

THE DARK BACKWARD

下一個天亮

People will forever struggle with the issues of their day and these struggles will forever be mined for narrative themes.

This story of one small family encapsulates the process by which Taiwan has become the country it is today.

The family is not a large and illustrious one, but however few they are in number, they have nonetheless found themselves subject to the very same turning gears of history that would define their era. Their struggles and resistance reveal the transformation of Taiwan over the seven decades since the end of Japanese rule. There is a story that touches upon the February 28 Incident of 1948, the White Terror, the Formosa Magazine Incident, the White Lily student movement and the women's, Aboriginal and immigrant rights movements, as well as the grass roots opposition to construction of the Meinong Reservoir, bullying in schools, the forced removal of the residents of Lesheng Village and the construction of the CPC petrochemical plant. The story demonstrates how individuals, fighting for what is right, have stood up to the government and molded what Taiwan has become today.

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By Hsu Chia-Tse. Translated by Jonathan Barnard.

Chapter 13

The Silent Movie

The mother of young Y would often wake up in tears. In her dreams her child had something to say, but every time she tried to hear what it was, the scene would somehow rewind or fast forward, or was obscured by other images. It was as if she was being forced to watch a silent movie. She didn't know what was wrong with the world that it had become so easy for people to inflict harm on others—as easy for them as squashing an ant on a table. What had happened to those boys who had victimized her son? Did they eat well? Did they sleep well? Were they in the least bit shamed by their own actions? Or were they searching for their next victim? Those unanswered questions were like rocks tossed at her from all directions. Yet she still had to get through the day. She may have lost a child, but she still had a family to look after.

Under the stress of their son's death, her husband had gone almost entirely deaf. Yet the couple had developed a deep understanding of each other after living together for decades and so she could still care for him with love and consideration. But who would care for her? She would have liked to have gone blind herself, so that she wouldn't see all that was unjust in the world. She wished she couldn't smell the scent peculiar to her son's room, so that it would no longer cause her such pain. If she were mute then the media wouldn't press her to keep facing the loss of her son. In her dreams she and her husband were removed of all their senses. She watched soundless images projected three-dimensionally around her. It was as if events her son had related to her had been edited into a film. In it, he tried to run from the other children, who were giants. They scooped him up as if he were an insect and put him down again. He lay on the ground, twitching for a moment, before going still.

Sunrise. A new day started. She woke her young son who was lazing in bed. Y's bedding was folded up neatly. She never needed to worry about him. The first thing he would do when he got up was fold up his blanket. Her younger son would be more likely to mess up a neatly made bed. Whenever she asked him to follow the example of her older brother, he would reply: 'Don't we have to sleep every day, anyway? If I straighten it up now, it will just get messy tonight.'

She never knew how to answer that. But now she could only wish that Y's bed were a mess. She could imagine Y running home for dinner in the day's last light.

'Mama! Mama! I'm home,' he would shout when he saw her in the distance. The memory of those daily moments was what hurt the most now. Sometimes she felt weak at the sight of the other children, including her youngest son coming home. She felt sharp pains of nervous anticipation. She was waiting for him to come back to her.

'Mama! Mama! I'm here!'

Those chirping birds had returned to their nests in the treetops, but Y was gone forever.

So the days passed. One after the next.

In the morning she would eat breakfast with her husband. He never spoke. He had always been like that, honest and unassuming, since the day they first met. He devoted all his energy to meeting the needs of the household, toiling at his farm work as the seasons demanded. He never interfered much with other matters and agreed to all his wife's decisions. She recalled carrying Y on her back down to the fields. She feared that if she laid him down one of the many stray dogs in the village might carry him off. By carrying him on her back she could hear him breathing, crying, snoring. It gave her peace. Sometimes she would speak to him and she could feel him snuggle his face into her back as he listened. Before long, he was learning to walk and then he could run. Next came the questions:

'Mama, flower? Flower?'

'Why is the sky blue?'

'Why do bats hang upside down?'

'When will the rice in the fields be harvested?'

'When will I grow up?'

'Why do my classmates laugh at me?'

'Why do they bully me?'

Some questions she could answer, others were her own. Why does my child have a boy's body but act like a girl? Why was it that the other boys played soldiers and cops and robbers, while her son preferred to play house with the girls? Why couldn't those bullies find something better to do, instead of constantly hassling her son?

She decided to let those unanswered question alone, accepting that things were the way they were fated to be. But what was she to do about her son being bullied at school? She tried telling him that he had to start by changing himself. She didn't understand much about it, but rules of conduct ought to be the same everywhere. If her son started arguing with the neighbours' kids, she would assume fault with her son first, comforting him only once they were home. Her child doused himself in everything she said. Yet the more proper his behaviour, the more naughty the other kids, like cats toying with a mouse, they would tease him and provoke him to tears.

'Why do they laugh and bully me?' He asked her again.

