

Kallu by Ismat Chughtai

Although not quite seven, Kallu did the work of grown man. He was shaken out of his sleep early in the morning and, dressed only in an old, tattered shirt in winter with Abba's old woollen cap pulled down over his ears, looking like a midget, dripping at the nose, he promptly set to work. Scared off by the cold water, he was always reluctant to wash his face, and just once in a while he would carelessly rub the tips of his fingers over his teeth which remained permanently coated with a thin film of mildew.

The first thing he did in the morning was to get the stove going. Then he put water on for tea, set the table for breakfast and made a hundred rounds to the door and back carrying butter, bread, then milk and, finally, the eggs—flapping his slippers noisily, he travelled to the kitchen innumerable times. And after the cook had prepared breakfast, Kallu made more trips to the table lugging hot toast and parathas. To ensure their good health, the children (nearly all of whom were Kallu's age), were forcibly fed porridge, milk, eggs, toast and jam while Kallu quietly looked on. When breakfast was over he sat alone in the kitchen and ate left-over burnt ends of toast and paratha, hurriedly downing them with some tea.

His next task involved taking care of small errands around the house: he polished Maliha bi's pumps, scouted for Hamida bi's ribbons, located Akhtar Bhai's socks, recovered Salima bi's book-bag, fetched Mumani Jan's katha from the almirah, and retrieved Abu's cigarette case from beside his pillow. In short, he spun around like a top until everyone had left for either the office or school. Later, he washed Nanhi's dirty diapers, and then settled down to play with Safia bi; in between he made trips to the front door to receive mail from the mailman or to inquire the name of a visitor at the door. Around midday the cook handed him peas to shell or spinach to rinse. At lunch time he repeatedly dashed to the dining table with hot rotis, giving the baby's cradle a little push every now and then on the way. What more can I say? He came to this household at a very young age, did the work of a bearer and sweeper, and all this for two rupees a month along with some old, ragged cast-offs. His mother lived in the village and had entrusted him to our care; he would at least have enough to eat, she thought. She herself worked as a cook for the village zamindar.

She visited him sometimes usually at the Teej festival, and brought him molasses and parched wheat or fried corn. She too put him to work.

'Dear boy, come here and scratch my back.'

'Son, bring me some water.'

'Get some roti from the kitchen, son. And ask the cook for a little dal as well.'

'Rub down my back boy.'

‘Rub my shoulders.’

‘Massage my head.’

The truth was, his little hands executed a great foot massage, and once he started you didn’t want him to stop; often he would have to continue massaging the entire afternoon. Sometimes he dozed off and fell on your legs. A kick was generally enough to awaken him.

Kallu had no time to play. If, for some reason, he had a little respite between errands, he would be found slumped with exhaustion, silently staring into space like an idiot. Seeing him sitting like this, looking so foolish, someone or the other would stick a straw in his ear surreptitiously, and startled, he would bashfully turn to a task that required his attention.

Preparations for Maliha bi’s wedding were under way. There was talk of weddings all day long—who’s going to marry whom, how did so-and-so marry so-and-so, and who should marry whom. ‘Who’re you going to marry, Nanhi?’ Mumani would jokingly ask.

‘Apa,’ lisped Nanhi, sending everyone into fits of laughter.

‘Who’re you going to marry, Kallu?’ Amma asked in jest one day.

Kallu revealed his yellow teeth in a shy grin. When he was pressed for an answer he lowered his eyes and whispered, ‘Salima bi.’

‘May you rot in hell! You stupid fool! A curse on your face!’ Peeved by the laughter around her, Mumani proceeded to box Kallu’s ears.

Then one day, while he and Salima were playing, Kallu asked her, ‘Salima bi, will you marry me?’

‘Yes ... es,’ Salima nodded vigorously, her little head bobbing up and down.

Mumani, sitting in the sunny part of the courtyard, combing her hair, was privy to this exchange between Kallu and her daughter. Livid with anger, she removed her sandal from her foot and smacked him one with it. A blow landed in the wrong place, Kallu’s nose began to bleed and soon blood was streaming down the side of his face. Kallu’s mother, who was visiting at the time, saw the blood and screamed that her son had been murdered.

‘Get out of my house, you hypocrite!’ Mumani yelled and ordered both mother and son out. Kallu’s mother wept and begged forgiveness, but her pleas went unheeded.

The years went by swiftly. As with the servant who came after him, Kallu too was forgotten. Maliha was now a mother. Hamida bi never married. Half the family had migrated to Pakistan, the other half remained here in India. Nanhi, Safia and Salima, having completed their education, were now waiting to get married. But husbands were difficult to come by.

Our uncle, Chacha Mian, was constantly on the lookout for eligible young men. He moved in official circles and had arranged a match for Maliha, but he too was helpless now. These were bad times; nice young men were nearly impossible to find, and those who were around demanded that a car and fare to England be included in the dowry. Such demands could be taken into consideration only if there was one girl in the family to be wed. But here there were many. Also, the loss of land had resulted in a lowering of status and income, and there were no parties any more, no fancy get-togethers; how were young girls to meet, eligible young bachelors? Nonetheless, if a rare party did come around, Chacha Mian saw to it that the girls attended. And so when a dinner was held in honour of Mr. Din, the new Deputy Collector, preparations in our house began several days in advance.

