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Alan Liu

ON THE HILL

It was hot in their Hong Kong apartment, but no one went to turn on the fan in the corner of the dining room. Peter Yee, who was eight, looked at his father's face, then at his adopted brother Sunn's. Sunn was seventeen.

"Where does your money come from?" his father asked.

"My job," Sunn said.

"You don't have a job. I asked the man in the tobacco shop. He never even heard of you."

Peter's mother put her bowl down. The cook and servant were quiet in the kitchen.

"You stole it, didn't you?"

Sunn picked up his bowl and ate slowly. He reached across the table for the pork dish.

Peter's father knocked the chopsticks from his hand.

"Did you steal it?"

Sunn took some pork with his fingers.

Peter's father got up. He went around the table and pulled Sunn out of his chair. Sunn held onto the table and jerked it a foot across the floor. A bowl fell and broke. Peter's father yanked Sunn's hands from the table and dragged him down the hall into a bedroom. He shut the door.

Peter sat very still. His mother was crying. She got up suddenly and called the servant.

"Take Peter outside," she said. She ran down the hall to another bedroom and shut the door.

Peter pushed his chair back and stood up. The sounds from the bedroom started, and he put his hands over his ears. The young servant pulled him toward the front door. He wouldn't go. She picked him up awkwardly and carried him. Her arms were hot on his back; she smelled

of perfumed soap.

When they returned, the apartment was dark and still. The servant accompanied Peter down the hall to the bedroom, and opened the door.

Sunn turned suddenly around. He was sitting shirtless on the double bed, carving with a small knife. There was a single red mark across his back. He looked at the servant for a moment. Then he got up and pulled Peter into the room. He shut the door.

Peter sat down at his desk and tried to do schoolwork. His brother continued carving, his lips pressed tightly together and a muscle working on one side of his face. He was shaping a wooden copy of the knife he held. It had belonged to his real father, who had nursed Peter's father back to health during the war, and had died in a fire with the rest of Sunn's family. When he finished the knife, he gave it to Peter. Its point was sharp enough to draw blood.

They went to bed, and Peter lay awake listening to his brother turn over and over. When Sunn's arms or legs touched his, they felt hot.

"Do you really steal?" Peter asked.

"Go to sleep."

"But do you?"

"No."

"Where do you go in the afternoons?"

"On the hill."

"Father'll kill you! Don't you know that's dangerous?"

There was a long silence.

"I'm taking you there tomorrow."

They left the apartment the next afternoon while Peter's mother watched television in her bedroom. It was hot outside. Old men sat in doorways in their undershirts and spat. A group of beggar children followed a hunched toy vendor along the sidewalk. He carried a bouquet of slim rods, each supporting a bird or airplane made of reeds. His arm was withered and shook slightly. The reed toys jerked. Spread on the sidewalk in front of him were cheap mechanical toys that walked and rolled. Pedestrians kicked through them as they passed, and the vendor crouched to pick them up, herding the toys slowly in one direction. The beggar children, barefoot, followed silently.

Peter walked beside Sunn toward the higher end of the street. It was a hillside street, and one side was lined with low apartment buildings tied together with laundry lines. The other was occupied by a high bamboo wall that blocked off all view of the hill's summit. It was made of bamboo poles about half a foot thick, lashed together on

horizontal braces. Each day at five, workmen blasted part of the hill away, and the wall shook with the impact of falling rocks.

"Are you sure we should?" Peter asked. They had reached the end of the street where the bamboo wall was buttressed by a heap of boulders.

"It's not too far."

"But the dynamite!"

"We've got time."

Peter stopped, Sunn looked at him a moment, then continued ahead. "You're afraid of Father," he said.

