

A Storm Wind's Blowing

By Chang Hsi-Kuo, 1965

“You really ought to make the trip home this time.”

Ai Lei said nothing. His gaze was fixed out the window. The rain was falling even harder now. Ai Lei could see nothing in the darkness outside. He could hear the surging of the storm on all sides, as gust after gust of fine spray was driven through the gap in the window frame. Occasionally a car drove by on the highway, sending up a sheet of spray. Then in the space ahead, illuminated by the headlights, there would appear a web, composed of line upon line of raindrops, which seemed to bind up the highway and the side roads. As soon as the car was past, the web was hidden again in the darkness; and one was aware of its existence only from the monotonous sustained sound of driving rain. But the web was still there: an all-encompassing net, enveloping everything in sight ahead, enveloping every exit.

“Listen to me, Ai Lei, it's best if you go home for a visit this time.”

Outside above the window were the power lines. Ai Lei couldn't make them out clearly, but he knew that suspended from each span beads of water were gliding along. From time to time, one of them would glide a bit faster, overtaking and swallowing up the one ahead of it; enlarging itself one water drop at a time; then a bit faster still, again swallowing the ones ahead; then faster ... until finally because of its greediness, too large to hold on any longer, it would suddenly fall to the ground.

When he was small, on rainy days Ai Lei would stand in rapt attention at the window watching the pursuit of the water drops on the power lines. Whenever one of those greedy drops would fall from the power line he just couldn't help bursting out with laughter! At that point Mama would run over laughing and shout at him in jest, “You silly little boy! What's so funny about watching the rain? Tell Mama what's so funny about it?” And he'd explain to Mama about the race of the water drops.

“The day after tomorrow, the day after tomorrow is your mother's memorial day. Your dad must be expecting you'll come home. I think you really should go home and visit.”

The rain was still falling. For a long time, on the highway no cars had driven by. But Ai Lei still was aware of that formless web, that all-encompassing, all-covering web of rain, which surrounded him on all sides.

He cleared his throat and said, "We're stuck, Lao Liu, we're just stuck here! We won't be able to make it back to the dorm!"

Lao Liu pushed open the window and stretched out his hand to check. A gust of spray surged in. Lao Liu quickly shut the window again. "It's been raining nonstop for an hour and forty-five minutes. Good thing we found the beach groundskeepers' hut, else by now we'd be a couple of drowned rats!"

"We're stuck! Stranded!"

"No we're not. Just wait a little while longer. The rain will lighten up. Rain like this never goes on for too long. I'm just afraid if we wait past midnight then that's the harbor curfew But we can always make a run for it. Right now let's talk about your trip home...."

"Alright enough already! You don't have to go on about it. The old man wants me to come home, so what about it? He thinks if he doesn't send me money then I've got no choice but to go home. Well I still won't go. Let's see what he does about that?"

"Do you really have to fight with your own father like this? No matter what, he's always your father."

That's exactly the point. No matter what he's always your father. No matter what, the Old Man's always the Old Man. Even though, by sheer chance, there'd been that scene, can you deny that he is your father?

Ai Lei could never forget that day and the expression on his father's face.

"Buddy! Buddy! You have to understand. There are some things ... that a man just can't ... after your mother passed away ... I ..."

There was father, until then always severe, composed to the utmost, now red in the face, imploring, *"Buddy! You have to understand."*

Perhaps it would have been better if the old man hadn't pleaded like that, and Ai Lei would have been able to maintain at least a little respect for him. But on that day after he'd stepped meekly into Ai Lei's room, after Ai Lei had discovered his hypocrisy, affectedness and utter insignificance, Ai Lei felt he'd never be able to forgive his father.

"It hasn't even been a whole year since Mama passed away. You couldn't even wait one whole year?"

“Buddy! You have to understand me. You need to ...”

“No! No! I’ll never forget the way you’ve acted toward Mom. I just can’t forgive you!”

“Buddy! Is this the way you talk to your father? You ...”

“I...”

