

Fiery Mountain
by Chang Hsi-Kuo

The run-down old bus lurched and came at last to a stop at the turnout.

The ticket girl nodded to him, "This is your stop, you can get off here."

"Thanks." He smiled at her, picked up his travel bag, and stepped off the bus.

The doors shut with a "*png*". In a cloud of exhaust the bus continued on ahead, rocking side to side, and vanished from view, leaving him alone by himself at the side of the road. He looked around a bit. The road was bordered on the right by a hillside. Terraced stone steps led up to a row of Japanese style houses. On the left there was a row of villa-style houses; and below was the harbor. He could see the blue of the ocean sparkling between the roofs and the trees.

"This is terrific! I've always wanted to have a place to live by the sea," he thought, "Here I'll be able to take in some inspiration for the soul. That's for certain."

Leaving the bus turnout, he walked up the stone steps set into the hillside, and came to the front of a red door. As soon as he rang the bell, everyone inside came pouring out. Mother, father, little sister, the wolf-hound, they all surrounded him, inundating him with questions.

"You're finally here, what took you so long? We've been waiting for two days already. Look at you, you've gotten thinner. Why don't you get a little more to eat? Have you been taking the vitamins we gave you....," said mother.

"Are you done with your exams? How do you think you did? You have to make sure you apply yourself more to your work, don't spend so much time writing those articles, don't let me worry about you...," said father.

"Hey, Big Brother! Look at our new house, how do you like it? Your study is amazing, it looks right out on the ocean, and you can see all the boats. In a little while I'll take you down to the shore and we can get some seashells," said little sister.

"Woof! Woof!" said the dog, two giant paws pressing up against his snow white shirt.

"I knew it'd be just like this," he sighed, "home sweet home and domestic tranquility. But why didn't you tell me before you moved – I'd have come back to give you a hand."

"But weren't you in the middle of your exams? We didn't want to disturb your studies. Besides, Dad and I wanted to give you a surprise. Haven't you always loved the ocean? "

"Come on, big brother, let's go down to the seashore!"

"There's no hurry, let him rest a little. If there's anything you'd like to eat, honey, I'll make it for you."

He put down his travel bag, and surrendered himself to parental love. That's just the way it always

was. Every time he came home, he was forced to become a child again. And when he left home, back at school muddling along in his studies he could act like a regular guy. But in the eyes of mother and father, he would always be just a ten or eleven year old kid. At home he couldn't write his articles, he couldn't accomplish anything of his own at all, because every corner was engulfed by parental love and solicitude. He constantly felt the pressure of being loved. Perhaps this was the reason for his reluctance to come home.

First he went to take a look around the new house. His study was just as nice as his sister had described. From the hallway adjoining the study, you could look out and see the entire Jilong harbor: steamships, navy ships, motorboats, barges, port terminals, lighthouse towers, and the white caps on the sea out beyond the breakwater. Standing in the hallway he remembered how, when he was little, he'd dreamt of becoming a naval officer. And then what had happened? Mom wouldn't let him go to the naval academy. So the dream was shattered, how commonplace and pathetic! He always liked to think of himself as being a person of real resolve. But in fact he was actually just as weak as everyone else, always lowering his head, buckling to reality, lowering his head and giving in to parental love. Just commonplace! Commonplace! Pathetic!

"Can we go down to the seashore?" little sister had been standing there the whole time beside him waiting.

At the end of the lane that went down along the row of villas there was, unexpectedly, a small strip of beach and a weirdly shaped reef. For an instant he felt a thrill, but then immediately sank again into a feeling of boredom. Sitting upon a the timbers of an old boat scuttled on the sand, he watched his little sister pick up shells.

"What's making you unhappy?" his sister eventually came over and asked him.

"It's nothing. I just can't get my interest up."

She tossed the seashells she'd been gathering to the ground, and sat down beside him.

"What did you do that for, throwing away your shells? Did I do something to make you angry?"

"No."

They sat there for a while and didn't say anything. Then his sister suddenly spoke up. She complained about her school, about the imbecilic, obstinate nuns, the empty, shallow studies, the tedium of school life... She spoke rapidly, attacking everyone and everything. He looked at her, and realized that he and she both had the same blood flowing in their veins, they were entirely alike. He wasn't the least surprised, that a ten year old girl would have such intense insight, such prideful ideas. Because he could understand her completely, and moreover he felt proud on her account.

"I told you before, you shouldn't have gone to that catholic school, who told you not to take my advice!"

"I wasn't thinking so much about these things then."

