

# PORT OF LIES

## 八尺門的辯護人

\* 2020 MirrorFiction Million Dollar Award winner

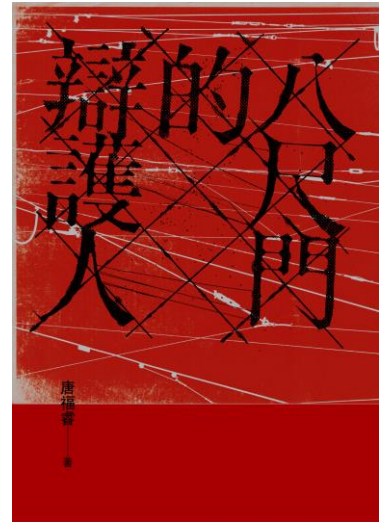
\* Television adaptation directed by the author is in production

*A young Indigenous Taiwanese escapes the hard life of his fishing port hometown by becoming a public defense lawyer, but when an immigrant fisherman kills a boat captain from his tribe, he is forced to reevaluate his vision of justice.*

In 1950s Taiwan, large numbers of Amei tribesmen from the east coast moved north to work on fishing boats based in the port of Bachimen. Raised in these environs, Tung Pao-Chu watched his elders struggling to make ends meet as fishermen and decided he would pursue a different path. Through hard work he managed to leave Bachimen and fulfill his dream of becoming a public defense lawyer, defending accused criminals for a modest government salary.

Now, just as he is preparing to leave the public defender's office to pursue more lucrative work, Tung Pao-Chu is assigned a difficult case involving the murder of an Amei boat captain and his entire family. The suspect is an illegal immigrant from Indonesia who worked on the victim's boat. The brutality of the murders, combined with associated racial tensions, has thrust the case into the spotlight. Already in the difficult position of defending a man suspected of murdering his own tribesmen, Tung Pao-Chu begins to doubt whether the case is as simple as it seems. What was the motive for the murders? And what transpired on the fishing boat during its final voyage?

Through the lens of an apparently straightforward murder case, *Port of Lies* exposes the complexity of race relations in contemporary Taiwan. The novel addresses a broad range of issues from the death penalty, to conflicting profit motives in the fishing industry, to racial identity and affirmative action, to the rights of immigrant workers.



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From these intersecting threads author and lawyer Freddy Fu-Jui Tang weaves a fast-paced courtroom thriller destined to please crime and mystery fans with a taste for social realism.

## Freddy Fu-Jui Tang 唐福睿

Freddy Fu-Jui Tang was a lawyer for five years before he moved overseas to study screenwriting and directing at CalArts. Within his distinctly social realist and humanist writing, the legal system becomes a device that frames the human dilemmas of his characters. *Port of Lies* is his first novel. He is also the screenwriter and director for the *Port of Lies* television adaptation, *The Attorney from Bachimen*, slated for 2023 release.

# PORT OF LIES

By Freddy Fu-Jui Tang

Translated by Timothy Smith

## Chapter 1. Murder by the Sea

### 1

September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1982. Midnight. Ten-year-old Tung Pao-Chu watched his father Shou-Chung appear from the shadows and step back into their shack, covered from head to toe in spattered blood. He was carrying a machete in one hand. A few rivulets of blood made their way to the blade point, the accumulated drops falling off the tip and edge. His father held onto the frame of their front door, which was made from the flotsam remnants of a fishing boat. He was breathing hard, almost panting. In Amis, he ordered his son to get the hell away.

A commotion came from outside the door. Presumably, Shou-Chung had come all the way back from the fishing port at Zhengbin, and he had startled quite a few of their neighbors.

Pao-Chu's family of three lived in a home built of wood scrapped from derelict fishing sampans and trawlers. It was about 750 square feet in size and had four rooms. About fourteen people were living under one roof. Most were Amis friends and relatives who had made the long trek north from Hualien. They were all awake now, and they all got up one by one to make their way to the front door to see what the fuss was about.

Pao-Chu looked at this demonic avatar that was his father and felt scared out of his wits. He didn't dare move an inch. He heard his mother, Ma-Chieh, call out from behind him in a tone of mourning: "Looh....What in God's name did you do!?"\*<sup>1</sup>

The color had drained from her face. She snatched the machete from her husband's grip and threw it to the ground. A police whistle screamed in the distance. Pao-Chu stared at the fresh, shining blood as it gradually dried and lost its luster. His mind turned blank.

A great gust of wind rocked the entire house, and the electricity cut out. In this pitch-dark world, there was nothing save for Shou-Chung's piteous gasping for breath.

Pao-Chu held tightly to his mother's waist and began bawling. This was the first time thoughts of running away arose in his innocent, juvenile mind; though time passed, they never disappeared.

This is Bachimen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dialogues marked with \* are in Amis.

In the 1960s, Keelung's fishing fleets were prospering and developing at breakneck speed, drastically increasing the demand for deckhands and other labor at Zhengbin Fishing Port. There were several headhunter middlemen who went down to Hualien and Taitung to search for workers, where they found plenty of Amis who were willing to work on the water or off in far-flung seas.

Tung Shou-Chung was one of the new hires. In the prime of his youth, he had originally come up from his hometown in Yuli, over in Hualien, famous now for its delicious short-grain rice. He moved his wife, Ma-Chieh, and their then-infant son to Keelung, and once there, they never left.

Some of the Amis tribespeople, venturing far from their native lands in the southeast of Taiwan, moved to the Longmu Well area on the north side of Heping Island, where they built a series of ramshackle buildings behind the military retiree's housing complex. These internal migrants called the area "a-la-bau'an", meaning "easily forgotten place" in the Amis tongue.

Another Amis group settled on the slopes near the entrance to the far side of the Bachimen tunnel. Once they got there, these internal migrants scavenged for flotsam and scrap wood, and built not-so-legal shanties from the water's edge all the way to the top of the slopes of the hill. In its heyday, there were about 200 homes here, all connected in continuous rows of asphalt roof shingle patches and stretching eastwards along the single seaside road into a valley. What this would later be called – Bachimen settlement – was where Pao-Chu's family would set down roots.