So that’s what happened, just like something that happens in a film or a novel. But when it happens to you, it is neither as moving, nor as interesting. Until then the conception he’d held of his father had been so dignified and so noble. Now suddenly the idol was smashed and his father was just like everyone else: a creature of the flesh, with feelings of lust, a petty and insignificant little nobody. This was your old man. Your old man whom you so recently worshipped; who it turns out is just another petty insignificant little nobody. Never mind the dashing figure in the photo album, wearing a military uniform, seeming so handsome, talented and spry. As soon as Mama died, he just had to go sleep with another woman. He was nothing but ordinary.

“Buddy! You have to understand.”

Ai Lei could only feel sick to his stomach. He could feel just pity for the old man, the idol that had been smashed. The old man had always doted upon him, and now all the more so. Every month he’d send letters, asking him to come home. Sometimes he’d waver a little but whenever he thought of that scene, he felt he could never forgive the old man; that he could never go home again.

“Listen to me, Ai Lei. You really have to go home this time. Not to see the old man. But it’s your mother’s memorial day. You’ve got to go back this time!”

“Why doesn’t he just get married. If he’d just get married that’d be good enough. Why does he stay unmarried, and make Mama suffer such indignity in her grave?”

“Maybe it’s because he’s so fond of you; maybe because he’s thinking of you. But old folks get lonely – you really can’t refuse to take that into account!”

“Alright! Lao Liu, let’s not talk about it anymore, ok? I’ll go home. Naturally I’ve got to go back. There’s no point in wasting your breath pressuring me. Tomorrow it’s the weekend and I’ve got a lot to do. I’ve got to go see Yun-Ch’ien. Maybe I’ve also got to go to Taipei. I just don’t have time to go home.”

“Yun-Ch’ien! Didn’t you just see her tonight? Why do you have to go again tomorrow?”

Ai Lei continued staring out the window at the power lines. A car drove by. As it turned the bend it cast up a shaft of light. In that instant Ai Lei's attention was drawn to the chain of sparkling, transparent suspended water drops, each gliding along the power line. The car turned away and was gone. Everything fell again into darkness.

"Just before when I went to see her, she wouldn't come out. I think I'll wait for her at her school tomorrow at lunchtime. That way I'll definitely see her."

"Ai Lei, I'm not trying to criticize you; but – chasing after her like this isn't going to work. If she doesn't like you, you can chase after her as much as you like, but it's no use. Sure, Yun-Ch'ien's not bad looking, but she's only a high-school junior. She still has to get into the university. Right now you're hoping she'll want to "go" with you; but that's completely impossible. Even if she goes out with you now, after she's in college, she'd have a change of heart anyway; and dump you then. If that's what's going to happen, it's just better now to"

"Shut your goddamn mouth!" Ai Lei suddenly lit up, "I've had enough of your lecturing. If I don't want to go home, you don't approve. If I want to have a girl, you don't approve. Ok. I don't have a chance with Wang Yun-Ch'ien, I'll give you that. So you're entitled to make your sarcastic comments. But, you got pretty hot and heavy with your own 'Miss Vitamin G.' – looked like you two were practically *married*. You satisfied your own damn desires, but if I feel like going after a girl, you don't approve, you've got to get in the way! Who do you think you are?"

In the darkness, Lao Liu took a step back. Ai Lei clenched his jaw and tightened his fists.

"Now you're barking up the wrong tree. Can't you see I'm on your side. If you can't take a word or two of advice between old friends, forget it. I'll be out with it: you can do whatever you want; I don't care. You don't have to come around asking for my advice either. "

Ai Lei relaxed his fists and did not reply. For a time the two of them said nothing. Then the sound of the rainfall gradually began to diminish, until at last it stopped completely. They left the wooden groundskeepers hut and walked along the highway back to the dorms. The concrete highway was partly flooded in low-lying spots by the overflowing drainage ditch. Ai Lei, not noticing, stepped right into one of these depressions. His leather shoes filled with water. He swore, then continued on, the waterlogged shoes squeaking. Lao Liu lit a cigarette. The glowing red spot moved back and forth from his hand to his mouth. They passed the lighthouse. The breakwater ships anchored in the outer harbor had already put on their lights. A large passenger ship was ablaze with lights. The inverted reflection of the ship upon the water was broken into many pieces by the waves. Nearby the mist above the sea was heavy and lights along the near shore of

the harbor twinkled ever more brilliantly. The cigarette end dangling from Lao Liu's mouth glowed fiercely for a moment then gradually became fainter.