Mr. Din was a bachelor, and the eyes of all the mothers of unwed girls in the city were focused on him. We were stunned when we saw him. He was over six feet tall, had a wheatish complexion, very attractive features, and teeth which shone like real pearls. During introductions, he suddenly quietened at the mention of Salima's name and then quickly moved away from our group to chat with the other guests.

Chacha Mian approached us with an expression of bafflement on his face just as we were getting ready to leave.

'Do you know who this Mr. Din is?' he asked.

'The Deputy Collector, who else' Mumani answered gruffly.,

'No, no. I mean, did you recognize him? My dear, he's our own Kallu.'

'Kallu?' Mumani crinkled her nose.

'Yes, yes Kallu. Kalimuddin. This is too much!'

'You mean that little midget who was our houseboy?'

'Yes, the very same, the one who suffered a beating at your hands.' Chacha Mian guffawed.

'My God! What's wrong with the government? It seems just about anyone can land a job with it these days! But how did this happen?'

‘Why not? He’s a Qureshi, that’s a good caste, and he even submitted to your beating when the need arose,’ my mother said in a mocking tone.

‘Well, in that case why don’t you give him your daughter in marriage?’ Mumani spoke archly.

‘I wish my daughters were so fortunate,’ Amma said. ‘I’d be only too happy to have him for a son-in law. But why would he want to have anything to do with a family at whose hands he suffered such humiliation? Ayesha, his mother, left him with us so he could become somebody. But you turned him into a servant.’

Chacha Mian said, ‘And the poor woman worked hard, sewed clothes, washed people’s dirty dishes and finally succeeded in raising him to such heights. People are willing to present him their daughters on a silver platter.’

‘May they perish who do—I don’t need him,’ said Mumani sullenly.

One day Chacha Mian arrived at our house in his usual state of nervous agitation.

‘We were at the club, talking, and before I knew it, Kalimauddin walked out of there with me as I was leaving. Make some tea, anything!’

Amma ran towards the kitchen, but Mumani, a grimace firmly set on her face, didn’t budge. The girls became pale; Salima was especially perturbed. We wondered whether ‘Kalim Saheb’ should be asked to come in or the ladies be sent to the lawn, or Chacha Mian be allowed to handle everything by himself.

‘He’s here for revenge,’ Maliha said with mock seriousness, and Mumani shivered. Salima’s face was drained of colour.

‘I don’t care what happens,’ Amma said, He’s here, which means he’s a decent person, and we should respond with the same sort of generosity.’

‘No, I don’t want to be humiliated,’ Mumani growled. ‘you are welcome to take your own girls—none of mine is going to stir from here. He’s just here to show of his superiority.’

‘I won’t go either. I’m already married,’ Maliha said with a laugh.

Finally it was decided that we would all go and, of Mumani’s daughters, only Maliha would accompany us.

‘What’s he going to think, such uncivilized people!’ Upset and bewildered, Chacha Mian started grumbling.

We arrived in the lawn to find ‘Kalim Saheb’ engaged in a lively conversation about the past with the old gardener, who smiled sheepishly, somewhat embarrassed, a little uncomfortable.

‘Midu chacha, remember how you used to holler, ‘Wate...er!’ at the front door and immediately I used to pull a sheet in front of Dulhan bi3 (that’s what he called Mumani) for purdah? Tell me truthfully, did you ever sneak a look through the sheet?’ he burst into laughter, and then seeing us approach, quickly turned to greet us.

While we were having tea he said, ‘Maliha bi, do you remember how you boxed my ears for not brushing my teeth regularly?’

Maliha blushed.

‘No matter how unpleasant one’s childhood has been, one always remembers it like a wonderful dream,’ he said. ‘All of you probably forgot about me, but I didn’t forget you.’

We talked for a long time afterwards, shared jokes and laughed. His carefree manner put us at ease in no time.

‘Give my regards to Dulhan bi,’ he said before he left.

‘She’s not felling well,’ Maliha lied.

He laughed, ‘Forgive me, but I have a very sharp memory. I remember that when Dulhan bi was angry with someone she took ill. Well, I have to go, I have a dinner engagement tonight. I’ll come again another time.’

We talked about ‘Kalim Saheb’ late into the night.

‘What if he proposes...’ Chacha Mian spoke with some hesitation.

‘He’d better stay away from my girls,’ Mumani retorted curtly.

‘Why?’ Amma was irritated.

‘Because I say so!’

This was all artifice on her part; only God knew what was really going on in Mumani’s heart.

Salima became tearful. Everyone had been teasing her.

A month passed. We had almost forgotten about 'Kalim Saheb' when suddenly he arrived at our house one day with Chacha Mian. This time Chacha Mian informed only Maliha and myself of his presence in the lawn.

'He wants to see his crochety Dulhan bi,' Chacha Mian said.

'And she won't let him come near her.'

We decided that since Mumani would never agree to a meeting voluntarily, the best course of action would be to just bring him in and surprise her.

'My dears, she's a witch! There'll be no place to hide my face if she insults him.' Chacha Mian spoke fearfully.