Peter began climbing up the boulders after Sunn. Small lizards, looking like cracks in the rocks, suddenly started into life and flung themselves, tails whipping, into crevices. Sunn and Peter crossed the crest of the boulders and descended to where the bamboo wall abruptly ended. They started up the face of the hill. The blasting site was a huge, triangular basin of rubble, its arrowtip pointing toward the summit. They climbed around the rubble to grass and trees. Crickets and cicadas sang. Locusts as big as fingers flicked onto their legs and clung until dislodged. Sunn walked ahead with long strides, and Peter began growing short of breath. Eventually they reached a zone where the trees were taller and thicker. Bats clung in masses from the upper branches. Sunn turned up an old, worn path scored with twin wheel-ruts, and they came into view of a corrugated-metal shack with a clearing in front. Small, wiry chickens scratched among exposed tree roots. A white goat stood tied to an ox, and as Sunn and Peter approached, it nervously butted its head against the ox's flank. The larger animal took no notice.

Sunn stopped and held Peter back. He called out a strange word. After a moment, a tall, young man dressed in the remains of a uniform and a bloody apron stepped out from behind the shack. In one hand he carried a cleaver, its blade wet. His other arm was missing, and the sleeve of his coat was knotted. He smiled, showing teeth that were rotten, almost black.

Sunn went behind the shack with the armless man, then returned with two ribs covered with flies. Laughing, he swung them like a curved sword at Peter. The flies swarmed off and settled back. He swung the ribs again and chased Peter, also laughing now, up the path past trees carved with words. He caught Peter and steered him off the path by a tree marked with his name. They came to a shelf of rock on which two boulders lay propped against each other, forming a narrow cave.

Sunn made a low whistle. Silence. He whistled again. There was a heavy, shuddering breath from inside.

Peter followed him to the cave and knelt. Inside was a long, dark form with white eyes and feet. It lay on its side, looking at them. Flies buzzed slowly around its body. When Sunn held the ribs out, it only watched, breathing heavily. At last, Sunn crept in on hands and knees and half pushed, half pulled the dog out. It emerged into sunlight and stretched, its hindlegs extended and quivering. Along its left side and running down to its abdomen was a long wound matted with hair and dried blood. It was crudely stitched, and the threads stood out, stretched tightly.

Sunn ran his hands along the dog's back. It lay down heavily and licked at the fly-covered ribs.

"Is he yours?" Peter asked.

"I'm taking care of him for someone." Sunn began picking out small bugs and worm-like creatures from the wound. "I'm going to get some water. You stay here." He took a large bowl from the cave and headed back for the shack.

Peter knelt two yards from the dog, watching as it ate, its teeth grinding at the bone. It had a long, black face with an old scar under one eye. The eye watched him.

Sunn returned with the bowl and a bucket of water. The dog stopped eating and looked up. Its tail thumped against the rock once. Sunn set the bowl by its head, and as it drank with long, loud swallows, dipped a rag into the bucket and began washing its body. The black fur, matted with dust and filth, became lustrous. Water ran down the slowly heaving sides and made dark stains on the rock. When he ran the rag softly over the dog's head and face, it licked his hand. It finished drinking at last, rose and sat closer to him. Its eyes were slitted almost shut in the warm sunshine.

"Feel him," Sunn said.

Peter came closer and placed his hand against the dog's neck. The fur was moist and hot. The dog turned its head toward him, and he felt its muscles move underneath.

They were quiet. Crickets started singing again. Flies droned around the half-eaten ribs.

Suddenly, the dog started forward and looked over the edge of the rock shelf at the hill below. Its ears pricked up.

Sunn looked down, too. Then he flung his arm around Peter and held him tightly. The earth shook, pitching them forward on hands and knees. There was a sharp clap and then a rumbling noise from the blasting site. Smoke and dirt lifted almost lazily into the air. The echo rolled over them once, then once more. Each time, the dog's ears flattened.

The next week, the young servant came with them to visit the dog. She wore a faded, newly-washed smock with a red sash around the waist, and strolled beside Sunn, who carried a bag of entrails under his arm. Peter followed behind.

"Your father warned me to stay away from you," she said. "Yesterday he asked me where you went in the afternoons. I said I didn't know, but I can tell he doesn't trust me. He's worried you'll get in trouble with the police."

