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NEW YEAR'S EVE

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by

Pai Hsien-yung

Translated by Diana Granat

On New Year's Eve a cold front suddenly invaded Taipei, and by twilight the sky was already dark. The lights in the houses were lit earlier than usual, as if to hurry away what was left of the old year and make ready to welcome the new.

In East Hsin-i Village at the end of Evergreen Road, the chimneys of the bungalows in the military dependents' quarters sent up puffs of smoke; mixed with the undulating chatter and laughter, the noise of spatulas and popping oil spilled into the streets. New Year's Eve was gradually approaching its high point — time for the family reunion dinner.

This evening in Major Liu's house, Number 5 East Hsin-i Village, the lights were burning especially bright. In the living-room window stood a pair of red candles, about a foot tall and as thick as a child's arm. Their flames shot up merrily, casting a glow over the modest living room.

"Brother Lai!"¹ Mrs. Liu came into the room carrying a copper Mongolian hot-pot with burning charcoals crackling and jumping underneath. She was a middle-aged woman, in her forties, in a new black satin dress embossed with clusters of purple flowers, over which she ^{had put on} an apron of blue cotton.

¹ Ta-ko (大哥 : "Elder Brother"), here used as a term of respect and friendship.

Her hair was combed into a glossy bun. Except for her finely-pencilled eyebrows, she wore no make-up. Mrs. Liu spoke the real Szechuanese dialect; her words came tumbling out one on top of the other, each syllable crisp and distinct. She greeted the guest of honor seated at the round dinner-table with a warm smile. "You've come so far to join us for New Year's; why did you have to spend so much money, too? Wine, and chicken, and those huge candles! It's a wonder you managed to carry them all the way here!"

"You're so right, Sissie!"¹ said Lai, slapping his knee. "Those candles sure gave me a lot of trouble." He spoke in a loud, rough voice, with a thick Szechuan accent. "The Tainan Railroad Station was so crowded today you could hardly breathe. Lucky I'm so tall; I held the candles high above my head so nobody would break them. I don't get to see you folks more than once a year, so I said to myself, I must spend New Year's Eve with you, and we'll see the old year out together. We'll be sitting up the whole night tonight; and having the candles all lit up will bring us all joy." He gave a hearty laugh. His swarthy face was densely covered with liver spots, and when he laughed all his wrinkles appeared at once, like ring after ring of ripples. His inch-long hair, already hoarfrost, stood erect like the bristles on a tough wire brush. He was unusually big-boned — seated, he was a head taller than the people beside him. (TO PAGE 3)

² Ti-mei (弟妹: younger brother's younger sister), a form of address for the wife of a young and dear friend.

He wore a threadbare Sun Yatsen tunic of Tibetan blue gabardine with a grass-green sweater underneath; the sweater's cuffs were showing, already unravelled, the seams coming apart. He had huge hands, all ten fingers gnarled like the roots of a tree.

"Brother Lai, that's exactly what my wife had in mind," Major Liu put in. "She's even found mah-jong partners for you."

Major Liu was still in uniform. He was a tall, thin man with lean cheeks, his taut, copper-colored skin burnished by the fierce sun and the sea winds. When he spoke his accent was all Szechuanese, just like Lai's. His sideburns had started to turn white, too.

"I know Brother Lai loves to play a round or two — that's why I kept this pair here." Mrs. Liu set the cooker down in the center of the dinner table and indicated the young man and the girl seated there. "It's not every day that Cousin Li-chu and Yu Hsin can come, either! Only this afternoon Li-chu was on duty at the Military Hospital, and Yu Hsin just came up from Camp Feng-shen today. The two of them had probably planned on a cosy date tonight all by themselves, but I forced them to stay so they could keep Brother Lai company when we play Going Round the Garden!"³

³ A friendly game of mah-jong for limited stakes.

"Going Round the Garden — I, Lai Ming-sheng, am an expert at that!" cried Lai. "Nobody leaves the table till dawn! My dear Miss Li-chu, if you want to bill and coo with our young buddy here, you go right ahead and do it across the table. Just pretend we're not here."