'Don't worry,' Maliha said, 'she's not a child. I'll go and get her and you bring him in.'

Our hearts beat uncontrollably. What if Mumani exploded like a bomb? Except for Maliha and me, all the other girls disappeared into the house. 'Kalim Saheb' walked into the room to find Mumani engrossed in cleaning her paan dan; her back was turned to him.

'Maliha, listen girl, get me the bowl of katha from the cupboard in the kitchen, will you,' she called out.

He took the bowl of katha from Maliha and handed it to Mumani. She extended her hand towards it and said, 'And some water, too.'

Just then she lifted her eyes and found him standing by her side. 'Adab'. He whispered the salutation nervously and kept his eyes glued to the floor.

'God bless you,' she responded in a deadened tone and started spooning out katha from the bowl.

'Are you well?'

'I am fine, with your blessing.'

'Why are you standing? Sit down,' she ordered dryly.

He sat on the far side of the charpoy, on the adwan.

'Oh-ho! Not there, you will break the adwan!' she yelled. He jumped up hastily.

When 'Kalim Saheb' sent a message requesting Salima's hand in marriage, she was unrelenting. 'Come hell or high water, I won't give him Salima,' she said.

‘But why?’ Chacha Mian and the others pressed for a reason.

‘Who’re you to ask? I’ve decided I won’t and that’s that!’ she said obstinately.

‘Kalim Saheb’ said he hadn’t take no from life and he wasn’t going to take no from the old lady either. Determined to get his way, he boldly stationed himself on a chair next to Mumani’s bed one day. All of us gathered around them with great interest, as if a fight between two wrestlers in a ring was about to commence. ‘I’m going to make myself very clear’, he spoke firmly.

Mumani frowned.

‘You’re turning the tables on him, Dulhan bi—that’s not fair,’ Chacha Mian interjected.

‘Don’t say anything, Chacha Mian, I’ll take care of this myself.’

‘Kalim Saheb’ brushed Chacha Mian aside and turned to Mumani. ‘At least tell me what my crime is, Dulhan bi?’ he complained.

‘Dulhan bi! Hunh! As long as you call me Dulhan bi...’ Mumani muttered indignantly.

‘Amma bi ...’ he began in a tearful voice. Mumani’s eyes also filled with tears. She began scolding us.

‘Is this a circus? Why are you standing around watching like idiots? I know these girls won’t be any help with the wedding arrangements. I’ll have to take care of everything myself, as usual. Useless, these girls are, good-for-nothing!’

Mumani’s cantankerous chastisement fell upon our ears like the sound of wedding trumpets.

Pumps: light flat shoes without fastenings.

Katha: catechu, a brown paste made from the tree acacia catechu, spread on betel leaves as an ingredient of paan.

Paan dan: ornamental box containing the ingredients for making paan.

Adwan: the strings at the foot of a charpoy or cot, by which the cross-strings are tightened.

Dulhan: Bride.

About Ismat Chughtai

1915–91 / She was a born rebel. She led an unconventional life, went in for higher education, took up a job, lived alone, married a man of her choice and was cremated, as she had desired, instead of being buried.

After Rasheed Jahan, she was the first Muslim woman to write novels and short stories in Urdu. Rasheed Jahan was Chughtai's mentor. In 1932, Rasheed Jahan, along with Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmad Ali and Mahmuduzzafar published a collection of short stories, *Angaray* (Embers) that set off a storm of protest in the local press. The maulvis issued fatwahas and the book was banned by the United Provinces government. In the wake of the agitation against *Angaray*, Sajjad Zaheer took up residence in London in March 1933. The 'Defence of *Angaray*' was published soon afterwards (in April 1933) by the *Angaray* group in which they announced the formation of the League of Progressive Authors. The first manifesto of the progressive writers' movement was drafted by Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zaheer in London and the movement formally launched as the All India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) at a conference held in 1936 in Lucknow, under the presidentship of the Hindi-Urdu writer Premchand. The League of Progressive Authors now came under the banner of the AIPWA. Soon the movement spread and literary figures from other Indian languages (Uma Shankar Joshi, Tarashankar Bannerjee, K. Shivrama Karanth, Sumitranandan Pant, Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala') began to be associated with it. The Progressive Writers' Movement encouraged a lot of new talents; Chughtai was one of them.

Chughtai wrote many stories before she was actually published in 1939. With a keen eye and an incisive intelligence she looked into the lives of a whole range of Muslim women from the middle class in the suburban towns of Uttar Pradesh. Her stories were often controversial. 'Lihaaf' (1942) which deals with the issue of women's sexual desire was charged with obscenity. It led to a trial that lasted four years at the end of which she was finally acquitted. Ismat Chughtai was an important figure of the 1940s literary scene.

She also wrote for films and much later, even acted in one— she played the role of the grandmother in *Junoon* (1978). Having married Shaheed Latif, the film-producer remembered for *Ziddi* (1948), Dev Anand's first film to win immense popularity, Chughtai was involved with this and many of his other films like *Arzoo* (1950), *Darwaza* (1954), *Society* (1955) and *Sone Ki Chidiya* (1958). Several of her stories have been made into films. Of these, *Garam Hawa* (1973) won a great deal of acclaim. She is, therefore, also a part of the complex relationship that existed between Indian cinema and the progressive writers in Urdu: many of the younger writers of the time—Manto, Sardar Ali Jafri, Kaifi Azmi, Sahir Ludhianvi, Majrooh Sultanpuri—wrote for films.