This time she did not evade the question. She knew that her husband would offer no suggestions, so she went to school herself and asked the teacher. 'The students are just making mischief,' the teacher responded. 'They don't mean him any harm. But the problem is just... you know, this kind of child easily attracts attention. Maybe you ought to consider sending him to a psychiatrist. We're not saying he has a problem, but just that from a psychological standpoint he could use a little help. Of course, our school should talk to the other children to prevent this kind of thing from happening again.'

When she got home, she tried to comfort him: 'Your teacher said that your classmates are just having some fun with you.'

'I don't like it.'

'Then just keep your distance.'

'It doesn't matter how much distance I try to put between us, they come after me. Ma, please, just let me stay at home?'

'Silly child, what are you saying? You go to school to learn how to become independent. If you can't handle

situations like this now on your own, then who is going to help resolve them in the future? Mama can go to school and talk to the teacher on occasion, but I have to work. I can't always be going to school to protect you!

It wasn't helping, she knew that. But how was she supposed to solve it? She'd just thrown it all back onto her son.

He nodded obediently.

At night, she mentioned the teacher's suggestions to her husband. True to form, he had little to say: 'Whatever you think is right.'

She called to make an appointment with a doctor and one Wednesday she took her child out of school for the day. They boarded a bus to go to a large hospital in another town. She talked to the doctor. She said that she didn't think there was anything wrong with her son. His mannerisms were a bit effeminate, but that could all change. It was just that some of her neighbours and his teacher said she should come to see him. She poured out her heart to the doctor, who responded politely:

'There is nothing wrong with the child's psychological state. He is very clear about his situation. On the other hand, if you as parents are uncertain, that might affect the child. If possible, come with your husband next time. Under the circumstances, a child will only be strong if the parents stand behind him. Parents serve as a child's support system, so if you and your husband can come in together for some family therapy, then you'll have a better understanding of your child and be better able to help him cope with the views of the outside world.'

After scheduling their next appointment, she took her son by the hand and left. There was a movie theatre near the hospital. The harsh summer sun pushed them into its shadowy depths. The toothy smiles of the movie stars seemed to beckon them. She bought tickets. The cinema was largely empty on weekdays. The audience sat in scattered groups. Her son concentrated on eating snacks while they waited for the film to start. The film was about a man who wanted to become actor. When not acting, he was hired as a debt collector, but in the end it was all an act and he had to flee for his life. Early in the film her son was laughing, but during the chase scenes, he grabbed her hand and wouldn't let go. At the end of the film, the character seemed to be playing himself on stage and acting in real life and in the process he helped the police crack the case. Whether on stage or off, he was the king of comedy.

The film let out and they boarded the bus to go back home. 'Ma, let's go back to the doctor tomorrow. I don't want to go back to school.'

'Silly boy! We can't go see the doctor every day.'

'What about if I came down with the 'flu and needed to stay in the hospital?'

'You don't need to go into hospital for the 'flu.'

'What if I was in a car accident and I broke some bones?'

'In that case you would have to get a cast and then you could go to school in a wheelchair or with crutches.'

'What if...'

'Okay, enough of this foolishness.'

Time sped on and her son started junior high school. They both hoped for a new start, that things would get better. Even the doctor thought that it might be so. The boy had a new book bag, a new uniform, new shoes and a new belt.

Everything was new, but his classmates were the same. The same nightmare repeated, a sequel to an earlier film. But to increase their hold over the audience, the baddies had learned new techniques. They used to attack just with words. Now things were more physical. And the more her child came home to her in tears, the more impotent she felt. Once again she went to the school and asked for help from the boy's teacher. She did everything she could think of apart from kneel in front of the other children and beg them to stop. Her son was no different from them. He could speak and play. Sometimes he would make her mad but more often he would make her laugh. She would rather they directed their words and fists at her, 'Mama has done all she can do. You yourself have to find a way to fight back. And to get away from them.'

Her son, ever obedient, nodded.

They were repeating earlier conversations, they were living a rerun. When would they finally be free from this nightmare?

Her son began bottling it up. He wouldn't talk about how they would pull down his pants in the bathroom, how they would call him disgusting, how they would threaten him or force him to do their homework.... She began to think that her child's situation at school had taken a turn for the better, because he was always singing—at the wall, in the bathroom, to the flowers, to the grass, to the sky, to the setting sun.

In everyone's heart lies a field after another.

In everyone's heart lies a dream after another.

One seed, one seed in that field in my heart.

'What are you singing?'

'A tune I learned at school choir.'

She didn't know back then what her child was singing. But she knew her son was a bird chirping so incessantly that he couldn't stop long enough to eat a meal. He only wanted to keep singing. Once, at dinner, her husband finally snapped: 'Can't you stop for two minutes to eat? You're firing rice missiles at your little brother.'

Their son laughed and covered his mouth with his hand.