"I don't care."

"You *should*. He takes good care of you."

Sunn laughed. The bag of entrails was growing wet. He shifted it to his other arm, and pulled his knife out of his pocket scabbard. "See this? This is my father."

"Don't be crazy." She turned around to see who was watching, then put her hand on his wrist. "Put it away."

They reached the boulders at the end of the street and began climbing. The servant lagged behind. Suddenly, Sunn stopped and motioned them down. Two British soldiers in a jeep drove up to where the pavement became rubble. Laughing, they got out and walked past the Danger signs to the boulders. They went behind a rock near the servant and relieved themselves against its lichen-encrusted face. Their urine hissed loudly.

They were stuffing themselves back in their pants when one of them spotted the servant crouching nearby. He laughed and pointed her out to his companion. They walked over to her, laughing and talking in English. She stood up and backed away. One of the soldiers grabbed her by the wrist.

Sunn stood up and started down the boulders. The soldiers watched him. He came to within a few yards and stopped. They were all silent.

Then the soldier holding the servant's wrist let go, and gave Sunn a mock salute. The two men laughed and went back to their jeep. They drove off, still laughing and looking back.

Sunn went to the servant, but she looked away. They started climbing again, and Peter followed them over the boulders and onto the hill. Sunn stayed near her, glancing at her now and again. She was silent, and avoided his eyes.

"Peter!" she said suddenly, turning around. "Hurry up!" She took his hand. Her face was flushed.

When they reached the cave, the dog came out to meet them. It had grown stronger, and was chained to a spike. One leg dragged a little. Sunn took it by the chain and led it uphill to the fields near the summit. Then he dumped the entrails out of the bag and gave Peter the

end of the chain. He went with the servant into the woods.

While they were gone, Peter knelt and watched the dog eat. It chewed with quick, mashing movements—the length of pink intestine dangling from its jaws.

Peter accompanied Sunn up the hill three or four times a week. The blasting area advanced daily upwards, grinding up more of the grassland. The servant came only a few times, and Peter took care of the dog when she did. It grew stronger and stronger. The wound closed up completely and the limp became barely noticeable. When it wanted to run, Peter had trouble holding onto the chain.

They were returning to the woods one afternoon when the dog halted and tensed itself. A white-haired British man with a walking stick and a soldier's beret appeared on the path. Instantly the dog tore free of Peter's hands and rushed down the path, its chain clattering. With a cry, the man stepped back and raised his stick across his throat. The dog leaped and crashed against his chest and shoulders, biting at the stick. The man toppled over backwards. He cursed and pulled an automatic from a belt holster.

Sunn, with a leap, landed on the dog and wrapped his arms around its ribs. It dragged him back and forth, trying to get at the British man, teeth bared. At last, Sunn found the end of the chain and wrapped it around his wrist. He dragged the dog back.

The man stood up slowly, brushing dirt off his pants. He slipped the gun back in its holster. "I want that dog ready in a week," he said in off-pitch Cantonese. "And if it does that again, I'll have it butchered and fed to the other dogs. Understand?"

"Yes."

The man turned to go. "And I don't want to see that kid again. What's he doing here?"

Sunn didn't answer. The man continued up the path. When he was gone, Sunn picked up a heavy stone and threw it at the trees. It knocked against a branch. Bats peeled off each other and swooped like shadows past them.

"What's next week?" Peter asked.

Sunn didn't answer.

"Who was that man?"

His brother picked up another stone and flung it with all his force. "He owns the hill."

Peter hardly saw Sunn during the next week. He wouldn't take him onto the hill, and stayed away longer than usual, sometimes returning just before Peter's father came home for dinner. He entered the bed-

room one afternoon, smelling of sweat.

"I want to go with you next time," Peter said.

"You can't," Sunn began stripping off his shirt and pants. "I've got a lot of work to do before Friday."

"What happens then?"

"Then I go on the hill at night." He took a towel and headed out the door toward the bathroom. The servant came down the hall carrying a basket of socks. Without looking, she poked him in the ribs. He laughed and wrapped the towel around his waist.