“Lao Liu, I'm really sorry ... for what I just said. But I feel like I'm going out of my mind. I've never kept this business with Yun-Ch'ien a secret from you. You've given me a lot of good tips. You've got to give me some advice now. What should I do now?”

“What do you mean ‘what should you do?’” The cigarette end glowed, then became a dark red again. “After the dance last Sunday when you walked her home, didn't you kiss?”

“Yes.”

“So, wasn't that wonderful?”

“I thought so too. I also thought that meant we were ‘going together’. But when I went to see her today, for some reason she wouldn't come out. It's like she was angry at me?”

“That night you kissed her, was she angry then?”

“Not at all. The moonlight on the harbor, the streets, it was just perfect.... We were both having such a great time. When we said goodnight she was still really happy. I just can't understand why today ... Ahh!”

“Sometimes girls are just a bit moody.”

“But I thought we were already ‘going together!’”

Lao Liu swung his hand, casting off a point of red light. It traced an arc through the air, before landing on the road, where it lay still unextinguished.

“Ai Lei, I don't understand what you're trying to accomplish. What's the point of being in such a hurry to be ‘going together’ with a girl? If it were me, there'd still be time to run away! With the life we're about to lead as sailors going to the ends of the earth, living on the high seas, do you think that girl would want to marry you? Take it a little slower; it all depends upon fate. You can't force fate, you know.”

Ai Lei hadn't anything to say. But there was a voice inside that said, ‘I need a girl who understands me; who'll listen to what's bothering me. When I'm down she'd encourage me; when I'm sad, she'd comfort me; when I'm happy, we could share the happiness together. I want ... I want to have a home! I don't want see the ends of the earth; I don't

want to be a sailor, casting about on the oceans, with no hope of ever going home, someone without a home at all. I've got to find a girl who can really understand me!

Then, unexpectedly he thought of Mama. He felt slightly ashamed. But he didn't have the courage to tell Lao Liu. Lao Liu was an optimist, who could calmly take whatever problem he encountered and make it simple. Ai Lei envied him terribly – why couldn't he be like that himself? But Lao Liu had a family and Ai Lei had only half of one. When would he ever finally find a place that he could really call home?

They hurried back to the dorm before the rain started to fall again and they changed their wet clothes. One of their housemates handed Ai Lei a registered letter. Ai Lei tore it open, stuffed the money into his leather jacket, and casually crumpled the letter up and dropped it without even looking at it once. Lao Liu shook his head, picked up the crumpled letter, straightened it out and read it to him.

"I don't want to hear it!" Ai Lei grabbed the letter and crumpled it into a ball again.

Lao Liu lost his cool, "God damn it! Your dad sends you money and you take that; but you won't even read the letter. What kind of way is that for a son to treat his family? I really can't stand to see it!"

"It's my business; it doesn't make any difference to you!"

Lao Liu swore, then left to go to bed. Ai Lei knew he wasn't really angry. There was no one better than Lao Liu. Ai Lei felt a bit guilty anyway. But as soon as he thought about that woman in his old man's room, his heart hardened. He lay there in bed thinking about Yun-Ch'ien, thinking about his mother. His pillow became a little damp. At last he fell asleep.

The next day, first thing in the morning Lao Liu shook him awake. "Time for class, lazy-bones, we'll be late!"

"I'm not going. I'm going into the city to walk around."

"She doesn't get out of class until the afternoon. You can go after our Engine Operations class."

