

It is 1967, and the Cultural Revolution in China is purging suspected anti-communist sentiment at every level, from Party leaders to the common people. Communal farms are experiencing influxes of city-folk that arrive as farmhands. Some of the city-dwellers have volunteered out of patriotism and solidarity; others have been ousted from the cities for 'harboring bourgeois sentiments.' Either way, the farmers regard them as incompetent at best.

Mo Yun doesn't pay much attention to politics, and the rest of the commune is dealing with the newcomers. Mo Yun has been busy with her patients, and her current case is puzzling her. She plops a toddler's legs on her lap, using one of her calloused hands to hold up the sick child's stiff neck. The girl has stopped crying only because she has lost consciousness. Mo Yun lets out a sigh of relief: the strange, high-pitched crying made it hard to think.

Mo Yun has long had a gift for taking care of the things around her.

She and her older brother Mo Zi survived the Great Leap Forward, but their parents did not. They died within weeks of each other in 1958, in the midst of the Three Year Famine. She was very young at the time, and there were many things she did not understand. If she were older, she might have known that the potatoes her mother cooked for them were hoarded illegally, that her parents were not eating for their children's sakes. If she had seen other villages, she might have known that hers was only one of thousands of farm communes across China facing massive starvation. If she were privy to the cycles of history, she might have known that the Famine was the consequence of a few policymakers' short-sighted effort to exploit farm labor to make cities into socialist utopias, that similar man-made famines had occurred in lands far from her own. She might have been angry like her brother was, who, in spite of the censorship and propaganda, was old enough to understand that there was something unjust in their parents' deaths.

Mo Zi had already been helping with the farm, but at age 16 he found himself entirely responsible for the farm and his 10-year-old sister. He found that bitterness without hope for retribution made life impossible to

bear, so he tried to protect his sister from such feelings. He encouraged her to do well in school and to accept the propaganda presented to her, and he taught her to think only about things in her life that she had some control over. She grew up a happy child, and she managed to finish her schooling years early while still helping her brother farm. She thought that the death of one's parents was a natural part of growing up, especially since many other children in the commune had the same experience.

For their commune, 1965 was a year of disease. A fungal infection was ravaging the potatoes. On the human side, a few of the villagers, including Mo Zi, contracted a bowel disease. Mo Yun took over her brother's farming duties and organized the villagers to raise enough money to send the sick farmers to the closest hospital. That harvest, the commune's potatoes grew more bountifully than they ever had. Her brother returned from the hospital quickly, explaining that he only needed to take a pill to recover from the snail parasite.

A city bureaucrat came to the commune, advertising a program that would train farmers in basic paramedical services. The commune put its support behind Mo Yun. After six months of training at the nearby army hospital, she aced the certification test and returned to the commune a 'barefoot doctor,' the term for farmer-paramedics.

By 1967, she had only been a barefoot doctor for a year, but it had been an eventful year: she taught the commune classes on hygiene in her tent, she delivered a few babies, including her brother's wife's, and she organized the effort to line the communal well with bricks to prevent water contamination. Her tent is stocked with herbal remedies, and she finds herself spending more time in the tent than on the farm.

Earlier today, Liu Qi, a sweet but nervous neighbor, presented to Mo Yun her 2-year-old niece visiting from the city. The girl, nicknamed Nana, has a high fever, a bump on her head, an unusually shrill cry that sometimes turns into a moan, and a stiff neck. Mo Yun had to request for the aunt to leave, for her nervous ramblings seem to make Nana cry even more.

Mo Yun remembers that in training the city doctor taught them all sorts of precautionary measures to

protect themselves from the contagions of their patients. Letting a coughing child sit in her lap certainly would have been unacceptable to the city doctor. But she hated the idea of being separated from her patients; she believes that tenderness is essential to good health and should not be forgotten. Furthermore, she has always had a hardy immune system, and seasonal illnesses never affected her. So she keeps Nana in her lap as she determines her next course of action. Nana is small even for her age and has thin, pale skin, and Mo Yun imagines that she will likely retain this skin if she continues to grow up in the city.

Mo Yun does not often reminisce (her brother trained her to think that thinking about the past is dangerous for the healthy mind), but the crying actually reminds her of the shadow puppet plays that occasionally came to her village as a child. A troupe would set up a screen and a light, and the puppets behind the screen acted out Chinese folktales. She loved these plays for the most part, but she found the men's use of falsetto to sing as female characters to be quite grating. Nana's crying sounds exactly like those female characters, especially when wailing after a death.

C.I.A. analysts from the other half of the world are tracking the 1967 meningitis epidemic, suspecting that its spread is due to recent surge of revolutionaries, who have been moving from city to city. It is a matter of international diplomacy: the United States will attempt to improve relations with Red China by opening the trade of antibiotics, but China will snub the offer, instead asking for help from European and other Asian countries. At the same time, Chinese officials are trying to suppress reports about an outbreak to prevent a panic, and they are fairly successful, considering that all media is state-controlled.

Mo Yun has little awareness of her role in the currents of history. She does not even know what diagnosis to make for Nana. All she knows is that her arsenal of herbal remedies will not work, and she has to take her to the army hospital in a nearby village. She borrows one of the commune's horses and sets off, toddler strapped against her back.

The People's Liberation Army runs the hospital; the personnel wear military caps with their white coats.

The hospital is full of children with the same illness: the diagnosis is meningitis, and it is treatable. But the hospital is in chaos. Nana's shrill, mournful cry is compounded twentyfold. The crying pierces from every direction. Mo Yun feels trapped, as though she is in the world behind the puppet theater screen.

Mo Yun has been at this hospital before—in fact, she did her six months of training here—but this time she feels deeply and viscerally unsettled. The unbearable crying takes her mind places it had not gone before. The People's Liberation Army insignia on a nurse's cap reminds her of the soldiers who used to come to the commune every harvest during the Great Leap Forward and take a share of the commune's crops. She remembers propaganda posters of the time that featured farmers carrying giant baskets of crops to cities bustling with industry. Now the propaganda posters go the other way: city-folk are directed to be farmhands in the countryside. For what purpose? Solidarity? The city-folk who have arrived on her commune are too delicate for farm labor, and some of them don't even want to be there. A good portion of them, lacking the typical farmer's immune system, will likely get sick before the next harvest, much like Nana. She realizes how much of life is out of her control.

She imagines Chairman Mao, who in posters is always enormous and glowing in the sky, playing with the hundreds of millions of people below him as though they were shadow puppets. For the first time in her life, Mo Yun feels bitterness.