In 1975, she received the Padma Shri for her contribution to Urdu Literature.

LU XUN

*Diary of a Madman
and Other Stories*

*Translated by
William A. Lyell*



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pieces to satisfy the requests of my friends. As time wore on, I found I had accumulated more than ten of them.

For my part, I thought I had long since ceased being the kind of person who is bursting to share his message. And yet—perhaps because I had not yet succeeded in entirely purging my heart of the sorrow and loneliness I too had once experienced in bygone days—I couldn't resist cheering now and then from the sidelines so as to console those bold warriors still charging through the fields of loneliness, and to encourage them to ride on. As to whether the sound of my cheers was heroic, woebegone, detestable, or even downright ridiculous—I couldn't really be bothered about that. Since I *was* cheering, however, I had to obey the orders of the bold warriors still out on the field. Therefore it often happened that I did not balk at twisting things a bit on their command: in "Medicine" I have a wreath appear out of nowhere on Yu Er's grave, and in "Tomorrow" I don't go so far as to say that Sister Shan never did see her son in her dreams. At the time our frontline officers were in no mood to tolerate negativity. And for my own part, I had no desire to take the loneliness that still afflicted me and infect young people with it, young people who were still dreaming the same sweet dreams that I had dreamed when I was their age.

Since this was the way these stories came into being, the distance that lies between them and real art can readily be imagined. And yet to have the opportunity to gather them into a collection and have them graced with the title "stories" is an unexpected piece of good luck. Though such luck makes me uneasy, it is also gratifying to think that, for the time being at least, I still have readers.

And so I have gathered them together and handed them over to the printer. Finally, for the reasons set out above, I have entitled the collection *Cheering from the Sidelines*.

DECEMBER 3, 1922
LU XUN IN BEIJING

Diary of a Madman

There was once a pair of male siblings whose actual names I beg your indulgence to withhold. Suffice it to say that we three were boon companions during our school years. Subsequently, circumstances contrived to rend us asunder so that we were gradually bereft of knowledge regarding each other's activities.

Not too long ago, however, I chanced to hear that one of them had been hard afflicted with a dread disease. I obtained this intelligence at a time when I happened to be returning to my native haunts and, hence, made so bold as to detour somewhat from my normal course in order to visit them. I encountered but one of the siblings. He apprised me that it had been his younger brother who had suffered the dire illness. By now, however, he had long since become sound and fit again; in fact he had already repaired to other parts to await a substantive official appointment.¹

The elder brother apologized for having needlessly put me to the inconvenience of this visitation, and concluding his disquisition with a hearty smile, showed me two volumes of diaries which, he assured me, would reveal the nature of his brother's disorder during those fearful days.

As to the lapsus calami that occur in the course of the diaries, I have altered not a word. Nonetheless, I have changed all the names, despite the fact that their publication would be of no great consequence since they are all humble villagers unknown to the world at large.

Recorded this 2nd day in the 7th year of the Republic.²

I

Moonlight's really nice tonight. Haven't seen it in over thirty years. Seeing it today, I feel like a new man. I know now that I've been completely out of things for the last three decades or more.

First published in *New Youth*, volume 4, no. 5 (May 1918). This was the first time Zhou Shuren used the pen name Lu Xun.

1. When there were too many officials for the number of offices to be filled, a man might well be appointed to an office that already had an incumbent. The new appointee would proceed to his post and wait until said office was vacated. Sometimes there would be a number of such appointees waiting their turns.

2. April 2, 1918. This introduction is written in classical Chinese, while the diary entries that follow are all in the colloquial language.

But I've still got to be *very* careful. Otherwise, how do you explain those dirty looks the Zhao family's dog gave me?

I've got good reason for my fears.

2

No moonlight at all tonight—something's not quite right. When I made my way out the front gate this morning—ever so carefully—there was something funny about the way the Venerable Old Zhao looked at me: seemed as though he was afraid of me and yet, at the same time, looked as though he had it in for me. There were seven or eight other people who had their heads together whispering about me. They were afraid I'd see them too! All up and down the street people acted the same way. The meanest looking one of all spread his lips out wide and actually *smiled* at me! A shiver ran from the top of my head clear down to the tips of my toes, for I realized that meant they already had their henchmen well deployed, and were ready to strike.

But I wasn't going to let that intimidate *me*. I kept right on walking. There was a group of children up ahead and they were talking about me too. The expressions in their eyes were just like the Venerable Old Zhao's, and their faces were iron gray. I wondered what grudge the children had against me that they were acting this way too. I couldn't contain myself any longer and shouted, "Tell me, tell me!" But they just ran away.