"No. I'd rather go there now. Get me a bus pass and I'll give you a meal ticket for it. I don't think I'll be back to the dorm to eat today or tomorrow. "

Lao Liu sighed and pulled a bus pass out of his pocket. "Here, take it. If your father comes looking for you tomorrow, what should I say?"

“Say that I went to Taipei to see my older brother.”

“You’re really going there?”

“I’ve been meaning to drop by.”

“Ok then,” Lao Liu straightened himself up, “anyway it’s your business. I’m not going to worry about it. I’m going to class.”

Ai Lei slowly climbed out of bed, brushed his teeth and got dressed. He’d given the meal ticket to Lao Liu, so he’d be going without breakfast. But it was like that a lot of the time anyway. After a while one becomes indifferent to eating only two meals a day. He looked at his watch. It really was a long time until noon. Might as well take a walk around first.

He walked out the school gate, came to the side of Heping Bridge and stopped to look at the various large wooden boats there. Some of the vessels, actually as large as large steamers, were broken down, stripped of their engines, scuttled, lying helplessly at the shoreline. They resembled the hulks of giant pre-historic beasts on the verge of death. Ai Lei climbed up onto one of the boats. Waves crashed through its broken sides, washing again and again across the algae-covered deck. The pungent odor of fish and rotting wood filled his nostrils. So this is where at last they return, after sailing faraway on the high seas; disintegrating, run aground on the banks, all rot and mildew. And then what about the ones who sailed the boats? Do they also rot away like this too? Or do they find another boat and continue to wander, faraway on the high seas?

This made Ai Lei feel extremely depressed. No! He didn’t want to be like this. All he wanted was a family. Who’d listen to him tell the story of the racing water drops... You do have a family don’t you? But that woman in his old man’s room, pale white hands, quickly buttoning up her dress....

“No! I don’t have a family. I never had a family!” he cried out and then immediately felt like a fool; standing on the bow of the ruined boat shouting to himself. With embarrassment he climbed down. Luckily no one had noticed him. The weather had turned pleasant. Along the water’s edge everyone was busy; everyone had something to do – including the mangy dog lying in the sun. Who was going to pay any attention to him? “I’m just completely insignificant; who’s going to pay any attention to me?”

He passed by the fish market and couldn’t help taking a detour to look around. One of the deep sea fishing boats just happened to have come in. The wharf was crowded with people. The entire ship’s hold was filled with crushed ice. A crewmember was using a

sickle to grab hold of case after case of frozen fish; shouting out as he heaved them down. Another shoveled crushed ice out of the hold. Dead fish were cast everywhere about the ground. Another large group consisted of onlookers like himself. And in the midst of this chaotic scene, in the back of the boat there were sailors cooking, frying up some big hodge-podge of rice and vegetables in a pot. Several men filled their bowls and ate, completely indifferent to the attention of the onlookers...

“No, I could never get used to this kind of life. I’m not one of them. I’ll never be able to understand them and I don’t want to be like them either. All I want is to have a family, that’s all...”

He got on the bus, stood for a while, got off the bus and walked until he came to the place where he always waited for her. He lit a cigarette and thought about what he should say when he saw her. All you need to do is ask her to go to Taipei to go dancing. She likes to go out and have a good time, so go along with her and have a good time. One of these days she’ll be moved by your persistence.

It was noon. All at once group after group of schoolgirls dressed in black uniforms appeared in the street; shouting and jumping they passed by Ai Lei.

“This morning Huang Jian-Jian was crying because the teacher won’t let her give the oral presentation...” “I can’t stand that Chen Ling. She just won’t stop hanging around me. She wanted to go home with me. I just wish she’d get lost!...” “Come over to my house tomorrow, you’ve *got* to come....”

Then Ai Lei saw Wang Yun-Ch’ien coming. He threw down the cigarette and stood up. Yun-Ch’ien was walking alone, carrying a large book bag on her back. On her pale, narrow face there was not the slightest smile; as if she had not seen him. Ai Lei had to step ahead quickly and walk alongside her. She tightened her mouth, walking at lightning speed. Ai Lei had no choice but to pick up the brisk pace.