But where did this name come from? Tung Pao-Chu didn't have a clue. He still remembered when he was younger, each time his father had thrown back a few drinks, he would tell his son the same stale joke about how it was called Bachimen ("Eight-foot-gate") because Amis men all carried eight-foot members, and he ought to pant his son to check if he was actually a member of the tribe.

There had been a party going on the night the incident happened, attended by Amis friends and family from the cramped, decrepit Bachimen neighborhood. Shou-Chung talked about when his younger cousin had accidentally fallen overboard and drowned. His emotional state had changed, and he was upset. Every drink made him more and more agitated and mean. His anger grew especially fierce when he thought about how the fishing boat company wasn't even insured. What's more was when the fishing company hired people on, they'd give out an advanced payment but when all things were said and done and the principal and interest was calculated, the survivor's compensation was a mere pittance. As a fishing boat captain, it filled Shou-Chung with rage.

Shou-Chung kneaded the fingers in his right hand, cracking his knuckles and massaging them. He was missing half his right index finger. He slammed his fist down on the table: "I lost half my finger just last year. They never gave me a damned cent for it."\*

The party died off after a bit and everyone made their way back to their hovels. Every drop of alcohol had been lapped up, and the lamp lights extinguished. Most everyone had taken their fill of liquor and beer and passed out to dream of better places and better times. Yet Shou-

Chung didn't immediately come home; he sat in front of the table until everyone around had nodded off. Then he walked out the door, spinning a machete in one hand, and followed the snaking path towards Zhengbin Fishing Port.

The sea breeze that evening carried a chill. After tossing back half his drink, Shou-Chung felt half-frozen. The adrenaline rush from the murderous ideas swirling in his head only made him quake harder. Despite nearly ten years of experience making a living from the ocean, and the strength to lift a 120-kilogram big-eye tuna without breaking a sweat, the hand holding the machete couldn't stop shaking.

The roll-up gate to the fishing fleet company compound stood half-open. The noise of bottles clinking and arguments hovered in the night air. Shou-Chung felt his body calming down. A strong gust of wind blew from the direction of Heping Island, and he thought he could hear the slight creaking of shanty doors and rooftops up on the hill slopes. Though he looked back in the direction of his house, he couldn't recognize at night which of the glowing lanterns was the one from his own hovel.

A male shadow came forward, a freshly lit cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. He made eye contact with Shou-Chung; it was the head of the company's accounting department.

"Ah-ya." The man said in a dry, hoarse voice.

Shou-Chung lunged and slashed through the man's chest and neck twice. Blood sprayed into Shou-Chung's eyes. He couldn't see who the second person who'd come out to attack him was. It didn't matter. Shou-Chung brought the knife down twice more.

Another fountain of blood.

Shou-Chung returned home by the same path. He wiped at the blood spattered across his face, and his body starting shivering once more. He walked in through the door, shouting for Pao-Chu. He dug around in his pants pocket, fishing out a couple copper coins, and called out for Ma-Chieh to go fetch a couple fresh bottles of beer from the convenience store down the road.

After Pao-Chu had grown up, criminality was far from something fresh and novel. He'd seen all manner of depraved and brutal acts, but this was far different from what he'd see later. This was the only time he was close enough to smell the pungent, ferrous odor of someone else's blood.

From then on, Pao-Chu would recall that night as if it had been broad daylight, clear for all to see. He remembered before his father Shou-Chung had carried out his deed, his father had sat stooped over at the edge of the kitchen table looking at all the emptied beer and liquor bottles scattered about the tabletop, muttering to himself.

"Are we just not humans to them?"\*

Maybe it was a blessing in disguise. Neither of the two men died from their injuries. Tung Shou-Chung was charged with attempted multiple homicide, and in the end, the court sentenced him to just ten years in prison.

This was how the verdict was written: "...Before the incident had occurred, the defendant had drunk several bottles of kaoliang sorghum liquor and millet wine with his friends and relatives, which led to the defendant losing his capacity for sound judgment. Such actions led to the defendant becoming mentally feeble. The intoxication report in the medical evaluation from the Tri-Service General Hospital is available on record for review. Furthermore, the defendant has almost no level of education. Since his youth, he had grown up in a Mountain Brethren community in Hualien, where he was long accustomed to imbibing alcohol from a young age. He is maladapted to living in a metropolitan environment. In addition to the above, the defendant was also severely impacted by the accidental death of a relative, and was not of sound emotional stability..."

The night before Shou-Chung was taken into prison, several of his friends and family had carried out a ritual for him. They had lit a bonfire and cooked a meal on the wet, algae-covered rocks on the shore next to Bachimen. Ma-Chieh went out earlier in the day, scavenging around for seaweed and sea snails. She tossed it all into simmering cooking pots full of soup, the flavor becoming nice and mellow, but Shou-Chung didn't have a single spoonful.

He remained mired in silence. Another member of the tribe suddenly muttered that another fishing boat would be heading out to sea the next month. He hadn't been interrupted, but perhaps he was hoping Shou-Chung would make an allowance for it. Some of the others started to chime in too. They owed the company too much money, and it would be difficult to get away with not paying them back the advance.

"Other than running the boats, what else could we do?"

Everyone knew everyone around the harbor. An uncomfortable situation would negatively affect everyone.

One had to make money somehow.

"The verdict had already shown some sympathy for our plight. Letting themselves get carried away by impassioned emotions wouldn't do anyone any good."

Tung Shou-Chung looked off into the black, churning surf. He was still silent.