Li-chu blushed and laughed, and Yu Hsin, a little flustered, managed an embarrassed smile. Li-chu was a petite girl with a rosy complexion and sparkling black eyes. You would think she wasn't more than sixteen or seventeen to look at her, but she had been a nurse for two years already at the Military Hospital. Yu Hsin was seated by her side, at attention. He was in an American-style uniform of light khaki, freshly starched, sharp-creased, complete with black tie. A shiny gold cadet-school badge was pinned to his collar. His very youthful face, cleanshaven, shone with a fresh radiance, and his newly-cut and blown hair lay obediently on his head, every hair in place.

"I want to stay up all night, too," Major Liu's ten-year-old son, Liu Ying, who was also sitting at the table, interrupted.

"After dinner you should be off to bed!" Mrs. Liu hollered at the boy. "Staying up all night indeed!"

When a player loses all his chips he is allowed to continue without playing for money.

"Uncle Lai promised to take me out on the street at midnight to shoot off firecrackers." Liu Ying looked at Lai Ming-sheng and protested anxiously.

"'Attaboy!" laughed Lai, reaching out a huge palm and giving Liu Ying a pat on his glossily-shaven head. "Your Uncle Lai shoots a mean firecracker. In a little while, I'll show you — bang goes the firecracker in my bare hands!"

He turned to Mrs. Liu. "My dear Sissie, don't underestimate this little fellow. He might turn out to be a general one day!"

"A general?" Mrs. Liu snorted. "In this world you're doing all right if you don't starve. I couldn't care less whether or not he becomes a high-ranking official."

"What do you want to be when you grow up, boy?"

Lai Ming-sheng asked Liu Ying.

"Commander in Chief of the Army!" Nose in the air, Liu Ying answered in all seriousness.

Everyone at the table burst out laughing, and even Mrs. Liu couldn't help but laugh. Lai Ming-sheng, his face all wrinkled up with laughter, pulled Liu Ying to his bosom.

"Sounds ambitious enough, all right! Good for you, my boy! When your Uncle Lai was your age, he set his sights even higher."

Mrs. Liu went back in and came out again with several plates of food for the hot-pot: a plate of tripe, one of kidneys, two plates of sliced mutton, and five or six dishes of assorted Szechuanese pickled vegetables in red pepper sauce. She placed a dish of fried peanuts in front of Lai Ming-sheng specially, for him to eat with his wine, and began to pour wine for everyone.

"Brother Lai also brought these bottles of Quemoy kao-liang,"⁴ she announced. "Why did you have to bring a whole dozen? Two bottles would have been enough to add to the holiday cheer. We don't have that many six-bottle men here."

"I didn't buy them, as a matter of fact," Lai Ming-sheng said, indicating the bottles of Quemoy kao-liang on the side table. "They were brought to me as a gift by an old subordinate — an assistant platoon leader on Quemoy — when he returned to Tainan on leave. He still remembered me as his former chief, bless him, but I had forgotten all about him."

"Brother Lai, you are my former superior as well. Permit me to drink a toast to you first!" Major Liu rose and, holding a brimming cup of kao-liang, went over

⁴高粱, a very strong liquor distilled from millet. The best kao-liang in Taiwan is made on the island of Quemoy.

to Lai Ming-sheng. Lifting his wine cup in both hands, he offered a toast to him.

"Worthy brother," Lai Ming-sheng stood up suddenly and, pressing Major Liu down onto the chair, spoke in a hoarse voice. "Surely I will drink this cup with you, but it all depends on how we drink. If we're talking about our friendship and brotherhood, it will not be too much if you toast me ten times tonight. But if you drink to me as your former senior officer, I won't touch a drop! In the first place, I've already retired. In the second place, you're an officer now. Say it's an important rank, or not, as you like, a major commands several hundred men — and as for me, I'm only a kitchen purveyor at the Veterans Hospital. A — what do they call it in the Army? Chief Army Cook!"⁵

As Lai Ming-sheng spoke he started to laugh out loud; then little Liu Ying let out a yelp and laughed with him. Lai Ming-sheng gave the boy a pat on his shiny head. "What are you laughing at, kid? Don't you look down on a Chief Army Cook. Your Uncle Lai was a Chief Army Cook, and he made his way up to be an officer! . . . So I tell you, Brother, a proper major as you are, if you go around calling

^{Huo-fu-tou}
5(火伙頭). Originally designating chief army cook, the term is also applied to the person in charge of the military kitchen, usually in a deprecatory sense.

a cook 'my former superior,' what will people think?
It doesn't sound right!"