“Yun-Ch’ien, why are you walking so fast? Are you in a hurry to get home for lunch?”

“Don’t talk to me over here, ok? The other students will laugh at me. Go away!”

Ai Lei forced a smile and said, “Your wish is my command, madame,” and walked a little farther away from her. She was a bad mood again today. But how could it be? That kiss – hadn’t that meant they were already ‘going together’? Why was she putting on this kind of attitude now? Ai Lei just could not understand it. Turning a corner, they entered an unpaved road. Laundry, sun-dried fish and meat hung outside the two story wooden buildings on both sides. Ai Lei finally summoned up the courage to walk beside her again.

“Yun-Ch’ien, I wanted to see you last night, but you couldn’t come out. But don’t you have free time in the afternoon? We could ...”

“I don’t have time!”

“But – last Sunday you told me you were free this Saturday and we could go out together.”

“What I said last Sunday was wrong. It turns out I have things to do; so there’s no time to go out with you. I’m really sorry.”

Something started to spin in Ai Lei’s head; it spun faster and faster. He suddenly dashed ahead of Yun-Ch’ien and blocked her way.

“Yun-Ch’ien, you can’t treat me like this. Don’t you remember last week when we ... I thought we were ‘going together’ !”

Her complexion seemed even more pale than usual, her long face seemed even longer.

“Last time, I made a mistake! I regretted it the whole week. Anyway it was you who tricked me... who’d want to be ‘going together’ with you. I’d rather not see you anymore. Father already said I’m not allowed to see you. I think what he said is right. Pretty soon I have to take the college entrance exams and I don’t have any time to go out and play around. I have to start studying!”

“But that’s absolutely right. I don’t like to go out and play around either; before it was only so we could be together. If you need to study, I could be your tutor and help you review...”

“No, I don’t want that. I don’t want to be with you, always like this – why are you always pestering me? The other students are going to laugh at me. Won’t you just stop coming to look for me, alright?”

Ai Lei was looking directly at her. Suddenly he put out his arm. Her reaction was swift and fierce.

“Don’t touch me! Right here in the middle of the street you’d dare.... I’ll scream, let go of me!”

Using all his strength Ai Lei held her and pressed his face close. After a struggle she pulled away and slapped him.

“You’d really dare to.... You despicable toad! You think that you can.... Get away from me! I never want to see you again.”

She ran off, the large book bag bouncing on her back. Ai Lei stood stuck to the spot; he couldn’t move his legs. He’d ruined everything. He started to feel dizzy again. Maybe it was from breathing in all that fishy air? Or because he hadn’t had any breakfast? She doesn’t like you. She’s not interested in going out with you. The kiss was a mistake, just an emotional impulse in the moonlight. She’s got to study, to get into college. She’s not interested in going together with a sailor-in-training. ‘The toad wants to eat swan’s meat’. He was the toad; so then what was she? Ai Lei suddenly burst out laughing, so hard he was bent over.

“Ha! So she thinks she’s a swan! A swan with a long face. Ha-ha! What am I doing here in Jilong still? I’ve got to go down to Taipei. Find A-Wan and those guys and go out and have some fun. We can have a great time for two whole days!”

And so he walked to the bus station. Just when he’d bought the ticket, someone patted him on the back. Ai Lei turned his head and his heart sank.

“Buddy! I was at the school looking for you a long time but couldn’t find you. They said you were going down to Taipei to see your big brother. Just now I ran back to the bus station, and wouldn’t you know I find you here. Now that’s luck for you! So what’s new? How’s everything been going – ok? You look a little thin. You have to get enough nutritional intake, Buddy. Did you get the vitamins I sent last time? You’ve got to take them every day so they’ll work, you know?”