Pao-Chu was absentmindedly staring into the bonfire, their conversations fermenting in his head. His love and compassion for his uncles had gradually turned into a deep hatred of some of their vices like alcoholism, physical abuse, and self-pity. He got especially irritated when he realized some of the Amis community would slack off around the harbor as they were trying to make it. They would even stand in front of the fishing company and question and blame his parents for all their troubles. This kind of resentment just kept growing and spreading throughout him, turning into something he just couldn't forgive them for, and even led to some self-hatred of his indigenous roots.

While Shou-Chung wasted away in a prison cell, Ma-Chieh worked part-time at a shrimp-processing factory. She'd often get bitten by the still-live shrimp as she dipped her hands into the filthy water. Since she often worked overtime, her body weakened. To make matters worse, she wasn't willing to spend any of her hard-earned money to go see a doctor, and eventually, it led to cellulitis and sepsis, which ultimately took her life.

Pao-Chu refused to have any compassion and love for himself. He never shed a tear for his own plight. He just kept to himself, studying his textbooks in the janitor's closet in the local Catholic church. The year Bachimen settlement was demolished, Pao-Chu strove hard to make it into a university. Once he did though, he never looked back and left that eternally rain-enshrouded, dismal slope by the sea.

#### 4

In 1988, President Lee Teng-Hui paid an official visit to Keelung. He decided to improve Bachimen's living environment, and three years later, Keelung's city government demolished the slum at Bachimen and built cheap housing units in its stead. A government-subsidized housing complex called the Hai-pin Housing Complex was constructed. The state-owned land had been concurrently defined as a protected area set aside for Indigenous Taiwanese, becoming the first instance in all of Taiwan where the government had resettled an illegal settlement of urbanized Indigenous peoples.

The time-consuming construction took no less than three years to finish. After the Hai-pin Housing Complex was built, the scattered tribesmen returned to their home here in Keelung, and renamed it "Kihaw", meaning "bay". The name "Bachimen" died away slowly with the memories of each person that passed away.

In any case, no matter how the name changed and the landscape transformed, to Pao-Chu this place was not worth remembering. He'd been away from his "home" for over thirty years, and only went back when absolutely necessary to see his father. Perhaps that's not entirely true – half the time, he had a hankering for fish cakes grilled over charcoal.

Apart from that, the only other time he went down was on Saturday afternoons to visit with the book club at the Catholic church on Heping Island. That was the deal he had made with the priest: once he began studying at university, he made sure to come back every weekend to this church. He always brought books with him for the kids in the parish, regardless of their age or reading level, and would answer their questions and help them. Though he didn't know everything, the questions the indigenous kids asked weren't all that complicated. What they really wanted was just a strong role model and volunteer mentor.

This time though, Pao-Chu came back to Keelung for a very different reason.

The lighting in the Keelung District Court is pretty awful. By the end of the year when it's already cloudy and gray out, it has an oppressively depressing atmosphere to it.

The family court isn't open to the public, so there weren't any spectators in the gallery or guests seating to listen in. Shou-Chung was there as a petitioner. Time and salt water had left scars and valleys all along his face. Moving his catch in and out of cold storage for years on end had left him with a crooked spine and permanently collapsed shoulders.

The young, female family court judge watched as Tung Pao-Chu sat across from his father. She was trying to amicably soften the situation by calmly and clearly stating out the facts: "The petitioner, Tung Shou-Chung, namely, your father, has requested that from this day forward until the day of his passing, that you provide a monthly stipend in the amount of NT\$30,000 for the purpose of caretaking. Do you have any opinions or thoughts on the petition at hand, sir?"

"Are you fucking demented?\*" Ignoring the judge's question, Tung Pao-Chu posed this question directly to his father in an angry outburst. "Isn't what I already give you more than enough?\*"

"That little pittance is a fucking joke."\*

"Both of you...please use Chinese to communicate," The judge said, made uncomfortable by the raw emotions on display. "The stenographer can't make a record for the court otherwise."

"Did you start drinking again? Or are you just losing big at Mah-jong?\*" Pao-Chu had hardly given his father any time to respond before resuming his offense. "Are you still losing massive wads of cash to that group of losers? You're an embarrassment."\*

"You're so immature. All you ever do is bitch and moan at the slightest request for just a tiny amount of money. What's the damned difference between you and that damned *Paylang* (Han) over there?\*"

"Hey. The both of you. If you have something to say, please talk it out, but can you use Chinese, please?"

"Why don't you just fucking drink yourself to death already?" Pao-Chu finally switched over to speaking in Chinese.

"Who's to say you won't kick the bucket first?" Shou-Chung was frothing at the corners of his mouth like a rabid dog.

"OK. Stop it, now! I don't want you using Chinese in this court to abuse each other either. Starting from this moment, I'm going to ask questions of you one at a time, and you will answer me in turn." The judge shook her head in disappointment. "To the defendant before me, Tung Pao-Chu: what kind of work are you engaged in professionally? About how much would you say you earn in monthly income?"

"He's a lawyer. He certainly has enough money." Shou-Chung butted in.

"Why don't you shut up? The judge wasn't asking you...."

"OK! Stop! The judge stared at Pao-Chu. With discerning eyes, she looked at this man wearing a beige polo shirt, with tousled salt-and-pepper hair, and a five o'clock shadow on his face. "The defendant is a lawyer?"

Pao-Chu gave a reluctant reply, almost embarrassed at his having been outed. "I'm a public defender."

"For which court?"



“The High Court.”

“And how long have you been working there?”

“Over twenty years.”

After she put Pao-Chu’s professional record together in her mind, she then asked him directly, “What’s your opinion on the petitioner’s claim?”

“According to Article 1118-1 of the Civil Code, I request an exemption from the obligation to provide support.” Pao-Chu said this coldly and emotionlessly as he pointed to his father, continuing, “This asshole here was sitting in a prison cell nearly the whole time I was a young kid. He used any money he earned on booze, and never took care of his family.”

Shou-Chung didn’t show any sign of shame or remorse at his son’s statement. Instead, he wore an expression of indifference, and looked off in another direction, avoiding direct eye contact with either his son or the judge.