All this while Major Liu, held captive on the chair by Lai Ming-sheng, was waving his hand in protest. Mrs. Liu took a cup of wine over to Lai Ming-sheng. "Dear Brother Lai, you're wrong," she ~~said jokingly~~ ^{laughed.} "Not only are you two buddies who have been through thick and thin together, but when you were already an officer, he was nothing."

"Me? When Brother Lai was a company commander in Szechuan, I was just an orderly in his company," Major Liu added at once.

Now, Brother Lai,
"Just what I said! [↑] will you still deny you were his superior? Not only should he offer you a toast; I want to drink to you, too. Here!"

As Mrs. Liu spoke she drank up half the cup. Everyone at the table rose and, calling Lai Ming-sheng "Senior Officer," offered him a toast. Protesting vigorously, Lai Ming-sheng made some effort to decline; then he tilted his head back with a laugh and downed his cup of Quemoy kao-liang. He sat down, smacked his lips, poached himself a chopstickful of tripe in the hot-pot, and swallowed it like a chaser. Mrs. Liu began refilling everybody's cups.

⇒ "What, our young friend!" Lai Ming-sheng exclaimed.

"You haven't finished your cup yet?" Just as Mrs. Liu was about to pour Yu Hsin some more, Lai Ming-sheng noticed the young cadet's cup was still half full; he pointed his finger at Yu Hsin as if he had been insulted.

Yu Hsin stood up hurriedly. "Sir," he explained, his face full of chagrin, "I really can't drink — "

"What's that?" Lai Ming-sheng broke in. "That's all very well for ladies, but how can a military man leave his cup undrained? Young friend, when I was your age I gulped san-hua and mao-t'ai down by the bowl.⁶ I would get so drunk I'd fall off my horse the night before, but the next day I would charge into battle and fight like hell. How can you be a soldier if you can't even drink? Drink up, Drink up!"

Yu Hsin had to raise his cup and finish the rest. In a moment his youthful face flushed to his eyelids; at once Lai Ming-shen snatched the bottle out of Mrs. Liu's hands and started to pour lavishly into the young cadet's cup. Yu Hsin, smiling nervously, didn't dare to make any comment. Li-chu, seated next to him, looked at Lai Ming-sheng. "Brother Lai," she said with an imploring smile,

⁶ 三花 and 茅臺, both potent grain spirits.

"he really can't drink. A few days ago he drank a little rice wine and got a rash all over."

"Now, Miss Li-chu, don't you coddle him. How can a few cups of kao-liang harm a sturdy lad? To tell you the truth, I'm pleased as all get-out to see the two of you tonight. Such a fine, handsome couple — by all means, I must drink a double with you!"

Lai Ming-sheng poured himself two cups of kao-liang, took one in each hand and went over to Yu Hsin and Li-chu; Li-chu hurried to her feet.

"^{you, my} young friend, I, ^{Lai Ming-sheng,} shall presume upon my age and talk you some straight talk. A soldier's ^{solemn} duty is of course to serve the country, but marriage is also an important matter which must not be neglected. Look at ^{your} Major and Mrs. Liu here — aren't they an enviable pair?"

"That'll do, Brother Lai!" Mrs. Liu shouted across the table with a laugh. "It's not enough that you tease the two kids, you have to make fun of us old ones too!"

"You're pretty lucky yourself, young friend. You wouldn't find another like our Miss Li-chu here even if you searched all over Taipei with a lantern. So you should try to be like your Major and love your wife in the days to come. If you ever take advantage of her, I'll be the first to call you to account."

Li-chu had long before turned completely red with embarrassment and lowered her head. Lai Ming-sheng raised the two cups and, having invoked a blessing on Yu Hsin and Li Chu, gulped them down one after the other.