Ai Lei turned his head downward and looked at the wizened little old man before him; a little old man wearing a cotton cap, dressed in a shabby old traditional Chinese suit. He barely came up to Ai Lei’s shoulder. Ai Lei thought, he’s more hunched than before, he’s getting old really fast.

“The five-hundred yuan I sent you the day before yesterday, did you get it?”

“ I got it last night ... thanks.”

A wrinkled smile appeared on the old man’s face. “You don’t have to say ‘thanks’. I just don’t think it’s right for you to have to depend entirely on yourself, making money as a tutor. First use the five-hundred. After next month’s mutual aid pool payout, I’ll send some more. Remember what they say, the most important thing is your health. You absolutely mustn’t skimp, when it comes to eating properly.”

“Fine.” Ai Lei looked at his watch, “The bus is coming right away, I’d better go wait for the bus. See you later!”

“What’s the big hurry? The Golden Horse Line runs every ten minutes or so, you can take the next one. Just let’s wait a little while; I’ve got to go see your brother too. We can go there together, how about it? What time is it? It’s after one o’clock. Have you had lunch yet? I haven’t eaten either. What’s the big hurry to get to Taipei? Let’s find a place to get something to eat first and then go. How about it, ok? Buddy. Can’t make plans on an empty stomach, you know.”

Ai Lei sighed. He couldn’t bring himself to meet the old man’s almost piteously pleading gaze. He noticed that the old man’s hands were shaking. He couldn’t help thinking the old man had really aged rapidly.

“Fine. We’ll have something to eat and then go.”

The old man perked up at once and reached for his arm. Ai Lei felt some impatience. The old man sensed it and drew back his right hand. On his face was that apologetic smile.

“Heh, heh ... Buddy, you’re really all grown up now. You’re practically a head taller than me! Before, when you were sick a lot, you were skinny like a monkey. Your mom always used to say”

“Don’t mention Mama, alright?”

“Ah... that’s right, that’s right,” he smiled apologetically, “I forgot. I’m really sorry.”

They went into a restaurant and got two bowls of beef noodles and an order of steamed dumplings. The old man didn’t eat much, said he couldn’t eat any more, gave all the noodles to Ai Lei and watched him eat. Perhaps because he hadn’t had breakfast, Ai Lei’s appetite was especially good. He ordered some more steamed dumplings. Seeing this made the old man very happy.

“To eat is to be happy. Whenever you get the chance, always eat a little more. Health makes wealth. Your Ma always used to say ... Ai... what I mean to say is, do you want some fruit? I’ll go and buy a couple of oranges.”

“You don’t have to. I don’t want any.”

But before he could finish, the old man had already run out. Ai Lei felt some remorse. Maybe he should go home? No. He corrected himself at once; he had no home.

Absolutely not! He wouldn't soften. He only had to think of that pair of pale white hands quickly buttoning up the dress and his fury was re-ignited.

"Here are the oranges. You can eat them both. I'll just take two pieces." The old man seemed to be unaware of what was on Ai Lei's mind. "Finish eating and we'll go. We can probably get to your big brother's house by three or four o'clock."

Ai Lei looked at the orange sections and stuffed them into his mouth. "I'm not going to big brother's house. I've got to find a classmate – we've got some work to do."

"Ah That's alright, that's alright. Anyway we're going the same way, right?"

All along the way, and after getting on the "Golden Horse" bus, they said nothing more. Ai Lei was in no mood to talk, and he didn't feel like looking at the scenery. He was only thinking over and over about the miserable scene he'd just had with Yun-Ch'ien. Go look for her again and have the door slammed in his face? Or better to send a letter, apologizing; which she'd tear into shreds? None of it's any use. Might as well go back and ask Lao Liu. "He'll know what to do. All I'd do myself is make the whole thing even worse." If only there were someone with whom he could talk it over! Ai Lei used to be able to talk to his mom. Although it seemed there were a lot of things Mama didn't understand, Ai Lei still was happy to tell her about whatever was on his mind. When he was done talking he'd feel a great deal more at ease. He never used to feel he could talk to his father. Father was so serious, so unreachable. Ai Lei never dared disturb his father with his own petty problems. And now what? Of course now it was different. Ai Lei had already seen clearly that the old man was nothing but an insignificant little nobody, not worthy of being held in awe. But he still just wasn't able to have even a casual talk with the old man. He couldn't... he couldn't tell the old man about the business with Yun-Ch'ien. He was afraid the old man would kid him about it. He especially did not want to reveal his own weakness, and give the old man a reason to explain the business with that woman. "You see now? You love Yun-Ch'ien; and I need a woman too. Aren't the two feelings exactly the same?" Ai Lei was afraid of getting to that point. No – he'd best just go and talk it over with Lao Liu.