“Well, it's really still alright. You can use all these experiences as material later on when you write a novel, can't you?”

She smiled, her eyes radiant.

He looked at her and thought, “That's my little sister, someday perhaps you'll write a great novel, greater than “Gone With The Wind”. But who knows? The future will forever be a puzzle.

“But you still haven't told me, why are you in a bad mood?”

He shrugged his shoulders .

“I'm not in a bad mood. It's just that I can't seem to get my interest up in anything... studying, going out, meeting girls, or anything else. I just don't really care about anything at all right now. Do you know what I mean. I just don't care about anything at all.”

His sister responded eagerly, “I feel exactly like you do. I just don't care about anything either.”

He suddenly realized his mistake, he should not be talking like this about these things.

“Don't worry, little sister. Don't you want to get out of that catholic school? Well, then you'll have to make sure that your schoolwork is your absolute best, so that you can test into another school. So you still have to make an extra effort. Don't talk like me. You aren't yet at the age where you can 'see through' things.”

But would he ever be able to see through things himself? He knew perfectly well it made no difference. For what was the point of life? Isn't it just that one goes on living only insofar as it takes no special effort do to so, if only because it is somewhat easier than dying? He sighed. Being a mere halfhearted nihilist was even worse than being a complete nihilist. If at some point he were able to cast off this concern over “not seeing through things”, then he'd finally be a true nihilist.

“Let's go home now. It's getting a little cold.”

Back at the house there were guests. Mother and father were chatting with another couple who'd come over to visit, a colleague of father's and his wife. He slipped into the study. The shoji paper screen door of the Japanese style house could not dampen the sound of their voices.

“..... Ming-Chong has been in the civil service all these years, and there's no one more upright and law-abiding than he.” It was his mother's voice, “but nowadays, honest people are just taken advantage of. Ming-Chong thinks all that matters is his productivity at the office. But it didn't ever occur to him to pay a social visit to his immediate superior, the general manager. No wonder the general manager was unhappy!”

The colleague's wife replied, “That's right. No one's a better person than your Li Ming-Chong. And the general manager has always had great respect for his work. You can't possibly say there's been any misunderstanding between the two of them”

“But if there weren't any misunderstanding, then why would he have assigned Ming-Chong here to Jilong? This demotion is such an embarrassment. The general manager must have had some problem with Ming-Chong.”

“I wouldn't put it that way, I wouldn't go so far as to say that,” the colleague's voice sounded.

“No, there has to have been some misunderstanding. There must have been! Otherwise why would Ming-Chong have been demoted? Is it because of his age?”

“Heh heh!” the colleague laughed dryly, “Mrs. Li, you're worrying too much. The reassignment isn't a demotion. Still, in the future Mr. Li really ought to make an effort to take some initiative socially with the general manager. You shouldn't think of it as currying favor; it's nothing more than doing a little of what's expected of a subordinate.”

“That's right, Mr. Ma, you've put your finger on it. I'm always trying to tell Ming-Chong the same thing, but he doesn't listen. Well, now he's learning his lesson. The general manager”

He suddenly was overcome by an unspeakable despair. Father hadn't done anything wrong. He hadn't thought to curry favor with his superiors – what was wrong with that? Mother was right too – as always what she said was reasonable and fair. But then who had done anything wrong? He wished he could have nothing at all to do with the affairs of the adult world. He wished he could forever remain a student, reading, writing articles, and when he had time, go out with girls. But he understood, that sort of pleasant dream could not go on indefinitely. Eventually there would come a day when he'd have to face the real world.

He stepped out into the hallway and stood there. The sun gradually began to set. A bank of red smoky clouds seemed to engulf the mountains in the west, as if the entire range of mountains were ablaze.

“Brother, look at the mountains over toward Taipei! It looks like all of Taipei is on fire.”

“Yeah, it looks a bit like *The Fiery Mountain* in *Journey to The West*, doesn't it?”

There they stood together in the hall, both enrapt by the uncanny fiery scene of the sunset. He knew that tomorrow he would have to cross over that Fiery Mountain, although he wished that he did not. But he could not avoid having to. He could not make time come to a stop, he could not stop life itself. For there really was not a thing he could do about it. A pawn on a chessboard, a cog in a machine, what can they do?

Early the following morning, before the fog had cleared in the harbor, the ships' horns sounding, he left his home, and caught the return bus back. Looking out the window, as he got a glimpse of last night's blazing Fiery Mountain, the intense seriousness of the expression upon his face was like that of a soldier being called up by the draft.