Let's see now, what grudge can there be between me and the Venerable Old Zhao, or the people on the street for that matter? The only thing I can think of is that twenty years ago I trampled the account books kept by Mr. Antiquity, and he was hopping mad about it too. Though the Venerable Old Zhao doesn't know him, he must have gotten wind of it somehow. Probably decided to right the injustice I had done Mr. Antiquity by getting all those people on the street to gang up on me. But the children? Back then they hadn't even come into the world yet. Why should they have given me those funny looks today? Seemed as though they were afraid of me and yet, at the same time, looked as though they would like to do me some harm. That really frightens me. Bewilders me. Hurts me.

I have it! Their fathers and mothers have *taught* them to be like that!

3

I can never get to sleep at night. You really have to study something before you can understand it.

Take all those people: some have worn the cangue on the district magistrate's order, some have had their faces slapped by the gentry, some have had their wives ravished by *yamen* clerks,³ some have had their dads and moms dunned to death by creditors; and yet, right at the time when all those terrible things were taking place, the expressions on their faces were never as frightened, or as savage, as the ones they wore yesterday.

Strangest of all was that woman on the street. She slapped her son and said: "Damn it all, you've got me so riled up I could take a good bite right out of your hide!" She was talking to him, but she was looking at me! I tried, but couldn't conceal a shudder of fright. That's when that ghastly crew of people, with their green faces and protruding fangs, began to roar with laughter. Old Fifth Chen ran up, took me firmly in tow, and dragged me away.

When we got back, the people at home all pretended not to know me. The expressions in their eyes were just like all the others too. After he got me into the study, Old Fifth Chen bolted the door from the outside—just the way you would pen up a chicken or a duck! That made figuring out what was at the bottom of it all harder than ever.

A few days back one of our tenant farmers came in from Wolf Cub Village to report a famine. Told my elder brother the villagers had all ganged up on a "bad" man and beaten him to death. Even gouged out his heart and liver. Fried them up and ate them to bolster their own courage! When I tried to horn in on the conversation, Elder Brother and the tenant farmer both gave me sinister looks. I realized for the first time today that the expression in their eyes was just the same as what I saw in those people on the street.

As I think of it now, a shiver's running from the top of my head clear down to the tips of my toes.

If they're capable of eating people, then who's to say they won't eat *me*?

3. The cangue was a split board, hinged at one end and locked at the other; holes were cut out to accommodate the prisoner's neck and wrists. *Yamen* was the term for local government offices. The petty clerks who worked in them were notorious for relying on their proximity to power in order to bully and abuse the common people.

Don't you see? That woman's words about "taking a good bite," and the laughter of that ghastly crew with their green faces and protruding fangs, and the words of our tenant farmer a few days back—it's perfectly clear to me now that all that talk and all that laughter were really a set of secret signals. Those words were poison! That laughter, a knife! Their teeth are bared and waiting—white and razor sharp! Those people are cannibals!

As I see it myself, though I'm not what you'd call an evil man, still, ever since I trampled the Antiquity family's account books, it's hard to say *what* they'll do. They seem to have something in mind, but I can't begin to guess what. What's more, as soon as they turn against someone, they'll *say* he's evil anyway. I can still remember how it was when Elder Brother was teaching me composition. No matter how good a man was, if I could find a few things wrong with him he would approvingly underline my words; on the other hand, if I made a few allowances for a bad man, he'd say I was "an extraordinary student, an absolute genius." When all is said and done, how can I possibly guess what people like *that* have in mind, especially when they're getting ready for a cannibals' feast?

You have to *really* go into something before you can understand it. I seemed to remember, though not too clearly, that from ancient times on people have often been eaten, and so I started leafing through a history book to look it up. There were no dates in this history, but scrawled this way and that across every page were the words BENEVOLENCE, RIGHTEOUSNESS, and MORALITY. Since I couldn't get to sleep anyway, I read that history very carefully for most of the night, and finally I began to make out what was written *between* the lines; the whole volume was filled with a single phrase: EAT PEOPLE!

The words written in the history book, the things the tenant farmer said—all of it began to stare at me with hideous eyes, began to snarl and growl at me from behind bared teeth!

Why sure, *I'm* a person too, and they want to eat *me!*

4

In the morning I sat in the study for a while, calm and collected. Old Fifth Chen brought in some food—vegetables and a steamed fish. The fish's eyes were white and hard. Its mouth was wide open, just like the mouths of those people who wanted to eat

human flesh. After I'd taken a few bites, the meat felt so smooth and slippery in my mouth that I couldn't tell whether it was fish or human flesh. I vomited.

"Old Fifth," I said, "tell Elder Brother that it's absolutely stifling in here and that I'd like to take a walk in the garden." He left without answering, but sure enough, after a while the door opened. I didn't even budge—just sat there waiting to see what they'd do to me. I *knew* that they wouldn't be willing to set me loose.

Just as I expected! Elder Brother came in with an old man in tow and walked slowly toward me. There was a savage glint in the old man's eyes. He was afraid I'd see it and kept his head tilted toward the floor while stealing sidewise glances at me over the temples of his glasses. "You seem to be fine today," said Elder Brother.

"You bet!" I replied.

"I've asked Dr. He to come and examine your pulse today."