"Take it easy now, Brother Lai, this is Quemoy kao-liang!" Mrs. Liu called from the other side of the table, but Lai Ming-sheng came behind her in a few strides. Waving his long arms, his swarthy face already flushed, he put his head close to her ear. "Sister," he said, "my worthy brother is certainly fortunate in having a wife like you — he must have done good deeds in his previous life to deserve you. Although I've been an old bachelor all my life, I've seen a lot of husbands and wives. My dear sister, it's not easy to find a couple like you. Believe me, it's not easy."

Mrs. Liu laughed till she had to bend over the table. She turned around to him. "Brother Lai, just treat me to a good meal and I promise I'll get you a wife. The boss-lady who runs the cigarette stand on our corner — she's some good looker! and she's looking for a boss-man. Would you be interested?"

"My hearty thanks to you, Sister," said Lai Ming-sheng with a throaty chortle as he faced Mrs. Liu and bowed,

"but I'd rather defer this share of my good fortune till my next life. I won't keep this a secret from you:

last year I did itch with a bit of this worldly desire, and look where it's got me! You see, when I retired last year I got more than thirty thousand dollars in separation pay. To rich people that kind of money doesn't mean a damn thing, but I had never held so much cash in my hands in my whole life.. At first I thought of going into some small business, but then a guy from my home town came along and wanted to play matchmaker. He said he knew of some mountain woman,⁷ a widow in Hualien, who was looking for a husband. So I went to see for myself and sure enough she was a young woman in her twenties; she didn't look so bad, either. Her family asked for twenty-five thousand, not a penny less. So like a shot I offered up all my retirement pay plus gold rings and bracelets to doll the girl up from head to toe. How was I to know those wild mountain women don't have one damn ounce of gratitude? Three days after we got married, she ran away without leaving so much as a ghost's shadow. And she cleaned me out proper, too — even managed to take the worn-out cotton bedding with her."

As Lai Ming-sheng went on, he drained his cup of kao-liang without having to be encouraged and wiped his

⁷ 山地女人, a woman of the mountain tribes in Taiwan, often referred to in English as "aborigines".

mouth on the back of his hand. Suddenly he leaped behind Yu Hsin. His hands resting on Yu Hsin's shoulders, he took a good look at the young man. "If I could still look like him, that wild woman — she wouldn't want to leave me even if I drove her out!" Everyone laughed at this, and Lai Ming-sheng continued. "Young friend," he said to Yu Hsin, "I don't mean to ^{brag} but in those days when I had my Sam Browne belt on, I bet I looked even smarter than you do."

"You sure cut one hell of a dash in those days," Major Liu echoed at once.

"That's right!" Mrs. Liu put in. "Otherwise, how could he have 'cut his major's boots' and gotten away with it?"

"What's 'cutting somebody's boots,' Cousin?" Li-chu asked Mrs. Liu in a soft aside.

"I don't know how to tell you," Mrs. Liu replied, ^{giggling}; she covered her mouth and kept waving her hand. "You ask your Brother Lai."

Lai Ming-sheng didn't wait for Li-chu to put the question, but edged close to her, his smiling face all wrinkles. "Miss Li-chu," he said, "tonight *the wine makes me bold*. You want to hear about 'cutting the boots'? All right, I'll tell you about the year I cut my major's boots. Worthy brother, do you still remember

Pockmarked Li, Li Chun-fa?"

"How could I not remember?" replied Major Liu.

"That petty warlord Li Chun-fa. I got kicked around plenty by that son of a bitch!"

"That bastard sure was a tin-pot warlord!" Lai Ming-sheng undid his collar, rolled up his sleeves, raised his wine cup and drank with Major Liu. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, and his cheeks burned fiery red. He turned to Li-chu and Yu Hsin.

"In the twenty-seventh year of the Republic,⁸ I was captain of a cavalry company in Chengtu. I was with our Fifth Battalion, and we were camped outside the city. Our major had a concubine who of all things loved horseback riding. Our major ordered me to let her ride my horse, and he had me follow her around every day, as if he wanted to make sure she wouldn't break her arse! One day Pockmarked Li went into town. Well, that concubine-lady of his called a couple of women over to her *house* to play mah-jong; she wanted me to make up a foursome. Halfway through the game, I suddenly felt a heavy weight on my boots, as if something ^{was} pressing down on them. When I reached

⁸ 1938.

down under the table, I felt this foot in an embroidered shoe sitting dead on top of my boots. As I looked up, our major's concubine-lady, who was sitting all smiles at my right hand, played me a "White Dragon,"⁹ "Heré's a nice, juicy piece for you!" After the game, an orderly came to summon me to the inner chamber; the lady had the chicken soup steamed with red dates all ready and waiting for me.¹⁰ That night I damn well cut off our major's boots!"