"Do you know what happens Friday?" Peter asked the servant.

"Shhhh. Your father just came in." She entered the bedroom and shut the door. "I think it's racing and gambling. There's a big night every two months or so. It's a big secret." She set the basket on the bed and began rolling socks. "He took me with him once when he was exercising the dog, and I saw him run with it. Then he took a big stick and let the dog jump at him. It's funny. He's really happy doing that."

She finished rolling the socks and gathered them in her apron. She walked to Sunn's drawer, stood on tiptoes, and spilled them in. "There. He isn't good for anything except putting holes in socks. And he says he wants to go to America. Who would take him?"

The shower shut off in the bathroom. She went and picked up the basket, then opened the bedroom door. Sunn stood outside, naked.

They looked at each other a moment.

Then she pushed him away with the basket. "Your father!" she whispered.

He laughed.

As Friday approached, Sunn spent more and more time on the hill. He fell asleep almost instantly at nights with his limbs sprawled over the bed. Peter, curled to one side, lay awake, listening to his brother's low breathing. Sometimes he woke with a start and thought the dog was in the room with them, its breath coming in low shudders.

Sunn went onto the hill early Friday afternoon. Peter waited for him while playing ball with a friend in the street. The dynamite went off, and rocks rattled against the bamboo wall. Sunn still didn't return. A half hour later, Peter's father came home early. He waved his newspaper at Peter, then went up the stairs. Peter kept bouncing the hard rubber ball against the bamboo poles. The ball bounced off at unpredictable angles, and his friend would run to catch it.

It was Peter's turn to catch when the young servant came down the stairs, crying. He turned to watch her, and the ball slammed into his face. He put his hand to his cheek and knelt. The servant, still crying, crossed the street to him. She picked him up and held him tightly.

"Are you all right?" she asked, sobbing.

"What's wrong?"

She didn't answer. She set him down suddenly and ran away down the street, one hand to her mouth.

Peter went upstairs to the apartment. His father sat at the long, black dining table, his fingers drumming.

"What happened to the servant?" Peter asked.

His father waited until he came up to him, then placed his hands on his shoulders. "The servant's no good," he said.

"What?"

His father was silent a moment. "Never mind," he said. "You'd better go to your room." He turned Peter around with his hands and shoved him gently.

Peter went to the bedroom, but left the door open. He could hear his father's fingers drumming on the table. The sun sank below the top of the bamboo wall. At last the front door opened and he heard Sunn enter.

There was a long silence.

"Where have you been?" Peter's father asked.

"Nowhere."

"Is that all you're going to say?"

Sunn didn't answer.

"I just told the servant girl she's got another week. Then she's got to go."

"Why?" Sunn's voice was almost a whisper.

"Because of you. All the neighbors told me about you two. If you want to play with the servants, do it with someone else's servant, not your own. Where did you learn you could do whatever you wanted? From those beggars and thieves you go around with? Is that where?"

Sunn was silent a moment.

"I learned it from you."

Peter heard his father's chair scrape against the floor. Then there was quiet.

"I'm not going to touch you this time," his father said. "Just go to your room."

Nobody moved.

"Did you hear me?"

Sunn didn't answer.

There was the sound of a slap.

Silence. At last, Sunn walked into the bedroom and shut the door. Without looking at Peter, he went to the bed and sat down. Peter flipped through a book. Sunn took out his knife and a stick of wood.

He began carving. Shavings fell steadily to the floor. Another wooden knife took shape, and when it was finished, he broke it with a snap.

"Do you want to go on the hill with me tonight?" he asked.

"Dad won't let us."

"Forget him." Sunn's voice trembled. "We'll just walk out."

"I don't know. I want to."

Sunn snapped another piece of the knife in two. There was a knock on the door.

"Peter," his father said. "Dinner."

Peter went to the door and opened it slightly. He saw his father's hand on the knob—veins standing out. He turned back to look at Sunn.

