheng waved his cue at Qinglai and invited him generously, “Come over! Let’s play together. I’ve booked this table and there’s still an hour left!”

He almost decided there and then to go take advantage of free billiards. However, he

was worried about that willow basket, and he didn’t want Xiaozheng to make fun of him.

Xiaozheng asked, “What’s that you’re carrying over there?”

“It’s salt!” Qinglai blurted out a lie. He pointed ahead and said, “Wait for me. Let me go give the basket to my auntie.”

Free billiards. Only an hour left. This made Luo Qinglai jittery and anxious. He started to scurry in the direction of the Town Office. As he ran, he heard the baby girl and the milk bottle sliding from side to side in the basket, and the baby girl remained as quiet as the bottle. Perhaps she didn’t dare to cry, or perhaps she liked it when he ran? He passed by Floriston’s Red Flag Nursery School. Organ music from the nursery school caught his attention. He came to an abrupt halt as a bold idea took shape in his mind. He recalled how the baby was left at his house secretly by a child-dumper. “If they could leave the willow basket at our goat pen, why couldn’t I leave the basket at the nursery?” he thought.

With this train of thought in mind, Luo Qinglai tensed up. He looked around and saw that there was no one about. He went to push open the window at the nursery. Behind the window were rows of cots, painted sky-blue. If he aimed properly, he could even toss the baby onto one of the cots. Unfortunately, though, the window was bolted on the inside. As soon as he pushed at the window, a child inside burst out crying. And then, he saw many children getting up unsteadily from their beds and looking in his direction.

Before he managed to open the window, a nursery teacher had dashed into the room.

With the window standing in the way of his plan, Luo Qinglai was unsuccessful in dumping the baby girl onto a cot. Panicking, he dropped the willow basket under the window of the nursery school, and ran off as fast as the wind. When he ran past Granny Li Liu's house, he didn't notice Granny Li Liu coming out to empty her spittoon. He swung his arm and knocked the spittoon right out of Granny Li Liu's hand.

Granny Li Liu didn't manage to see Luo Qinglai's face. All she saw was a harum-scarum young man running off with the speed of the wind, and disappearing in the blink of an eye. All that remained was a whiff of something suspicious in the air. Granny Li Liu sniffed at the air for a while. To her, it didn't smell like the odour of an overturned spittoon, but rather a faint, musky trace of goat.

## Four

Granny Li Liu discovered the baby girl underneath the nursery school window. She stood by the window and knocked on the glass, "Someone come out! Aren't you teachers supposed to take care of the children? How could you have left a child outside?"

Three nursery school teachers rushed to the window, horrified. But after they took a good look at the willow basket outside,

they heaved a sigh of relief and said, "That isn't a child from the nursery, it isn't!" Then, not unaccusingly, they said, "Granny, you sure gave us a good scare! You should have looked more carefully first. This is an infant, two months at the oldest. We only take children over three years old, and we never take in babies!"

Granny Li Liu couldn't stand their way of shrugging off responsibility. She curled her lip and said, "It doesn't matter if it's two months or eight. A nursery is meant to take care of children. What's with all these rules? One of you come out, do, and take her back."

A middle-aged teacher didn't think it was worth paying attention to Granny Li Liu. She turned around, muttered, "stupid old woman," and left. The two remaining teachers, one an older lady and the other a young woman, continued leaning over the window sill to study the baby girl in the basket.

One of them said, "It must be that village boy who left her here. Wonder if something's wrong with his head? How could he have left his own sister here?"

The younger teacher said, "Babies aren't rubbish. How could anyone just dump a baby? Not that you should dump rubbish anywhere anyway!"

The older lady slapped the window sill suddenly, and said, "What if she's not his sister? That village boy had some facial hair going already. Chances are he made a mistake with a girl, and when the baby

popped out, he didn't know what to do with it and so he thought to just dump it somewhere and be done with it."

Granny Li Liu said, "How could you start gossiping instead? It doesn't matter whose child she is. Are you not a nursery? Do nurseries not take care of children? You have to come out, one of you. See how windy it is out here—what if the baby catches a cold?"