The judge let out a loud sigh. After gathering the basic facts, she requested both parties try to resolve things peacefully through mediation, set a further court date, then banged her gavel and sent them home.

As Tung Pao-Chu stepped outside the Keelung District Courthouse doors, a light rain was gently floating down, and the temperature had dropped a bit. He was thinking about the nearby night market that was about to open for the evening. The hordes of people wouldn’t be out just yet. He thought about how he ought to go eat something to warm up his belly before heading back to Taipei. The “Li-Yeh’s Spicy Stinky Tofu” stand across from the local Changhua Bank branch would be a good starting point if he wanted to peruse the market stalls.

“Did you drive here?”\* Shou-Chung appeared behind his son. His tone, though not as sharp as it was in the courtroom, still had a tinge of condescension and an expectation of filial obedience.

Pao-Chu let out a small sigh. “Where are you trying to go?”\*

“Back home. Are you still driving around in that beat-up piece of junk? For all that learning you did, it doesn’t seem to have done you any good, car-wise.”\*

Pao-Chu just wasn’t willing to continue sparring with his father and swallowed his retort.

Pao-Chu set off along the Tai-2 Provincial Highway, the two-lane road snaking along the coastline and moving onwards toward and beyond Heping Island. The old apartments with their grimy tile walls that dotted the roadside had taken a constant beating from the ocean winds and awful weather. The buildings hadn’t seemed to have changed in the thirty-plus years since he had picked up and left. It all seemed like it would stay this way forever, with the narrow coastal highway that wormed its way around like a centipede adding to the depression of the misty atmosphere.

Right as he turned in towards Zhengbin Fishing Port, buildings painted in a rainbow of different colors burst into his line of sight. Rubbernecking at this eyesore, Pao-Chu nearly hit a group of tourists who were in the middle a crosswalk attempting to take photos of this “tourist site.”

“Holy Matsu!” Pao-Chu shouted out in surprise.

“They ought to paint the other side with some colors used in those houses over in the Mediterranean. Maybe they can throw in a couple coffee shops for good measure.”\* Shou-Chung said coldly.

## 5

The Hai-Pin Housing Complex was completed in 1995. To make it easier for the Executive Yuan to manage, the allotments for apartment units were split between Indigenous and Han Taiwanese. The lower sections of the complex, closer to the ocean, were handed out to people of Han descent (this was considered the lower settlement back in the day), while the Indigenous residents were situated up at the top of the hill (the old middle and upper settlements).

The apartments in the upper half were built around an open plaza, with a “Kihaw Tribal Center” on the east side for daily activities and whatnot. It was also, of course, used as the venue for holding the tribal community’s harvest celebration each July.

Shou-Chung’s home was situated mid-level. There was a narrow mountain path outside his door. Since he couldn’t find a parking space, Pao-Chu just kept creeping up the road, towards the top of the hill, where he eventually found a space over by the plaza.

He had just cut the engine when a middle-aged man walked over, a smile spread wide over his face. He was wearing a sports jacket with the zipper half pulled up. A policeman’s uniform showed through the gap in the jacket, as well as the man’s slightly pudgy stomach. As soon as he spotted both Tung father and son, he waved over to them with a warm welcome, one hand holding a beer bottle and the other, a takeout container with soy-braised fishcakes and veggies.

“Looh, and the both of them, to boot. Aiyee...It’s Takara.”\*

Takara was Pao-Chu’s childhood nickname; it came from the Japanese reading for the first character in his name, meaning “treasure”. Because of the influence of Japanese colonization, many Indigenous Taiwanese elders still spoke Japanese. The Amis language was no exception when it came to Japanese loan words. Even though there were still friends who knew this nickname of his, Pao-Chu wasn’t particularly fond of it.

Pao-Chu looked in the direction the man was pointing and saw a group of people eating and drinking around a banged-up card table by the entrance to one of the complex towers. The tabletop was covered in beer bottles, aluminum cans, and little snack packets. Pao-Chu knew very well what was going on over there, and didn’t want any part of it. He waved a hand in weak objection, “Maybe next time, Anaw.”

Anaw pressed: “But we haven’t seen you in forever. You should come sit down for a sec.”\*

Shou-Chung turned towards Pao-Chu and feigned a whisper, “Oh, don’t go. If you do, they might mistake you for their friend.”\*

Pao-Chu forced a smile and reluctantly followed his father toward the table to maintain a semblance of amity.

Spirits were high around the table, everyone laughing and smiling, joking and jovial.

As Pao-Chu approached the group, he recognized two of their number from his childhood.

One was Cheng Feng-Chun, sitting in the middle; his Amis name was Kaniw. He was holding his two-year-old daughter on his knee, all the while being very animated in telling a rendition of a lowbrow sexual joke. He was getting close to 50, short and a little soft around the edges. He had a loud voice and a sharp but good-natured look in his eye. Long years of exposure to wind and rain had carved out gorges both deep and shallow in his skin, but this didn't detract from any of his vigor.

Peng Cheng-Min was sitting next to Cheng Feng-Chun. Cheng-Min's Amis name was Lekal. He almost seemed to be the complete opposite of Kaniw, with his seafarer's temperament, pitch-dark skin, and upright, muscular frame. He had a fearsome air about him. A dirty bandana on his head, a tight t-shirt, and denim shorts accentuated his look of silent aggression.

Anaw plopped down the soy braised snacks and alcohol onto the table as everyone welcomed the newcomers. Shou-Chung promptly sat himself down without waiting for an invitation. By contrast, Pao-Chu stood off to the side and tried to stay inconspicuous.

"Anaw, Doesn't it constitute malfeasance if you're drinking on the job?" Cheng Feng-Chun asked facetiously.

Anaw pulled up the zipper on his jacket and pretended to be dizzy with intoxication. "What malfeasance? You're deranged. God says we're all alcoholics."

Cheng Fung-Chun put his hands together as if in prayer. "Well, no wonder you're drunk every day."