"He's welcome!" I said. But don't think for one moment that I didn't know the old geezer was an executioner in disguise! Taking my pulse was nothing but a ruse; he wanted to feel my flesh and decide if I was fat enough to butcher yet. He'd probably even get a share of the meat for his troubles. I wasn't a *bit* afraid. Even though I don't eat human flesh, I still have a lot more courage than those who do. I thrust both hands out to see how the old buzzard would make his move.⁴ Sitting down, he closed his eyes and felt my pulse for a good long while. Then he froze. Just sat there without moving a muscle for another good long while. Finally he opened his spooky eyes and said: "Don't let your thoughts run away with you. Just convalesce in peace and quiet for a few days and you'll be all right."

Don't let my thoughts run away with me? Convalesce in peace and quiet? If I convalesce till I'm good and fat, they get more to eat, but what do *I* get out of it? How can I possibly be *all right*? What a bunch! All they think about is eating human flesh, and then they go sneaking around, thinking up every which way they can to camouflage their real intentions. They were comical enough to crack *anybody* up. I couldn't hold it in any longer and let out a good loud laugh. Now *that* really felt good. I knew in my heart of hearts that my laughter was *packed* with courage and righteousness. And do you know what? They were so completely subdued by it that the old man and my elder brother both went pale!

4. In Chinese medicine the pulse is taken at both wrists.

But the more *courage* I had, the more that made them want to eat me so that they could get a little of it for free. The old man walked out. Before he had taken many steps, he lowered his head and told Elder Brother, "To be eaten as soon as possible!" He nodded understandingly. So, Elder Brother, you're in it too! Although that discovery seemed unforeseen, it really wasn't, either. My own elder brother had thrown in with the very people who wanted to eat me!

My elder brother is a cannibal!

I'm brother to a cannibal.

Even though I'm to be the victim of cannibalism, I'm *brother* to a cannibal all the same!

5

During the past few days I've taken a step back in my thinking. Supposing that old man wasn't an executioner in disguise but really was a doctor—well, he'd still be a cannibal just the same. In *Medicinal . . . something or other* by Li Shizhen, the grandfather of the doctor's trade; it says quite clearly that human flesh can be eaten, so how can that old man say that *he's* not a cannibal too?⁵

And as for my own elder brother, I'm not being the least bit unfair to him. When he was explaining the classics to me, he said with his very own tongue that it was all right to *exchange children and eat them*. And then there was another time when he happened to start in on an evil man and said that not only should the man be killed, but his *flesh should be eaten* and *his skin used as a sleeping mat* as well.⁶

When our tenant farmer came in from Wolf Cub Village a few

5. *Taxonomy of Medicinal Herbs*, a gigantic work, was the most important pharmacopoeia in traditional China. Li Shizhen lived from 1518 to 1593.

6. Both italicized expressions are from the *Zuozhuan* (Zuo Commentary [to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*]), a historical work which dates from the third century B.C. In 448 B.C., an officer who was exhorting his own side not to surrender is recorded as having said, "When the army of Chu besieged the capital of Song [in 603 B.C.], the people exchanged their children and ate them, and used the bones for fuel; and still they would not submit to a covenant at the foot of their walls. For us who have sustained no great loss, to do so is to cast our state away" (Legge 5.817). It is also recorded that in 551 B.C. an officer boasting of his own prowess before his ruler, pointed to two men whom his ruler considered brave and said, "As to those two, they are like beasts, whose flesh I will eat, and then sleep upon their skins" (Legge 5.492).

days back and talked about eating a man's heart and liver, Elder Brother didn't seem to see anything out of the way in that either—just kept nodding his head. You can tell from that alone that his present way of thinking is every bit as malicious as it was when I was a child. If it's all right to exchange *children* and eat them, then *anyone* can be exchanged, anyone can be eaten. Back then I just took what he said as explanation of the classics and let it go at that, but now I realize that while he was explaining, the grease of human flesh was smeared all over his lips, and what's more, his mind was filled with plans for further cannibalism.

6

Pitch black out. Can't tell if it's day or night. The Zhao family's dog has started barking again.

Savage as a lion, timid as a rabbit, crafty as a fox . . .

7

I'm on to the way they operate. They'll never be willing to come straight out and kill me. Besides, they wouldn't dare. They'd be afraid of all the bad luck it might bring down on them if they did. And so, they've gotten everyone into cahoots with them and have set traps all over the place so that I'll do *myself* in. When I think back on the looks of those men and women on the streets a few days ago, coupled with the things my elder brother's been up to recently, I can figure out eight or nine tenths of it. From their point of view, the best thing of all would be for me to take off my belt, fasten it around a beam, and hang myself. They wouldn't be guilty of murder, and yet they'd still get everything they're after. Why, they'd be so beside themselves with joy, they'd sob with laughter. Or if they couldn't get me to do that, maybe they could torment me until I died of fright and worry. Even though I'd come out a bit leaner that way, they'd still nod their heads in approval.

Their kind only know how to eat dead meat. I remember reading in a book somewhere about something called the *hai-yi-na*. Its general appearance is said to be hideous, and the expression in its eyes particularly ugly and malicious. Often eats carrion, too. Even chews the bones to a pulp and swallows them down. Just thinking about it's enough to frighten a man.

The *hai-yi-na* is kin to the wolf.⁷ The wolf's a relative of the dog, and just a few days ago the Zhao family dog gave me a funny look. It's easy to see that he's in on it too. How did that old man expect to fool *me* by staring at the floor?