The two teachers watched Granny Li Liu calmly. The more soft-spoken one said, "Granny, you don't understand. We are a nursery school, not an orphanage. We have rules and regulations, and we can't just take in any child. Think about it, Granny—if everyone left their unwanted children underneath this window, it'd be a zoo in here!"

The other teacher was getting fed up with Granny Li Liu's ignorance. She raised her voice, saying, "We are just three adults with three pairs of hands, and we have to manage dozens of children already. We've already got more work than we could do, and here you are being a bother!"

Granny Li Liu answered, "What do you mean I'm being a bother? It's not like I want you to wipe my bum and feed me. It's this little precious! Do you not have a heart? It's so windy out here. Why do you just stand there and look, and not come out to do something?"

One of the teachers said, "Even if we come out, we can't take her. Granny, you

don't understand—we've got procedures to follow when we admit a child!"

Granny Li Liu said, "You don't have to tell me about procedures. I know all about procedures. But can't you just take in the girl first and then do the procedures later?"

That teacher smiled exasperatedly, "We're never going to get through to you. Granny, we are a daycare. The parents have to come in the afternoon to pick up their children. If I take her in now, who would I pass her off to in the evening? You can see just as well as I do that she has no parents!"

"The more you should feel sorry for her, since she's an orphan!" Granny Li Liu squatted down, stuck her hand under the sunflower jacket, felt around, took her hand out again and touched the baby girl's forehead. "She doesn't seem sick," she said, "and her eyes are so lovely. How could such a cute little girl be left out here with nobody giving a care?"

Granny Li Liu picked up on the faint goat smell again. She wrinkled her nose and sniffed, and determined that it was indeed the scent of goat. However, to the two teachers, she reported something different; she waved to them and said, "Come over and take a sniff. The girl smells really nice, like butter biscuits!"

The two teachers shrewdly declined Granny Li Liu's invitation, saying, "We are all too familiar with the smell of children. We have had enough. We don't want to smell her."

Granny Li Liu stared at the window sill desperately. All of a sudden, she sneered, “Who says people have hearts? Some people have icicles instead where their hearts should be!”

The younger teacher finally lost her temper at Granny Li Liu, “If you’re so kind-hearted, you take her home yourself!” With that, she shut the nursery school window with a bang.

## Five

They watched Granny Li Liu limp down the street, dragging a little wooden wagon behind her. Someone went up to greet her, “Granny Li, off to buy some coal?” Granny Li Liu shook her head and answered, “No, what coal? If I see coal, I’ll start to think about those people’s hearts. Nowadays people have hearts that are darker than coal!” Her already-wizened face had an expression of desperation and righteous anger on it, making it look even shrivelled than before.

Floriston at noontime was a busy place. People were hurrying to and fro, and very few noticed that the willow basket on the little wooden wagon held a baby. Most people thought that it was just a cotton-padded jacket that Granny Li Liu had removed. The bright sunflower design on the jacket, though, caught the attention of many. They said, “Ha! Granny Li is getting young at heart again, to be wearing such a cutesy jacket!”

Granny Li Liu’s little wooden wagon stopped before the house of her nephew, Zhang Sheng. Zhang Sheng’s wife, in a half-buttoned cardigan and a baby in her arm, came out to greet her. She saw Granny Li Liu bending down and taking a baby out from a willow basket, saying, “Hurry, hurry! Give this baby some milk!”

As she nursed the baby, Zhang Sheng’s wife listened to Granny Li Liu condemn the teachers at the nursery school. But all the while the only thing she was really interested in was where the baby girl came from. And it was the one thing that Granny Li Liu couldn’t explain properly.

Granny Li Liu kept her eyes on the baby girl’s mouth and the ample breasts of Zhang Sheng’s wife. She said, “Feed her a bit more. You’ve got a lot of milk and you’ll have to squeeze it out anyway.”

Zhang Sheng’s wife replied, “Feeding her more isn’t an issue. But Granny, how could you just pick up random children from the streets? Hepatitis is going around these days, and what if—”

Granny Li Liu interrupted her, “You’re thinking too many what ifs. Take a look at her. Her skin is fair and her cheeks are rosy. How could she be sick?”