A giant wave of laughter consumed the table. Shou-Chung nonchalantly picked up a beer bottle and drank nearly the whole thing in one continuous gulp.

"The old captain can't be swayed."\* Cheng Fung-Chun poked fun at his elder.

Shou-Chung gave him a sideways glance that carried a hint of disdain. "First mate."\*

Peng Cheng-Min's expression morphed. Cheng Fung-Chun gave a slight smile, raised the shot glasses held in his hands in an offering of peace.

Anaw wanted to help resolve the matter, so he pointed at Cheng Fung-Chun and said, "Kaniw came back from his trip fully loaded."\*

"The machinery did the work."\* Shou-Chung didn't seem to have shifted from his contempt.

The air was filled with awkwardness, but Fung-Chun shook his head indifferently. He didn't want to lower himself to Shou-Chung's level. Instead, he turned towards Pao-Chu.

"Takara, long time no see. Did you finally decide to come home and try being a fisherman?"\* Hearing the sarcasm, the whole table laughed.

"I'm not suited for that kind of work," Pao-Chu said with a forced smile.

"Oh, and what kind of work is that?"\* Fung-Chun asked.

"It's too taxing. I'm not as...fierce."

Fung-Chun pointed to a round stool over to the side. "Come. Sit for a bit."\*

"I have to get going soon. I have something to take care of."

"Can you still speak our language?"\* Peng Cheng-Min suddenly asked. His question wiped away the grin from Pao-Chu's face.

"Depends on the situation." Pao-Chu gave up on pretending. His face seemed to become sterner.

Peng Cheng-Min licked his lips, and rudely hocked a giant wad to one side. He wanted to continue talking. Tung Shou-Chung suddenly stood up, grabbed a bottle of beer from the table and began to walk away. Seeing his opportunity, Pao-Chu turned to leave, leaving the tense atmosphere around the table.

Pao-Chu got back to his clunker of a car and realized that the fog and mist had intensified. He knew that rain would soon begin to silently and continuously pelt this sad stretch of hillside. Not wanting to wait around any longer, he turned the engine over.

This place and its people made him feel an incomparable sorrow.

He couldn't have foreseen that this was the last time he'd ever see Cheng Fung-Chun.

## 7

The elevators in this luxury apartment complex were spacious and pristine.

Lien Chin-Ping looked closely at himself in the elevator mirror, patting his drunk self on the cheeks and passing his fingers over his crew-cut hair. He looked noble, upright and strong, well-proportioned. Though he was just wearing a plain shirt and jeans, he still gave off a sense of dignified respect.

Lien Chin-Ping patted at his face, trying to chase away the look of drunkenness, and then he looked down at his wristwatch. In all his twenty-five years, he hardly ever came back so late. It was only because he had just graduated from his pre-law program that his father, Lien Cheng-Yi, made an exception and let him go out for some "nightlife," as he put it.

"It's just a normal nightclub. Nothing special." He'd tried to explain to his father.

"There are 'normal' nightclubs?"

"Well, it's not a gay bar or a place for call girls."

Lien Cheng-Yi looked at his son with doubt and suspicion in his eyes. Chin-Ping didn't need to be told twice when he saw that look of reproach in his father's eyes. As a judge of nearly thirty years, his father undoubtedly knew what kind of business these places were conducting, but his own brusqueness when talking about them seemed to have not the slightest effect on his son.

"I went with my law school classmates. But they're all bookworms. How crazy could it have been?" Chin-Ping kept explaining.

Lien Cheng-Yi kept his silence. He knew exactly what kinds of games the youth of today were up to. All he could do was just surmise and let his thoughts run wild. When you were a professional judge, just being well-acquainted with the law was the most basic of requirements. A judge's duty was to "know how to use the law." This meant that "knowing the facts" took precedence over "use of the law." For Cheng-Yi, these societal matters were always something he had to know extremely well.

Yet society was constantly changing in innumerable ways, and the only way to unravel multiple tangled leads was to rely on the most thorough thinking and a stubborn commitment to fairness and justice. Over several years, Lien Cheng-Yi's demands on his own sense of jurisprudential quality allowed him to move as free as a cloud within the legal world. Having been a sitting judge in the criminal court section of the Supreme Court for nearly a decade, he'd dealt with the most bizarre of cases. Seeing through the schemes of the most cunning of defendants was business as usual; nothing could get past him. Toward his son, by contrast, he felt more confidence than worry.

Standing at his front door, Chin-Ping fished around for his house keys from deep in his bookbag. All of a sudden, the inner door opened up and his father was behind the outer door screen, waiting and staring at his son. He was wearing upscale lounge wear and a stalwart expression on his face. He had deep creases that embossed the corners of his lips. Even if he had smiled, it wouldn't have taken away from his grave expression.

"Dad...you're still up?"

Lien Cheng-Yi opened the outer door for his son, looking at his son's nearly-bald head. He didn't say a word.

"My classmates said we'd have to buzz it all off sooner or later...I just..."

Lien Cheng-Yi smelled a wave of something and doubt quickly spread out on his face. "Are you drunk?"

"No."

"You should avoid going to those places from now on. You'll be a judge eventually." Lien Cheng-Yi looked at his wristwatch. "It's almost eleven. Come back home earlier next time."

Chin-Ping nodded in deference to his father and quickly slipped off to his bedroom.

## 8

Chin-Ping's bedroom was spacious. Sports posters and tchotchkes lay scattered around, while his desk and bookshelves were piled up with an overflow of books, documents, and all manner of papers. Though if someone were to have walked in and said he wasn't organized, they at least wouldn't call him a slob. Instead, they'd probably say the room felt "very lived in."

He sat by the edge of his writing desk, stacked high with books, and composed himself. He hadn't yet come down from the euphoria of his crazy night out with his study group. Before, when he was in law-school, he often heard interesting rumors and tales from senior classmates working

on their legal training. Finally, he had had his own firsthand experience, but it would be something unforgettable.