"Make up your mind," Sunn said.

"Peter," his father said.

There was a silence.

"I . . . I don't want to eat dinner," Peter said.

His father shoved the door open suddenly, pushing him back. He looked at them.

"This is your last chance."

Peter couldn't look at him. "I'm not hungry."

His father waited another moment, then shut the door and walked away.

The servant hadn't returned when Peter's father went to bed. Sunn waited half an hour, then slowly opened their door. The knob creaked loudly, then creaked again as he shut the door behind them. Peter followed him slowly down the dark hall to the living room, then out the front door.

Outside, the bamboo wall was a solid face of blackness cutting off the stars. Moths as big as Peter's hand pattered against the street-lights. Bats cut through them, severing wings. The wings fluttered slowly down.

They walked to the end of the street and climbed over the boulders, then started uphill over the rubble of the blasting site.

"What's going to happen to the servant?" Peter asked.

Sunn said nothing. He started to walk faster, and Peter couldn't keep up. Sunn walked faster and faster.

"Wait," Peter said.

"I hate him," Sunn said. He picked up some rocks and flung them back at the wall.

"Wait."

Sunn stopped and Peter ran into him. His brother was trembling slightly. He took Peter's hand and led him into the woods. There

was no moon, and under the trees they were almost blind. They followed the path to the metal shack. Sunn stopped. He called out the same strange word, and they waited.

A flashlight flicked on and shone into his face, then into Peter's.

"Mr. Martin's waiting," the armless man said. "The other dogs are finished, so you'd better hurry." He shut off the flashlight. "And you'd better not let him see the boy."

Sunn pulled Peter past the armless man. He began to walk quickly again, and Peter had to run every few steps to keep up.

"You have to hide when you get there. Understand?"

"Why?"

"They won't let you stay otherwise." Sunn was silent a moment. "You'll see how I really earn my money tonight."

They continued up the path to the trees carved with names. Sunn felt each tree with his hand, then stopped.

"I have to get the dog. You go up to the fire."

"I want to go with you."

Sunn left.

Peter tried to run after him. He tripped on a root and fell. The earth was damp and covered with moss. He got up and wiped his hands on his pants. He didn't know where to turn. Water dripped from the trees. A drop hit his forehead, and he started. He groped his way back to the path. Far ahead he heard a low, hoarse murmur. He followed the path uphill and saw a faint glimmer. He turned toward it. The murmur grew more distinct. He could hear sharp laughter and men cursing. He descended into a small hollow, and the light disappeared. Only the noise drew him on. He came closer and closer. Men coughed and spat ahead of him. On hands and knees he crept up the last, small rise. He peered over the top.

A soldier two yards in front of him slammed his companion on the back, making him choke on his drink. Men sat in crowds all around the sides of a natural amphitheater. They drank and smoked. Some wore khaki uniforms, and some were missing arms or legs. A group of beggars with hair down to their chests sat by themselves and passed around a hubcap filled with reddish liquid. Men higher up tossed cans and dirt at them. They gestured back violently with their hands. On the other side of the hollow were the British men. Most were soldiers with their berets clipped to their shoulders. The white-haired man with the walking stick sat in their midst, calmly smoking a pipe. Below them all was a sand-covered pit in which a large bonfire burned. It lit everything with a reddish glow. Cinders flew toward the sky.

At a signal from the white-haired man, a cripple without legs began swinging on his arms from one group of men to another, dragging

a box. Money changed hands. Even the beggars had something to bet.

Peter suddenly saw Sunn on the other side of the crowd, struggling with something. He kept pulling and pushing. There was a loud bark. Nearby men scrambled to get out of the way. Someone laughed wildly. The black dog leaped high over the sprawled bodies and landed in the pit, kicking up sand. It barked hoarsely, and immediately sprang away in another direction. It doubled back on itself, snapping at its legs. Each rear leg had a bamboo clamp on it, pinching into the flesh. Blood ran down and stained its white feet. It leaped from one side of the pit to the other, landing among the men and sending them scurrying. The soldiers kicked it back to the sand.