The old man also seemed to have something on his mind; maybe he was thinking about that woman? When the bus had just about got to Taipei, the old man cleared his throat and spoke cautiously.

"So you're going to see a classmate today? That's fine. But tomorrow is your mom's memorial day. You ought to take a trip home, shouldn't you? And go visit her gravesite."

Ai Lei had already prepared his reply.

“Can’t do it. The day after tomorrow first thing in the morning there’s a calculus test. Last time I didn’t do so well. This time I’ve got no choice but buckle down and make the extra effort. I have to study all day long tomorrow, so I can’t make it home.”

“Ah...,” the old man could no longer disguise his disappointment. “Can’t you come home and study?”

“No. I can’t get any studying done at home.”

The old man wiped the corners of his mouth the spoke slowly, hesitatingly.

“Pal, there’s something I have to tell you. I know, you’ve never forgiven me.... for that time. But I give you my promise now – she’ll never again stay at home! I give you my promise! So you can always feel comfortable about coming home for a visit!”

“I’m telling you, it’s not because of that I can’t make it home. I have a calculus test on Monday. Really!”

The old man sighed and leaned against the seat back.

“Buddy, you’re too cruel! Can’t you forgive your father for just one accidental mistake?”

Ai Lei didn’t say anything. The bus had arrived at the stop and the passengers were getting off one after another. Finally the old man stood up. His expression had recovered some of the former dignity.

“Alright. If you can’t make it back then that’s the way it goes. I’m not going to try to force you. But I’ve noticed this one thing ... We’ve been together more than three hours today, but you haven’t spoken to me directly even once. You’ve probably decided you’re not going admit that I’m your father, is that right?”

Ai Lei pretended to tie a loose shoelace.

“Fine. Then that’s all for today... that’s all for today.... “ The old man coughed violently. “I’ve brought you up all these years, but I can’t believe it’s come to this! Is this the way you show your respect? Fine, have it your way. I’m leaving now. If that’s really the way you show respect for your mom.”

“Don’t say anything about Mama!” Ai Lei suddenly exploded, “You have no right to say anything about Ma. The two of us know very well who hasn’t shown respect for Ma!”

The old man looked extremely tired. The wrinkles on his face looked even deeper.

“Alright then. You can call me disrespectful of her if you want. You’re right son. You’re always in the right. If you really can’t make it back, then don’t. After next month’s association pool payout, I’ll send some money again. You take good care of yourself now. Good bye.”

The old man walked haltingly away. Then he was gone. Ai Lei felt a wave of despair. He’d thought the old man would force him to come home; maybe by withholding the money as leverage. That way he’d have had an excuse to go home, to pay his respects to Ma; and to show respect to the old man as well. He’d never thought the old man would give in so easily. Ai Lei felt as if everything in front of him was pitch-black. The old man had really gone, and now he could never go home again. Who was stopping him from going home? It was only himself, only Ai Lei himself. He had to show his loyalty to Mother, he had to show his opposition to that woman, her pale hands hastily buttoning up the dress; because of this he would not go back. But now that the old man had given in, expressing his deep regrets; could he still not return home?

“I do want to go back. I want to go home. But how can I go home? Oh God! How I wish Mama hadn’t died!”

He went to find A-Wan at the armory.