Even though there are exams in his one month's legal training, it honestly wasn't all that difficult. The legal training reminded them of their university lifestyles which allowed these would-be lawyers to let loose and feel uninhibited. They felt free for once. It was a joyful coming-of-age farewell to their years of youth.

For Tai-Da graduates like Chin-Ping who had passed both the strenuous tests for the lawyer and judge/prosecutor tracks, following in his father's footsteps by becoming a judge was a predestined life-track decided long ago. Legal training was just a matter of obtaining one's licenses to practice law. It was also the last chance for a respite before moving on to the completion of a master's thesis, and then eventual compulsory military service.

One could say it was the high point of his legal training. The only thing that made him brood was that he wasn't brave enough to ask Li Yi-Jung to go out dancing with him.

Li Yi-Jung was the daughter of one of his father's colleagues. She was the same age as Chin-Ping. Like Chin-Ping, she was dual-tracked to become either a lawyer or a judgeship at National Cheng-Chi University. She easily passed her exams to get into National Taiwan University's law studies graduate school. Chin-Ping was in the criminal law track, while Yi-Jung was studying economic law.

Chin-Ping would have fallen in love with Li Yi-Jung just on her good looks and charming demeanor alone, even if his father hadn't introduced them. He made sure to apply for the same training prep coursework she did, just so he could get closer. The two of them had chatted tonight, their conversation loose and enjoyable. Chin-Ping felt he could take it a little further.

Following a wonderful wave of fantasizing, Chin-Ping felt a chill as the alcohol wore off. The January damp had penetrated the window and diffused throughout the room. As he pulled off his clothes and prepared to take a shower, he flipped on the TV like he always did. After the screen buzzed to life, a breaking news story caught his attention.

"This evening at just a little past seven o'clock, there was a murder at the Hai-pin Mansions near Heping Island in Keelung. A twenty-some year-old Indonesian laborer by the name of Abdul-Adl, his motive still unclear, charged into the home of boat captain Cheng Fung-Chun, armed with a knife, killing him and two family members, including Cheng's two-year old daughter.

What was more terrifying was that following the murders, the suspect seemed to be confident and felt justified in his devious deed. He held onto the blade and, covered from head to toe in his victims' blood, strolled on casually through the Heping Island Tourists Fish Market, causing a stir and leading to many police reports from frightened bystanders and onlookers. Fortunately, everyone in the market worked together to pin him down to the ground. The police, who arrived later, then cuffed the suspect and took him into custody...."

In the hazy feed on the TV monitor, a short, gaunt man wearing a red football jersey was shown wobbling this way and that as he walked along the roadside. Chin-Ping looked more closely, but he couldn't recognize the suspect's weapon from the footage or see the details of the blood spatters on the man's clothes.

“The friends and family of the deceased were questioned, and a crowd has formed outside the police station. They’re demanding that the killer show his face and let them handle him. The atmosphere at this currently unfolding scene is extremely unstable. The head of the Hai-pin police dispatch station came out to reason with the crowd, and only then did those gathered begin to calm down. He said the police were currently working through the night investigating leads, and they hoped to identify the killer’s motives as soon as possible.”

On the news screen, an agitated Peng Cheng-Min was waving a baseball bat around and shouting into the camera. A group of people at his side began shoving the cops who were blocking the dispatch station entrance, and the scene quickly turned chaotic.

Although Chin-Ping, as a specialist in criminal law, always paid particular attention to big-name murder cases, tonight he felt too beat to continue watching the story. He turned off the TV, slung a towel over his shoulder and walked exhaustedly towards the bathroom.

## 9

At night, the Bo'ai Special Zone around Taiwan's government buildings was utterly quiet. Cylinders of razor wire and sawhorse barricades, set up five days in advance of the presidential election, sat in a corner outside the glow of the streetlights. In tonight's rainy, frigid cold front, soldiers silently sitting in a row had their gazes lowered.

A black government car drove away from the Ministry of Justice building and turned from Chong-ch'ing South Road onto Ketagalan Boulevard. Its destination was the giant office building that headquartered the ruling party.

The passenger was none other than the head of the Ministry of Justice, Chen Ching-Hsueh. She looked out towards the fleeting streetlights of this part of Taipei and reflexively smoothed her hair to make herself look more presentable. Though she was nearly fifty, the tailored pantsuit she was wearing fit well and showed off her figure. A light application of makeup hadn't overly concealed her age, but suited her calm nature. Her elegant demeanor helped her pull off a perfect balance between gentility and authority.

The recipient of a PhD in human rights law from the University of Hamburg in Germany, Chen had been motivated by a sense of justice and compassion since she was a little girl. She began participating in social movements in high school, confirming her interest in law. In the stodgy, politically conservative 90's, her high-profile words and actions had brought no shortage of trouble, but she defused all of it by deploying great political skill.

More than a year ago, not long after she assumed office, more than fourteen homicides occurred in Taiwan within a month, including three high-profile dismemberment cases that happened within a span of just twelve days. Wanting to quickly achieve a policy consensus, President Sung Cheng-Wu had spent the night in conference with the ministers of Interior, Justice, Health and Welfare, and the National Police Agency in order to understand the causes and finalize a policy response.

Aware of the growing public outcry, most of the attendees at that meeting were desperate to push through new criminal regulations. However, Chen Ching-Hsueh stood alone.

She believed these murder cases were independent of each other. There didn't seem to be any correlation between them, nor did she believe there were any copycat killers. There weren't any loopholes in the current laws on the books that couldn't be patched up. Provided that she really wanted to rashly change the legal system just for the sake of these sporadic cases, not only were they bereft of any substantial meaning, but they would also have ruined the overall planning of the mental health laws. Moreover, Ministry of Justice reports on trends in criminal behavior over the past decade indicated that crime rates, the number of criminals, and even the number of homicide cases in Taiwan were all trending downward.