Here Lai Ming-sheng stopped ~~dead~~ a moment, then all at once he leaped up and banged his fist on the table. "That ~~piece~~ bitch!" he snarled. "What a fine juicy piece ~~she~~ she turned out to be!"

His banging made the coals under the hot-pot jump. Everyone gave a start at first, then they all burst into roaring laughter. Giggling, Mrs. Liu fished a big ladleful of kidneys out of the hot-pot and put it into Lai Ming-sheng's dish.

"You know, worthy Brother," Lai Ming-sheng said, turning to Major Liu, "That time Li Chun-fa thought this old fellow was going to die for sure. You remember

⁹ 白板, literally "white piece," one of the mah-jong pieces, or "tiles," that has a smooth, ivory-white surface, without any design on it whatever; known in the Western parlance of the game as "White Dragon".

¹⁰ This dish is traditionally considered an aphrodisiacal tonic.

later he had me transferred to Shantung? *At that time, there was such glorious fighting going on over there in Shantung.* Li Chun-fa was *getting suspicious*. That son of a bitch, he wanted to send me to Taierhchuang to get myself killed!"¹¹

"Sir, did you take part in the Battle of Taierhchuang too?" Yu Hsin blurted out excitedly.

Without answering, Lai Ming-sheng seized a handful of fried peanuts and conveyed them to his mouth, chewing noisily. After a moment he turned to Yu Hsin and snorted, "Tai — erh — chuang — Young man, that name is not to be mentioned lightly!"

"Last week in our lectures on the War of Resistance Against Japan the instructor happened to talk about the Battle of Taierhchuang," Yu Hsin hurriedly explained.

"Who is your instructor?"

"Niu Chung-kai. He's a fifth-year graduate of Whampoa."

"I know him. Short, fat fellow, speaks with a Hunan accent. So he's lecturing on Taierhchuang, is he?"

"He just got to the battle when the Japanese Isogai Division attacked Tsaotse," answered Yu Hsin.

¹¹ 臺兒莊, in southern Shantung Province, scene of a historic battle in April 1938, in the early stages of China's resistance against the Japanese invasion.

"Ah . . ." Lai Ming-sheng nodded his head. Suddenly, stretching and puffing, he pulled open his Tibetan-blue khaki jacket, lifted his sweater and undershirt, and revealed his large chest. On the right side of his chest was the vivid imprint of a bloodred scar, shiny, round, the size of a ricebowl. His whole breast had been hewn away; it had caved in, forming a crater. Mrs. Liu turned her head away, laughing, while Li-chu hurriedly covered her mouth with her hand and bent over with laughter.

Lai Ming-sheng pointed to the round scar, every vein in his head standing out, his eyes reddened. "My young friend, I've spent a lifetime in battle, and I've never once been decorated. But this little mark here is rarer than a 'Blue Sky and White Sun' medal. With this on me, I'm qualified to give you a lecture 'on Tai'erhchuang'. But people who have nothing like this — *what do* ~~they still insist on talking nonsense?~~ *know, talking about it?* You go ask Niu Chung-kai for me: how many of our regimental commanders and battalion commanders were lost in that battle? *And who were those people?*

And how did General Huang Ming-chang die? *Does know?"*
Tucking his clothes in any old way, gesticulating
vehemently,

Lai Ming-sheng went on speaking to Yu Hsin. "When the Japs attacked Tsaotse, I was defending the place!

The fire power these midgets had was really something!