Zhang Sheng’s wife turned around every now and then to look at her own baby, lying on the bed, as if she was comparing and contrasting the two infants. A while later, she drew her nipple out evenly from the baby girl’s mouth. “Granny, can you smell

something odd about the girl?” she asked, “Why is there this musky goat smell?”

Granny Li Liu hesitated for a bit and then laughed, “What goat smell? It’s a sweet smell. I think it smells like butter biscuits.”

The nursing over, Zhang Sheng’s wife placed the baby girl back into the willow basket. She caught sight of the milk bottle in the basket, converted from an IV bottle. She took it out, gave it a shake, and said, “They already had some milk ready for the girl. And you insisted on her drinking mine.”

Granny Li Liu said, “It’s just half a bottle. We’ll have to ration it. We’ll have to take her to the Town Office in a bit, and who knows if they have milk there?”

Zhang Sheng’s wife went to pick up her own child. She turned her head around and said, “You’re going to carry the baby over in your wooden wagon in a bit?”

The question upset Granny Li Liu. She frowned and said, “Young people these days! Has the Communist Party educated you in vain? She’s an abandoned baby, but regardless she’s still a baby! Why do you all talk like that? I’m well up in years, and my legs are giving me trouble. And the cadres won’t understand the way I talk anyway. And you young people want me to go instead of taking her there yourselves?”

Zhang Sheng’s wife replied, “I wasn’t telling you to take her there. But Granny, why are you minding business that’s not yours?”

Granny Li Liu raised her voice and

yelled, “We’re not talking about business. We’re talking about a baby!”

After all, Granny Li Liu was her elder. As soon as she yelled, Zhang Sheng’s wife kept her thoughts to herself. She walked around the house with her own baby in her arms, and after walking around a few times, she said, “Well, I don’t have time to go anyway. But Zhang Sheng is about to come home for lunch. If you really want the girl to be taken there, get Zhang Sheng to do it.”

## Six

Zhang Sheng from the lumber yard arrived at the Town Office just past noon. He arrived at a bad time, though, as it was right at lunch break. All five storeys of the Floriston Town Office Building were silent and still. The Petitioning Bureau, the Women’s Federation, the Family Planning Leading Group... the door of every office was shut. Only one office on the fifth floor caught his attention. The windows of that room were covered in newspaper carelessly, and voices were heard from the inside. Zhang Sheng climbed onto a window sill and peered inside through a transom. There were a few cadres sitting there playing cards, and one of them had two slips of paper stuck onto his nose. Zhang Sheng giggled and hopped down, saying to himself, “Didn’t know they played this game too.”

He knocked on the door for a long time. It fell quiet inside for a while, and finally

someone asked, "Who is it?" A female cadre in a tangerine suit came to answer the door. She leant sideways, looking at Zhang Sheng warily through the half-opened door, and said, "We're on lunch. No official business now."

Zhang Sheng remembered that she worked in the Women's Federation. "The Women's Federation deals with children," he mumbled, and lifted the willow basket from the floor. He offered it to the female cadre in an exaggerated posture. "You're on lunch, but I need to hurry back to work," he said, "My auntie found this baby outside the nursery school, and told me to bring her to the authorities."

The female cadre instinctively avoided the willow basket. In a startled voice, she cried, "Where did the baby come from?"

Zhang Sheng said, "Someone abandoned her on the street!"

The lady screeched again, "Where are you from?"

Zhang Sheng put the basket back on the floor, saying, "I am a worker in the lumber yard. What are you looking at me like that for? It's a child that I'm giving you, not a bomb! Take her! If you don't, I'll just leave her here."

The other people in the room swarmed out. One of them, a security guard, recognized Zhang Sheng. He said, "No wonder, it's this hot-headed fellow. A few years ago he was a regular at the police station too!" Seeing that Zhang Sheng was

about to flee, a young cadre ran up and held onto him. "You can't abandon the baby here. This isn't some kind of joke. We have to investigate and register her first."

Zhang Sheng replied, "What's there to investigate? If I'm supposed to turn in money that I found by the roadside, shouldn't I also turn in a child that I found as well?"