"Public opinion is by nature vague and irrational, and it fundamentally conflicts with the end goal of pursuing human rights through legal means." Chen Ching-Hsueh said in an attempt to halt the President. "The government needs to hold firm and have a clear and consistent position, otherwise, the backlash in public opinion will become a problem for you sooner or later,"

The development of subsequent events was just as Chen Ching-Hsueh had predicted.... She had tried to warn them.... After several official speeches, the irrational discussions surrounding these cases gradually relaxed and subsided.

But everything was happening too close to the presidential election. They had no choice but to consider the president's image and the court of public opinion.

There was little more than a week left before the January election. In the tightly see-sawing opinion polls, this murder case, as well as the current 39 inmates on death row would doubtlessly be used as a cudgel to beat down the President's election prospects, especially when the murderer was an escaped migrant worker in a Taiwanese fishing fleet. The opposition party could take the part of migrant workers to attack the president and his party on the regulation of the fishing industry or new immigration policies. The level of complexity was difficult to imagine.

Several former presidents had ordered the execution of thirty prisoners by firing squad. President During Sung Cheng-Wu's nearly four years in office, he had only ever ordered one. It was something that had occurred prior to Chen Ching-Hsueh's taking office. President Sung was striving to gain international visibility and recognition. His administration was trying very hard to conform to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Although...with the massive pressure of the election going on, just how long could he last?

"Murder depends on timing." This fallacy appeared in Chen Ching-Hsueh's mind. The official's car had just passed by the sentry box at the entrance to the multi-storied party headquarters. They kept driving down into the basement parking lot of the complex.



When Chen Ching-Hsueh walked into the conference room, President Sung was already seated, awaiting her arrival. The president's chief campaign advisor, Chiang Te-Jen, was standing next to the President.

Though he was visibly tired, the President's tranquil expression seemed to hide a question. "Should we continue to implement the death penalty? What do you think is the right choice here?"

"We're mainly dealing with public opinion," Chiang Te-Jen added as he faced Chen Ching-Hsueh. "The election's already entering the home stretch."

Chiang Te-Jen had thick eyebrows and wide eyes. He had an grandiose bearing on others, but many years of trickery as well as excessive alcoholism had rendered him as constantly casting an overcast demeanor with a gloomy pall all about him. Chen Ching-Hsueh had never once appreciated his methods. All Chiang ever cared about was winning at all costs. He never let things like a conscience or any integral morals or principles get in his way. And she knew it. However, she had to admit that Chiang Te-Jen had a knack for turning crises into opportunities.

"Sir, if every murder forced us to follow public opinion and revise our criminal code, what would be the point of our country bothering to sign the Second International Convention on Civil and Political Rights?" Ching-Hsueh maintained her stance.

"The present reality is that the people don't have a consensus. The death penalty is both reasonable and legal. Those against abolishment still account for the majority. This is what we call democracy. At this juncture, no ordinary citizen could tell you what the Second Conventions say, much less care about it." Te-Jen replied.

"Whether the death penalty is kept or abolished isn't a matter of democracy; it's a human rights issue, an issue of constitutional governance. People could be executed every single day of the year, and so doubtlessly, the courts should get rid of trials altogether and just shoot 'em, right?"

"An issue of constitutional governance? The grand justices have long ago expressed their intent on this topic. The death penalty doesn't contravene the constitution by any means."

"The grand justices' decision was a refusal to entertain the case, not an explanation of or verdict on its constitutionality. Even if obsolete laws were once considered constitutional, the grand justices would also be making a mistake."

"Elections aren't a matter of learning. With that position of yours, you might...." Chiang Te-Jen chose his next words carefully. "I'll have to be quite blunt. This would have much to do with the fate of your job position."

"I just need a statement." Sung Cheng-Wu lifted his hand in a gesture for Chiang to slow down. "Madame Minister, at this time, I need to be a bit more realistic about the current state of things."

Chiang Te-Jen's apprehensions weren't incorrect. Unless Chen Ching-Hsueh could think of one or two win-win situations, complete and perfect, Sung wouldn't trust Chen unconditionally, what with all the headwinds and stormy seas ahead of him. Carrying out an execution also depended on the timing. Ching-Hsueh kept mulling this thought in her head over and over again.

“You have to maintain a consistent viewpoint. You have to jealously guard the position of the Two Conventions and human rights, but you don’t need to be so forceful or go to the extreme end of abolishing the death penalty.” Ching-Hsueh answered the President.

“Madame Minister, what is the difference between this position and the previous one?” Chiang Te-Jen called her reply into question.

Chen Ching-Hsueh pulled a sheet of paper from out of her briefcase and handed it over to the President.

“These are the names of the thirty-nine current inmates sitting on death row. Among them, thirty-two are currently seeking legal redress. According to the current ‘Review on the Execution Points of Death Penalty Cases,’ the executions ought not to be carried out, sir. As for the other seven, we can just say publicly that they’ve already retrieved their relevant certificates, and then review their cases as soon as possible.”

“But just how effective would these stalling tactics be?” Chiang Te-Jen asked with incredulity.

“The Legislative Yuan amended the ‘Prison Execution Act’ just this month. The Ministry of Justice has renewed deliberations on amending the ‘Death Penalty Execution Rules.’” Ching-Hsueh went on the attack. “Now that the Legislative Yuan believes that the laws and regulations are unreasonable and outdated, the government shouldn’t continue to pursue the death penalty when they haven’t even established a new system. Does the Legislative Yuan not represent the people’s will? This is our legal high ground.”

Chiang Te-Jen sat with his hands folded together in front of his solar plexis as if deep in thought, but he couldn’t find a better counterpoint.

“Furthermore, I recommend that you ought to use a uniform name when referencing this latest murder case. At the moment, most of the media are calling it the ‘family massacre case.’ To be honest, it’s mind-numbingly horrific.” Chen Ching-Hsueh once again displayed her skills for careful reflection. “I believe it would be best to use a more neutral name for the murders, which would avoid creating a specific reference or a connotation, the way terms like ‘Peace Island’ and ‘migrant workers’ do.”