Hundreds of tanks, twenty thousand infantry — double our number! What could we put up against them? Our bodies! My friend, after one night of fighting I don't know how many from our regiment were still left. General Huang Ming-^{chang}~~sheng~~ was our regimental commander. At daybreak I was riding behind him on patrol. I just saw an explosion flash, and the next moment his head was gone, but his body still sat erect on his horse, hands grasping the reins, galloping. Hell, I didn't have time to blink before I was blown off my horse myself. My horse was hit in the belly by a shell and I was all tangled up in its guts. The Japs thought I was finished, and our men thought so too. I lay in the pile of dead for two days and two nights without anyone paying any attention to me. Afterwards when our army won and came to collect the corpses, they dug me out. Ah, my friend," Lai Ming-sheng pointed to the right side of his chest, "that's the shot that blew off half my chest."

"That battle was truly our National Army's glory!" said Yu Hsin.

"Glory?" Lai Ming-sheng gave a humph. "Young friend, for you people who've never gone to battle, 'glory' is an easy word to say. As for us in the Nationalist Army, it's

all right not to mention other battles, but if you bring up this battle, my friend, this battle — "

Lai Ming-sheng suddenly began to stammer. One hand gesticulating, his face purple with heat and excitement, he seemed to be groping for some heroic words to describe Taierh-chuang, but unable to come up with any on the spur of the moment. Suddenly the sound of an explosion outside rent the air, and an intense white light flashed twice across the window. Liu Ying, who had been quiet for a long while, jumped up and ran to the door, shouting, "They're setting off the Kung-ming lanterns!"¹²

Major Liu yelled at the boy and reached out to grab him, but he had already skipped out the door, turning his head and calling, "Uncle Lai, shoot firecrackers with me later — no breaking your promise!"

"Little devil!" Mrs. Liu scolded him with a laugh. "Let him go. You can't hold him. Brother Lai, quick! While it's hot, taste my dish of 'Ants up a Tree'!"¹³

¹² 孔明燈, a kind of fireworks that shoots up into the sky, trailing a string of firecrackers behind; named after Chu-ke Liang (諸葛亮), the superb strategist of Three Kingdoms fame.

¹³ A Szechuan dish consisting of minced meat sauce served with hot-pepper oil over deep-fried bean threads (peastarch noodles).

Mrs. Liu put a big bowl of rice in front of Lai Ming-sheng. Lai Ming-sheng pushed it aside and pulled the dish of fried peanuts to him again; he poured a cup of Quemoy kao-liang and brought it to his mouth. He drank so fast half the liquor ~~was~~ spilled, dripping all over him.

"Take it easy, Brother Lai, don't choke," Major Liu persuaded him as he quickly handed Lai Ming-sheng a towel.

"My dear brother," cried Lai Ming-sheng, striking the table violently with his empty cup and grabbing Major Liu's shoulders, "You think a drop of Quemoy kao-liang on Taiwan could make your big brother drunk? Have you forgotten how many crocks of Kweichow mao-t'ai I used to drink on the mainland?"

"We know about your large capacity," Major Liu reassured him.

"Dear brother," Lai Ming-sheng clutched Major Liu's shoulder strap in both hands, and his large head almost knocked into his host's face. "You may be a major, you may even wear stars, but if it were not for our friendship I wouldn't have come today, even if you sent an eight-man sedan chair for me!"

z "What talk, Brother Lai!" Major Liu hastened to pacify him.

"You know, brother, what I say is straight talk, every word. That little worm Wu Sheng-piao was once my second lieutenant. When I came to Taipei and walked past his door I wouldn't even give him a look. He's a big wheel now, well, that's his luck, but licking somebody's arse to get ahead is just not for me. Otherwise I wouldn't be a Chief Army Cook now. Last week I just took a little burnt rice from our hospital kitchen to feed the pigs, and the officer-in-charge *looked down his nose at me and read me the Riot Act*. So I rolled up my sleeves and pointed right at his face and said, 'Officer Yu, let me be frank with you: in the sixteenth year of the Republic,¹⁴ I, Lai Ming-sheng, was out there carrying pots for the Revolutionary Army on the Northern Expedition to fight Sun Chuan-fang.¹⁵ So when it comes to kitchen rules, Sir, I have no need of your advice.' You add it up for me, dear brother — " he counted on his fingers, his head swaying, "I'm the same age as the Republic itself. All these years, through thick and thin, what strange things haven't I experienced? Now what do I care any more? Frankly, dear brother, the only regret I still have is that these old bones of mine have not yet found their way home."