Sunn walked to the edge of the crowd and stopped, his fists at his sides. The men began clapping in unison. The dog leaped in front of Sunn and looked up. Someone kicked it in the face. Sunn didn't move.

The crowd shouted suddenly. With a wild howl, a lean, silver-grey dog leaped into the pit. Its eyes were bright coins in the firelight. There were bamboo clips on its legs. It howled and ran around the pit. Men kicked at it as it passed.

After a few minutes, the white-haired man stood and signaled. Men picked up long bamboo poles and poked at the dogs. The ring formed by the poles grew smaller. The dogs tried to escape and were beaten back. They bit at the ends of the sticks. Saliva dripped from their mouths.

At last they turned upon each other. They seemed to freeze where they stood—their heads lowered and ears flattened. The men withdrew the sticks. The crowd kept clapping. Nothing happened. Then, with a cry, the silver dog lunged forward. Sunn's dog leaped to meet it, and the two slashed at each other in mid-air. They separated and circled. There was a gash on Sunn's dog's shoulder. Men began standing up, and Peter had trouble seeing. The two dogs leaped together again and separated. They repeated the pattern time after time. They circled, then struck in an instant, snarling. Their eyes reflected the red of the fire. Sunn kept his hands balled in fists. The boy who had brought the silver dog stood on the opposite side of the pit, yelling. The tendons stood out on his neck.

Again and again, the two dogs ripped at each other. The silver dog began to limp. Sunn's dog slammed its body and chest against it, sending it skittering to one side. One of the silver dog's ears disappeared. It barked continually. Men threw cans at it. A can hit it on the head and it backed away. Instantly, the boy who had been yelling took a stick and beat it back into the center of the pit. Sunn's dog seized it by a hindleg and jerked part of its body into the air. It kept

tearing back with its teeth. At last, Sunn's dog seized it by the head. Their jaws interlocked, biting at each other. Sunn's dog was more powerful. It crushed down and ground into bone. Blood filled the silver dog's mouth. Men were tossing cans at both dogs now and shouting. Sunn's dog seized the other by the throat and shook it back and forth. With a final fling of its head, it tore through the windpipe.

Men whistled and clapped. The boy who had brought the silver dog leaped into the pit and began beating Sunn's dog with a heavy club. Sunn ran onto the sand and tackled him. The men urged them on. They wrestled each other, standing up and hitting with their free hands. Then the boy got his club free and smacked it against Sunn's skull. Sunn fell to his knees. The boy kept hitting him across the face and shoulders. Soldiers came into the pit and dragged him back. One of them kicked Sunn's dog in the ribs. It kept biting at the other boy's feet.

Sunn still knelt by the fire, blood running brightly from his nose and dripping into the sand. The men began to get up and walk around. Some lined up to get their money. A soldier slipped a chain around the black dog's neck. Sunn stood up. He walked unsteadily to the dog and took the chain, then led it over to the white-haired man and stopped.

The black dog advanced slowly, its body tense. Blood ran from its wounds and from tattered shreds of flesh hanging from its belly. It halted at the end of the chain and pulled.

Sunn looked up at the white-haired man. "I won," he said.

"I'll pay you tomorrow." Then, very calmly, the white-haired man drew his automatic out of its holster and shot the dog.

Sunn jumped back a step and drew his knife. There was a moment of quiet. Peter stood up to see better. The dog sat back on its haunches as if tired. Its breath came in low, deep pants. The bullet had torn away half its face, and after a moment, it lay down on its side, its eye staring up and looking around. It kept breathing.

Sunn stood very still, trembling. The knife was bright in the firelight.

The white-haired man watched him carefully. He lowered the gun to his side. "It was too dangerous to sell," he said. "This hill will be totally flat in a month anyway. This is the last fight." He put his pipe back in his mouth. "Put the knife away."

Sunn didn't move. Soldiers with sticks walked up behind him.

"Put it away, son."