Sung Cheng-Wu nodded in resolute agreement.

Ching-Hsueh moved to her conclusion. “We could call it the Hai-pin Case. The name is neutral, and the Hai-pin Mansions aren’t a well-known location. Few could make an emotional connection. The sense of danger will be lower.”

Sung assented, and Chiang Te-Jen did not try to argue.

Ching-Hsueh knew that her strategy of advancing through retreating had hit its mark, and she silently sighed in relief. Even though the run-up to the election was perilous and fraught with all sorts of surprises, at least she could fight for more of others’ trust in herself.

Ching-Hsueh saw the abolishment of the death penalty as her life’s ambition. However, she wasn’t doing it to win fame for herself. Several people had criticized her idealism, but she thought that abolishment wasn’t impossible. It was just a matter of timing and politics.

As long as Sung Cheng-Wu was re-elected, she would still have her position and her reforms could continue without interruption.

## 11

Even though the last third of August bordered on autumn, the sweltering heat of summer persisted. Lien Chin-Ping's hair was buzzed short, and he was dressed in a substitute military service uniform. As he stood in the stairwell inside the offices of the criminal division of the high court, looking outside at the devilishly scorching sunlight, it seemed as if it were stretching back eons into the past.

He thought back to a month prior, when he was still in his substitute military training. Like today, he was placed in a completely alien environment. Apart from feeling a sense deep down that things could change, most of his thoughts were focused on the excitement of the unknown challenges that awaited him.

After passing his master's thesis defense, he didn't have enough time to prepare for this year's judicial training track, so he opted to take care of his compulsory military service first. In order to smooth over the path for his son to get into next year's judicial track after he completed his military training, Chin-Ping's father had to call in a few favors and asked for the military service division of the district office to prioritize his son's squad by giving them a cushy posting.

The flat-footed Chin-Ping was classified as an alternative service soldier. He only needed to undergo a month of basic training at Camp Cheng-Kung before he could leave and make a speedy entrance into government service soon after due to his professional expertise.

It had already been two weeks since Chin-Ping was given a placement at the Public Defender's Office of the High Court. Even though he qualified as a lawyer and as a judicial officer, he still hadn't received practical vocational training for the position, and had no internship experience, so it went without saying that he couldn't just start picking up court cases. His daily work routine only went as far as keeping the office environs neat and tidy, and organizing official documents and giving a hand with various odd jobs.

Since he was a prospective judge, his colleagues very rarely gave him any overly complicated work. After all, who's to say he wouldn't end up ordering them around as their superior someday? The thing was, Chin-Ping felt that even this was kind of an excessive courtesy. He often felt constrained by everyone else's circumspection.

One public defender, Brother Pao, wasn't like the rest of them at all. Tung Pao-Chu's first question to him was: "What kind of disability did you have that you were able to do alternative service?"

"Is your surname Lien? Are you related to Lien Chan by chance? If you are, it'll be a hundred times less of a struggle for you." This was the second thing he said.

And then came the third thing: "I'll call you *lian wu* from now on. It's easier to remember the fruit."

After two weeks, Lien Chin-Ping had no problem with this rude, middle-aged man. He even began to look forward to the times when he could listen to him talk shit.

The work day was coming to an end. Tung Pao-Chu had some free time, and he stood by the window looking out towards the courtyard next to the Judicial Building. He laughed a bit strangely. "Did you know that the Japanese used to use that stretch over there as an execution ground?"

Chin-Ping shook his head. He wasn't sure why Pao-Chu suddenly brought up the topic.

The Judicial Building was built when Taiwan was a Japanese colony. At the time, it served as both the national and local court, as well as the prosecutor's office. Afterwards, Japan had lost the War in the Pacific and the Chinese Nationalists had moved into Taiwan, it had been changed into the Judicial Yuan that we know of today. The Criminal Division of the High Court, situated over on Bo-Ai Road, wasn't built until 1968. The building leaned against the Judicial Building. The small space hemmed in by the two buildings was what Pao-Chu was pointing at – his "execution ground."

This legend wasn't just something Tung Pao-Chu had cooked up out of thin air. After all, it was a historic building that was once used as a place for carrying out criminal trials, as well as death sentences. It wasn't so surprising that there would be legends concocted around this and other places.

"On many a night when I had to stay late and do overtime, I heard a gunshot coming from over the courtyard at around midnight." Pao-Chu said ominously.

"That's a load of bull...Don't listen to his nonsense," said Lin Fang-Yu, the secretary. She absolutely couldn't stand how her boss just used his age as a crutch to get anything he wanted.

"I swear, I heard it! Honest to God!" Pao-Chu was trying to fake sincerity.

"You've never worked a second of overtime in your life." Lin Fang-Yu buried her head in her dossier. She didn't even bother to look up from the pages.

A sly smile spread across Pao-Chu's face. "The last time I told a ghost story, Fang-Yu couldn't be convinced to stay late for nearly a week. Her boyfriend thought she'd have to switch jobs."

"Tung Pao-Chu, just what kind of nonsense are talking?"

"Oh, that's right, you don't have a boyfriend."

"You're an old, washed-out bachelor, and you have the nerve to criticize me." She flung an official document at Pao-Chu's face, and he almost fell out of his chair.

Chin-Ping watched the two trading jabs. He wasn't sure if he should leave to fetch some coffee or intervene or what.

Pao-Chu looked at his watch, packed up his personal belongings and headed towards the door. He happily strode out, waving a hand in sincere goodbye as he left them with piles of work.

"Don't stay too late. Remember: Execution ground. Ka-pow!" Tung Pao-Chu shot them a wink as he kept walking. "I'm gonna have some fun tonight.... I'm goin' on a date. Bye-bye!"

Chin-Ping smiled awkwardly at Lin Fang-Yu as he heard Pao-Chu's footsteps gradually disappear down the hallway corridor.