"Stop quibbling. Even if you're turning her in, you have to come when the office is open. Pick up the basket and go wait downstairs. You can register her with Family Planning at two-thirty!"

Zhang Sheng refused to pick up the willow basket. His body inched stealthily towards the staircase. Two of the male cadres were quick and saw through his plan. Together, they rushed forward and stuffed the willow basket back into Zhang Sheng's arms. And then, grabbing him from under his arms on either side, they basically dragged him down five floors of stairs.

Zhang Sheng sat in the gatehouse downstairs for about five minutes, which he spent uttering various oaths and curses. It took Old Nian, the doorkeeper, much effort to figure out what exactly was going on. There was nothing much he could say, so he just poured Zhang Sheng a glass of hot water and even offered him a cigarette. Zhang Sheng was still fuming mad. He refused both the water and the cigarette, and all he wanted to do was give the basket to Old Nian.

Old Nian said, "I've been a bachelor all my life. Never dealt with children. You'd

just be giving me trouble if you give me the baby!”

Zhang Sheng looked outside the window angrily, and then looked at Old Nian. A determined, obstinate expression crossed his face. “I won’t give you any trouble,” he said, “I’ll go away. I’ll leave the baby outside!”

Old Nian’s eyes followed Zhang Sheng as he placed the willow basket next to the flower box outside the building. Before he left, Zhang Sheng tucked the baby girl into the jacket. But it didn’t do any good. As he saw through the window what Zhang Sheng was doing, Old Nian burst out, “Bastard!” He regretted having poured that glass of hot water, or having offered that cigarette to Zhang Sheng. “What an oaf! Going to work is important, but it doesn’t mean you can just abandon a baby like this by the flower box. It’s a baby, not a potted plant!”

The afternoon sun shone agreeably upon the flower box outside the Town Office. The chrysanthemums in the flower box were half blooming, half withered, all appearing indifferent to the enthusiasm of the sunshine. The willow basket, on the other hand—each strand of its wicker embraced the rays, and the entire basket looked as if it was surrounded with a pale golden halo.

It was a cat who first noticed the willow basket. The cat—it wasn’t clear whose it was—rushed over and circled the basket a few times. It put a paw on the rim of the basket, poked its head in to give the baby a

good smell. Nothing tasty. The cat walked around several times more, and finally walked away disappointedly. Right after that came a dog, frolicking and running towards the flower box. It was the yellow dog owned by the head chef at the cafeteria. Seeing that the dog came to check the scene out as well, Old Nian ran out and shooed the dog away, “That’s a baby, not a fish or a bone! You animals stay out of it!”

Old Nian kept watch over the willow basket from the other side of the window. He was waiting for the baby girl in the basket to start crying, but she never did. The baby’s uncanny quietness made him suspicious. Why wouldn’t she cry? Poor child, why wouldn’t she cry? He thought, “Maybe she’s a mute? And if she is a mute, whoever takes her in would be taking in trouble. No wonder people are unkind to her!”

Later on, two girls skipping a rope of rubber bands came to the pole with the national flag. They tied one end of the rope to the flag pole, but neither wanted to hold the other end. Both wanted to jump first. As they quarrelled, one of the girls caught sight of the willow basket. She abandoned her friend and ran towards the flower box.

Soon, Old Nian heard the two girls screaming, “Whose baby is this? Who abandoned their baby? A villain threw their baby away!”

Old Nian saw the two little girls, dragging the rubber band rope behind them, dash towards the gatehouse. He

panicked. Immediately, he bolted the door from the inside. He turned around to look for somewhere to hide, but the only refuge available was a folding canvas bed. An idea hit him in this time of desperation. He kicked his shoes off, threw the blanket back, and scurried underneath it. By the time he had hidden himself under the blanket the door was already being knocked thunderously. Old Nian pretended that he didn't hear. He covered his face with the blanket, and there underneath the sheets, he grumbled about the girls, "Stupid girls! How stupid can you get! Why would you get an old bachelor to deal with a baby? I'm a doorkeeper, not a babysitter!"