At that moment he looked so happy. Who could have guessed what he was really feeling?

After her son had gone, she found the lyrics to the song in his desk and a recording still sitting in his tape player. She found solace by listening to her son's voice. It held his dreams. Her child, who had used music to plant peaches, to plant plums, to plant the spring wind, to plant a future that belonged to him. Yet the blossoms had fallen and spring had come and gone. She wanted to ask her child why he still hadn't returned.

If this was just a bad dream, why hadn't she woken yet? She could have accepted the black and white silent reality if it meant her son was still alive. She could have rewound the past, she could have done something the time he received that first threatening note, instead of just saying coldly: 'Face it like a man. You haven't done anything wrong. Don't show fear.'

But that silent film was horrifying, the bullies were giants. It kept repeating the same scene. She kept going to see the doctor, but now she went alone. Her son used to sit calmly beside her on the bus, telling jokes he learned from who knows where, knitting, or making small dolls. Sometimes he would massage her back or ask her if she was thirsty... Shouldn't a child like this only draw people's affection? The questions were still building inside her and they swirled as she slept. The doctor prescribed some sleeping pills, telling her to take one a day. One before

bed—buzz, buzz, buzz. One before bed. Tomorrow she had work to do. She thought about how, after school, her son would often go to her hair salon to help. He would greet people, wash the customers' hair, or give them shoulder and head massages. Now, with her son gone, the neighbours came to the shop more often. It was always full. Conversation diluted her sadness, but still she couldn't sleep. Two pills before bed— buzz, buzz, buzz.

Her youngest son told her that the school was having a field day the following week, but she didn't know if she should go. She feared that once she got there, she would find it hard to keep herself steady. Would her elder son's spirit still be crying in the bathroom? The more she thought about it, the more anxious she became and the harder it was to sleep. Three pills before bed, four pills before bed.

Then, one day her husband hid them.

'Have you seen my sleeping pills?' she asked.

'I threw them away. You've been abusing them.'

Her husband's physical condition had improved. He seemed to have accepted the reality of their loss. As the pressure gradually diminished, his hearing had returned.

'Give me them back. I can't sleep without them.' She needed to turn her dreams into reality. The only way she could apologize to her son again was when she was asleep.

'Once you're tired enough, your body will naturally find rest.'

'I've got to be at the salon tomorrow. This isn't going to work.'

'You should take some time off. Your health is more important.'

'No. Give them to me. There's too much pain in my heart! Don't you see? I hate, hate, hate those boys. And I hate myself too. Hate myself for being so negligent. Our child....'

'We were fated to only have him for a short while. There's no point in dwelling on it. We have to get on with our lives.'

'I don't want to forget! I want him to live again, this time I want him to be the girl he wanted to be. What do you have to say about that?'

Her husband hugged her tightly. In the darkness, she heard his faint sobs, 'Whatever you say. Whatever makes you happy.'

But hate is not easy to cast aside. She kept returning to the hospital for her prescriptions. The trips made her recall those Wednesdays when she used to go with her son for family therapy. He would take the day off and the three of them would often end up eating at a food stall afterwards. He loved his food and liked to experiment in the kitchen. Often, when she was too busy at her salon, they relied on him to help prepare meals. He helped in the kitchen ever since he was in elementary school and his cooking steadily improved. On weekends, he would go with her to the market and they would discuss what to make. When they returned home, he'd help prepare the food. He was her help at home. Her other son was always out playing and only returned when night fell and it was time for food. He'd eat, wash up and then sit playing video games, transfixed by the screen. He wouldn't wash the dishes, wouldn't empty the garbage. He never ran any errands for her. Reflecting on her first son's virtues only made her hate those boys even more.

'You can hate them, but hate won't change anything,' the doctor noted. 'Why don't you transform that hatred into something to help the people who are facing the same kind of treatment? Why don't you do all you can to spread the message about your son, who you couldn't help, so that others who like him won't be treated the same way? Instead of wasting your energy hating ignorant children, wouldn't it be better to do something more meaningful?'

From the hospital, she would go straight to the movie theatre, choosing a seat in the farthest corner. She really couldn't care less about the film, but it was a place to cry.

How, she wondered, were those bullies getting along?

Did they have much of an appetite?

Did they sleep peacefully?

Were they overcome by guilt?

Or were they searching for their next victim?

But one day, as she sat in the darkness of the cinema, she realised she didn't want answers anymore. Other children were going through the same nightmare as her son and now was the time to take on those images from her dream. She needed the rest of the world to see them just as clearly as she did. Just because one doesn't speak up doesn't mean one isn't afraid. Just because one doesn't complain doesn't mean there isn't a problem. Not being able to save her child was her biggest regret, but she would make saving other people's children her greatest achievement. In the dark, she felt her son beside her, 'Ma! Ma! Don't cry!'

May this be the last time she would cry tears of regret.