My elder brother's the most pathetic of the whole lot. Since he's a human being too, how can he manage to be so totally without qualms, and what's more, even gang up with them to eat me? Could it be that he's been used to this sort of thing all along and sees nothing wrong with it? Or could it be that he's lost all conscience and just goes ahead and does it even though he knows it's wrong?

If I'm going to curse cannibals, I'll have to start with him. And if I'm going to *convert* cannibals, I'll have to start with him too.

8

Actually, by now even they should long since have understood the truth of this . . .

Someone came in. Couldn't have been more than twenty or so. I wasn't able to make out what he looked like too clearly, but he was all smiles. He nodded at me. His smile didn't look like the real thing either. And so I asked him, "Is this business of eating people right?"

He just kept right on smiling and said, "Except perhaps in a famine year, how could anyone get eaten?" I knew right off that he was one of them—one of those monsters who devour people!

At that point my own courage increased a hundredfold and I asked him, "Is it right?"

"Why are you talking about this kind of thing anyway? You really know how to . . . uh . . . how to pull a fellow's leg. Nice weather we're having."

"The weather *is* nice. There's a nice moon out, too, but I *still* want to know if it's right."

He seemed quite put out with me and began to mumble, "It's not—"

"Not right? Then how come they're still eating people?"

"No one's eating anyone."

7. Three Chinese characters are used here for phonetic value only—that is, *hai yi na* is a transliteration into Chinese of the English word "hyena."

"No one's *eating* anyone? They're eating people in Wolf Cub Village this very minute. And it's written in all the books, too, written in bright red blood!"

His expression changed and his face went gray like a slab of iron. His eyes started out from their sockets as he said, "Maybe they are, but it's always been that way, it's—"

"Just because it's always been that way, does that make it *right*?"

"I'm not going to discuss such things with you. If you insist on talking about that, then *you're* the one who's in the wrong!"

I leaped from my chair, opened my eyes, and looked around—but the fellow was nowhere to be seen. He was far younger than my elder brother, and yet he was actually one of them. It must be because his mom and dad taught him to be that way. And he's probably already passed it on to his own son. No wonder that even the children give me murderous looks.

9

They want to eat others and at the same time they're afraid that other people are going to eat them. That's why they're always watching each other with such suspicious looks in their eyes.

But all they'd have to do is give up that way of thinking, and then they could travel about, work, eat, and sleep in perfect security. Think how happy they'd feel! It's only a threshold, a pass. But what do they do instead? What is it that these fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, wives, friends, teachers, students, enemies, and even people who don't know each other *really* do? Why they all join together to hold each other back, and talk each other out of it! That's it! They'd rather *die* than take that one little step.

10

I went to see Elder Brother bright and early. He was standing in the courtyard looking at the sky. I went up behind him so as to cut him off from the door back into the house. In the calmest and friendliest of tones, I said, "Elder Brother, there's something I'd like to tell you."

"Go right ahead." He immediately turned and nodded his head. "It's only a few words, really, but it's hard to get them out."

Elder Brother, way back in the beginning, it's probably the case that primitive peoples *all* ate some human flesh. But later on, because their ways of thinking changed, some gave up the practice and tried their level best to improve themselves; they kept on changing until they became human beings, *real* human beings. But the others didn't; they just kept right on with their cannibalism and stayed at that primitive level.

"You have the same sort of thing with evolution in the animal world. Some reptiles, for instance, changed into fish, and then they evolved into birds, then into apes, and then into human beings.⁸ But the others didn't want to improve themselves and just kept right on being reptiles down to this very day.

"Think how ashamed those primitive men who have remained cannibals must feel when they stand before *real* human beings. They must feel even more ashamed than reptiles do when confronted with their brethren who have evolved into apes.

"There's an old story from ancient times about Yi Ya boiling his son and serving him up to Jie Zhou. But if the truth be known, people have *always* practiced cannibalism, all the way from the time when Pan Gu separated heaven and earth down to Yi Ya's son, down to Xu Xilin, and on down to the man they killed in Wolf Cub Village.⁹ And just last year when they executed a criminal in town, there was even someone with T.B. who dunked a steamed bread roll in his blood and then licked it off.¹⁰

8. Darwin's theory of evolution was immensely important to Chinese intellectuals during Lu Xun's lifetime and the common coin of much discourse.

9. An early philosophical text, *Guan Zi*, reports that the famous cook, Yi Ya, boiled his son and served him to his ruler, Duke Huan of Qi (685-643 B.C.), because the meat of a human infant was one of the few delicacies the duke had never tasted. Jie and Zhou were the last evil rulers of the Shang (1776-1122 B.C.) and Zhou (1122-221 B.C.) dynasties. The madman has mixed up some facts here.

Pan Gu (literally, Coiled-up Antiquity) was born out of an egg. As he stood up he separated heaven and earth. The world, as we know it, was formed from his body.