“Hey! I haven’t seen you in a long time! What made you think of looking for me today? We’ve really got a lot to talk about, brother! Let’s go get something to eat. Tonight, it’s all on me. A couple bottles of Gaoliang will get our spirits up! Then later tonight, the Student Association is putting on a party and a dance. They’ve got a high class place, a really classy spot. It’ll be going on all night long. Come with me, I don’t need a ticket. What you say? Is your friend A-Wan some kind of a guy or what?”

Ai Lei couldn’t handle beer, let alone Gaoliang. After drinking one whole bottle of Gaoliang, his heart was racing and his ears were pounding, ‘Tng! Tng!’ But drinking the stuff down made the world seem quite interesting again. He looked at A-Wan and said with a vengeance: Exactly; let’s go have ourselves one hell of a time! Do the “twist” till the sun comes up. What’s that new style? The “surf”? You can pick it up just like that? What are we waiting waiting for? Let’s go!

At the party Ai Lei didn’t know any of the other guys, except for A-Wan. Ai Lei didn’t recognize any of the girls either, except for ... except for Wang Yun-Ch’ien. Wang Yun-Ch’ien, can it be we meet again here? Really, is there *anywhere at all* that we don’t run into each other? I heard somewhere that you were really serious about staying home and studying; but here you are in Taipei dancing. Maybe you’ve come looking for me?

Wang Yun-Ch'ien turned her back and walked away. Ai Lei burst out laughing. The guy next to her gave him a threatening look, but A-Wan stepped in between. My brother here is drunk, talking nonsense. Let me apologize for him. Wang Yun-Ch'ien's boyfriend rolled his sleeves back down. Ai Lei continued to laugh out loud. The Swan! The Long-Faced Swan. She still thinks she's a swan! Isn't that amazing? She thinks that little nobody me, Ai So-and-So, can't have anyone but her? Wrong! I'm only trying to relieve the boredom. If it's not you I'll get along just fine thanks! Tonight you'll see. I'll ask every one of the girls to dance, but I won't ask you. I'll dance the twist the whole night! I don't care what Mama thinks down there; I don't care about that woman in Dad's room, buttoning up her dress with her pale white hands... I don't give a goddamn! I don't care about any of them! I'm just going to have myself a great time tonight. Swan! Ha! You Long-Faced Swan!

Halfway through the dance party, the leader stopped the music and announced: Tonight it's a Student Association party, so shouldn't we all play some group games? Everyone clapped their hands in agreement.

“Everyone grab a chair and sit down. We're going to play, ‘A Storm Wind's Blowing’.”

Ai Lei also found a chair and sat down.

The leader shouted out, “A Storm Wind's Blowing!”

“What is it Blowing?!” everyone shouted back in unison.

“...the Wind is blowing A girl wearing silk stockings.”

There was laughter, a sharp cry, ‘I'm not going to go!’, but the girl who couldn't hold on to her chair then was left standing alone in the center; it was Wang Yun-Ch'ien. The Long-Faced Swan-Girl.

Ai Lei again couldn't stop laughing.

“A Storm Wind's Blowing....” Yun-Ch'ien called out.

“What Is It Blowing?!”

“.... The Wind is Blowing everyone wearing leather dress shoes!”

This time everyone jumped up at the same time. There was loud laughter and a scuffle as chairs were snatched away. Suddenly Ai Lei found himself standing all alone in the

middle, dozens of pairs of eyes looking straight at him. He tried to think of what to say. The pounding in his ears ... Tng! Tng! ... got even louder. He opened his mouth a few times; then finally managed to get out a word –

“A Storm Wind’s Blowing...”

“What Is It Blowing.... ?”

“What IS IT Blowing ??”

“What IS ... IT BLOWING ???”

Honestly? What *is* the wind blowing? What does the wind blow? The Long-Faced Swan-Girl? Those pale white hands in Dad’s room quickly buttoning up the dress? The line of water drops racing along the electric power lines?

Ai Lei heard himself say:

“.... TheWind Is Blowing *every kid who’s got no Ma!*”