¹⁴ 1927.

¹⁵ 孫傳芳, one of the warlords in the 1920s, military governor of Kiangsu Province.

Mrs. Liu went over and planted herself between Lai Ming-sheng and Major Liu. "Brother Lai, you just keep talking away, and you haven't had a bite of this 'Ants up a Tree,' and after I went to all the trouble to fry it nicely. Even if you should go to a Szechuanese restaurant, I doubt if they can cook this hometown specialty the way I do."

"Dear Sissie — " Lai Ming-sheng reached across the table to get at the half-empty bottle of Quemoy kao-liang again, but Mrs. Liu grabbed it and hugged it to her bosom.

"Brother Lai, if you drink a couple more, you won't be able to stay awake and see the New Year in."

All at once Lai Ming-sheng struggled to his feet and struck his chest a couple of times. "Dear Sissie," he declared in a hoarse voice, "you really think too little of me. Although I am getting a little advanced in years, this frame of mine is still made of iron. To tell you the truth, I'm retired but I'm still in training. Every day as soon as they blow reveille in the barracks next door, I get out of bed. I go through my routine — 'Poisonous Snake Shoots out of the Hole,' 'Praying Mantis Waving its Arms,' 'Large Chariot Wheels,' 'Small Chariot Wheels',¹⁶ —

¹⁶ Various moves in boxing.

I wonder if those youngsters could match these tricks of mine!"

As Lai Ming-sheng spoke he left the table, struck a martial pose and started boxing, brandishing his arms and legs. Beads of sweat ran down his bright red face like water; everyone at the table roared, swaying back and forth. Mrs. Liu went over to him quickly and, taking hold of him by the arm, half pushing and half pulling, led him to the rear of the house to wash his face. Before leaving the living room, Lai Ming-sheng turned to her. "Now do you see, Sissie?" he said. "When we fight our way back to Szechuan one day, your Brother Lai may not be good for much else, but he can still carry eight or ten rice-cookers for sure!"

His words made those at the table start laughing again. When Lai Ming-sheng had gone inside, Mrs. Liu directed the group to clear the dinner table and place a square mah-jong table-top on it. She took out the mah-jong set ^{and} assigned the task of dividing up the chips to Yu Hsin and Li-chu, while she herself brought the pair of red candles over from the window sill and set them down on a side table next to the mah-jong table. The candles were already more than half burnt down, leaving tallow drippings on the candlesticks. While Mrs. Liu was scraping off the clinging tallow with a little knife, the sound of vomiting suddenly came from the bathroom. Major Liu ran inside.

"He's drunk." Mrs. Liu shook her head with a sigh, letting the knife fall from her hand to the side table.

"I knew it; it's the same every time. He loves to drink and raise a ruckus, but he can't really hold that much."

"Brother Lai looks so funny when he's high," said Li-chu, giggling as she gave Yu Hsin a mischievous look. Yu Hsin laughed, too.

Major Liu came out somewhat later. "He's asleep," he said in a low voice. "He wants me to play a few hands for him; he'll take over later."

Mrs. Liu mused for a while. Then she let out a yawn and rubbed her temples. "Say, let's forget it. If Brother Lai has gone to sleep, heaven knows what time he'll wake up. I've been busy all day, and I'm tired. Li-chu, Yu Hsin, you two might as well go on out and have a good time. Sorry to have kept you around all night."

Li-chu stood up promptly. Yu Hsin helped her into her red coat, put on his Army cap and straightened his tie in front of the living-room mirror. Then they said goodbye to Major and Mrs. Liu. As Li-chu and Yu Hsin stepped out into the lane, they saw the children from the military dependants' families in East Hsin-i Village, all gathered together in the middle of the lane, twenty or thirty of them.

They were in a circle, setting off firecrackers. The Lius' boy, Liu Ying, was squatting on the ground, lighting a big pinwheel. A splendid silvery boom of light suddenly burst in the air, about six or seven feet high, bathing all the laughing young faces in a silvery brightness. Amidst a roar of cheers, each child scrambled to light his own firecracker, and streak after streak of light broke through the dark sky. The sound of firecrackers all around grew heavier and heavier as New Year's Eve drew to an end and another New Year descended on Taipei.