Old Nian remained hiding under the blanket after the two girls left. There was no way he would get up then. But that's all right. He would keep an eye on the clock on the wall, and he would get up before two-thirty, when his supervisors would come back into the building to work. And then someone would take care of the willow basket. Voices started streaming into the gatehouse from the outside, wave after wave. It seemed that the shrill voices of the girls got the attention of people in the Cultural Center and the clinic nearby. Old Nian poked his head out from underneath the blanket, and peered out the window furtively. He saw shapes of people moving all around the flower box. And, amidst the hubbub, he suddenly heard the baby girl wail, clear and loud, no differently than other infants. It shook his eardrums,

though, and filled his ears with itch and pain. He dug in his ears, but at the same time he heaved a sigh of relief, and murmured, "She could cry after all. She's not a mute!"

Around a quarter past two in the afternoon, Old Nian got up from bed. After napping dressed for all this time, he suddenly felt the chill. He pulled off a winter jacket hanging behind the door and draped it over himself. The ruckus outside had died down. Old Nian stood by the window and looked towards the flower box for a while. There were a few people standing there still, gesturing and pointing as they spoke. The willow basket had disappeared. There had been so many people around; one of them must have been kind enough to solve the problem. With mixed feelings, Old Nian walked out, jacket draped over his shoulders. He sensed a delicate yet musky goat-smell lingering in the air outside, a subdued scent and yet one that overpowered the perfume of the fading chrysanthemums in the flower box. Old Nian recalled that it was the smell of the willow basket and the baby girl.

Remaining around the flower box were a few of the women chefs from the cafeteria, indulging in a discussion about the fate of the willow basket. They were the ones who broke the shocking news to Old Nian.

One woman put it most succinctly, "The mad woman Ruilan carried off the basket!"

Another one filled in the details, "Ruilan, the mad woman, snatched the basket and ran off with it. She was fighting for it

and no one could stop her. She said it was her daughter. But everyone here in Floriston knows that her daughter drowned in Muddy River. And yet she swore that it was her daughter!”

Old Nian’s jaw dropped. It took a while before he could react. He cried out all of a sudden, “She is mad, but you’re not! How could you just let her snatch the baby? How could a madwoman take care of a child?”

Seeing that the normally even-tempered old doorkeeper break into such an unexpected fit of rage, the women chefs tried to calm him down, saying, “Don’t you worry. Ruilan won’t be able to keep her. Her brother, Ruichang, was here with her too. He said that as soon as she snaps out of her fit, he’d take the baby where it should go. He promised he’d take care of it!”

Old Nian said, “Easy enough for him to say. He’ll take care of it? Not even the gods know who the child belongs to. Where would he take her?”

One of the women chefs said, “Across the river, of course, to Maple-Poplar Village!”

Old Nian didn’t understand, “Why do you reckon the baby’s parents are in Maple-Poplar Village?”

The woman chef said, “That’s obvious. Country folk value boys over girls, and whenever they have a girl, they throw her away!”

Another woman chef interrupted her

bluntly, saying, “It’s not like you saw it happening. Don’t talk about what you don’t know! If the villagers across the river hear about this, they’re going to come after you with their hoes!” It seemed like this one had enough information, and her explanation satisfied Old Nian. So they had traced her parentage back through clues. She continued, “Xiao Lu from the clinic, the one who gives shots, came over earlier too. And she was the one who revealed Maple-Poplar Village as the origin of the girl.”

“Xiao Lu recognized the milk bottle in the basket,” added another woman chef, “Did you see that IV bottle? It was half-filled with milk. The women in Maple-Poplar Village always go to the clinic to steal IV bottles, and take them home to use as milk bottles!”

## Seven

Shrouded in the darkness of the night, a willow basket descended into the goat pen at Luo Wenli’s house.

The next morning, Lu Xingxian got up and went out to the goat pen. The first thing that greeted her eyes was the returned willow basket. The basket had come back. Lu Xingxian screamed. Suddenly, she saw that their goat pen had been rebuilt into a maze without her knowing. The maze-pen was half in the dark, half in the light; the goats were hiding in the dark, while the willow basket sat outside boldly, soaking up the morning sun. Lu Xingxian tiptoed

over. The sunflower-patterned padded jacket was still there, but the baby was gone. She braced herself and touched the jacket. It was a bit wet, smelled a bit of the morning dew's lingering damp, and felt a bit sticky.