Xu Xilin (1873-1907) was from Lu Xun's hometown, Shaoxing. After studies in Japan he returned to China and served as head of the Anhui Police Academy. When a high Qing official, En Ming, participated in a graduation ceremony at the academy, Xu assassinated him, hoping that this spark would touch off the revolution. After the assassination, he and some of his students at the academy occupied the police armory and managed, for a while, to hold off En Ming's troops. When Xu was finally captured, En Ming's personal bodyguards dug out his heart and liver and ate them.

10. A similar incident is the basis for Lu Xun's story "Medicine." Human blood was believed to be a cure for tuberculosis.

"When they decided to eat me, by yourself, of course, you couldn't do much to prevent it, but why did you have to go and *join* them? Cannibals are capable of anything! If they're capable of eating me, then they're capable of eating *you* too! Even within their own group, they think nothing of devouring each other. And yet all they'd have to do is turn back—*change*—and then everything would be fine. Even though people may say, 'It's always been like this,' we can still do our best to improve. And we can start today!

"You're going to tell me it can't be done! Elder Brother, I think you're very likely to say that. When that tenant wanted to reduce his rent the day before yesterday, wasn't it you who said it couldn't be done?"

At first he just stood there with a cold smile, but then his eyes took on a murderous gleam. (I had exposed their innermost secrets.) His whole face had gone pale. Some people were standing outside the front gate. The Venerable Old Zhao and his dog were among them. Stealthily peering this way and that, they began to crowd through the open gate. Some I couldn't make out too well—their faces seemed covered with cloth. Some looked the same as ever—smiling green faces with protruding fangs. I could tell at a glance that they all belonged to the same gang, that they were all cannibals. But at the same time I also realized that they didn't all think the same way. Some thought *it's always been like this* and that they really should eat human flesh. Others knew they shouldn't but went right on doing it anyway, always on the lookout for fear someone might give them away. And since that's exactly what I had just done, I knew they must be furious. But they were all *smiling* at me—cold little smiles!

At this point Elder Brother suddenly took on an ugly look and barked, "Get out of here! All of you! What's so funny about a madman?"

Now I'm on to *another* of their tricks: not only are they unwilling to change, but they're already setting me up for their next cannibalistic feast by labeling me a "madman." That way, they'll be able to eat me without getting into the slightest trouble. Some people will even be grateful to them. Wasn't that the very trick used in the case that the tenant reported? Everybody ganged up on a "bad" man and ate him. It's the same old thing.

Old Fifth Chen came in and made straight for me, looking mad as could be. But he wasn't going to shut *me* up! I was going to tell that bunch of cannibals off, and no two ways about it!

"You can change! You can change from the bottom of your hearts! You ought to know that in the future they're not going to allow cannibalism in the world anymore. If you don't change, you're going to devour each other anyway. And even if a lot of you *are* left, a real human being's going to come along and eradicate the lot of you, just like a hunter getting rid of wolves—or reptiles!"

Old Fifth Chen chased them all out. I don't know where Elder Brother disappeared to. Old Fifth talked me into going back to my room.

It was pitch black inside. The beams and rafters started trembling overhead. They shook for a bit, and then they started getting bigger and bigger. They piled themselves up into a great heap on top of my body!

The weight was incredibly heavy and I couldn't even budge—they were trying to kill me! But I knew their weight was an illusion, and I struggled out from under them, my body bathed in sweat. I was still going to have my say. "Change this minute! Change from the bottom of your hearts! You ought to know that in the future they're not going to allow cannibals in the world anymore . . ."

II

The sun doesn't come out. The door doesn't open. It's two meals a day.

I picked up my chopsticks and that got me thinking about Elder Brother. I realized that the reason for my younger sister's death lay entirely with him. I can see her now—such a lovable and helpless little thing, only five at the time. Mother couldn't stop crying, but *he* urged her to stop, probably because he'd eaten sister's flesh himself and hearing mother cry over her like that shamed him! But if he's still capable of feeling shame, then maybe . . .

Younger Sister was eaten by Elder Brother. I have no way of knowing whether Mother knew about it or not.

I think she *did* know, but while she was crying she didn't say anything about it. She probably thought it was all right, too. I can remember once when I was four or five, I was sitting out in the

courtyard taking in a cool breeze when Elder Brother told me that when parents are ill, a son, in order to be counted as a really good person, should slice off a piece of his own flesh, boil it, and let them eat it.¹¹ At the time Mother didn't come out and say there was anything wrong with that. But if it was all right to eat one piece, then there certainly wouldn't be anything wrong with her eating the whole body. And yet when I think back to the way she cried and cried that day, it's enough to break my heart. It's all strange—very, very strange.

12

Can't think about it anymore. I just realized today that I too have muddled around for a good many years in a place where they've been continually eating people for four thousand years. Younger Sister happened to die at just the time when Elder Brother was in charge of the house. Who's to say he didn't slip some of her meat into the food we ate?

Who's to say I didn't eat a few pieces of my younger sister's flesh without knowing it? And now it's my turn . . .

Although I wasn't aware of it in the beginning, now that I *know* I'm someone with four thousand years' experience of cannibalism behind me, how hard it is to look real human beings in the eye!

13

Maybe there are some children around who still haven't eaten human flesh.

Save the children . . .

APRIL 1918

11. In traditional literature stories about such gruesome acts of filial piety were not unusual.