She started to call for her husband, "Wenli, Wenli, come here quickly! Our goat pen is haunted!" Unfortunately, the hardworking Luo Wenli had already left to work in the fields. She fled to the gate, and, turning around to keep an eye on the willow basket, she started yelling for her son. "Qinglai, Qinglai, get up! Where did you drop the baby off? Why did the basket come back on its own after you dropped off the baby?"

As she turned around, Lu Xingxian caught sight of a baby goat standing timidly in a corner of the goat pen. She remembered that when she went to feed the goats the previous night, there were only three of them. Now she woke up in the morning and there was an extra goat. Lu Xingxian was so shocked that she doubted her own eyes. She shouted in the direction of the house, "Qinglai, Qinglai, hurry and get up! What's going on with my eyes? I can't tell how many goats we have!"

Qinglai threw on a pair of shorts and came out. He looked at the willow basket, turned around awkwardly to look at his mother, and then went to look at the goats. The colour left his face. He counted the goats on his fingers, and said, "Yes, there is an extra one. Just like last summer, we have four

goats now." Qinglai walked up to the little goat, reached out as if he wanted to grab its horns, but immediately drew back again. He turned around and said to his mother, "Mom, don't be scared. I recognize it. It's the goat that wandered off last summer. It's back."

Lu Xingxian said, "You're still dreaming! Goats aren't dogs. They can't find their way home. Go and take a closer look. Whose goat is it and what's it doing in our goat pen?"

Qinglai squatted down, spat on the ground, and began inspecting this baby-goat-from-nowhere intently. After a while, all fear and indecision left him. "You're just a goat. I won't be afraid of a goat!" he yelled, and determinedly put out his arms and tightly clasped the baby goat's head. He turned his own head this way and that way, looking the goat over.

Suddenly, he gave a shout, "Mom, come and look! The goat is weeping. Its eyes are wet!"

Lu Xingxian picked up a carrying pole and gave her son a whack on the bottom. "I'm already terrified. Stop scaring me!" she cried, "How would a goat weep? I've kept goats for decades and have never seen one weep. It's only cows that weep!"

Qinglai said, "Mom, I'm not trying to scare you. This one's eyes are different. Come see for yourself!"

Lu Xingxian walked over, leant on her son's shoulder, and stared at the baby goat's eyes. There seemed to be a teary glitter over

its eyes. “Whose goat is this and how could it be weeping?” Lu Xingxian shrieked, “Most merciful bodhisattvas in Heaven! We have treated our goats well and you’ve seen it! My family is always hungry, but our goats always have full bellies! How could you let our goat pen be haunted?”

Qinglai was not as distraught as his mother, which was a good thing, as they needed all his self-possession and quick-thinking that morning. He took a glance at the willow basket under the window, and then looked at the goat. He shivered all of a sudden, and gave a resonant sneeze.

Lu Xingxian said, “Are you getting cold? Go put on some clothes and come back. Then take the goat out and see whose it is.”

Qinglai fixed his gaze on his mother blankly and said, “Mom, don’t try to send it away anymore. You can’t ever send it away. It’s all your fault. Yesterday you said something you shouldn’t have!”

Lu Xingxian asked, “What did I say?”

Qinglai replied, “Yesterday you said, if the baby were a goat, you would have kept it. You shouldn’t have said that!”

Lu Xingxian said, “What’s wrong with you, son? Why are you making no sense like you’re talking in your sleep?”

Qinglai fell silent. After a while, he took his mother’s arm and took her outside. And there, outside the fence of the goat pen, beneath the early, rising sun of the morning, young Luo Qinglai revealed to his mother the greatest secret in the history of Maple-Poplar Village:

“Mom, I’m telling you, don’t be scared. Don’t be scared. That isn’t the goat that wandered off last summer, and it isn’t someone else’s goat either. I’m telling you, don’t be scared, but you really did say something wrong, and the kid remembered the way back to our place, and she has returned!”

Translated by Florence Woo

### Notes:

1. Editor’s note: *jīn*, a unit of weight, 1 *jīn*=500 grams.