

# SNOWFLAKES

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## PROLOGUE

To begin with, he was a great story-teller. Having travelled far and wide for the best part of his life and seen much of the world, he had stored in his mind all the strange things that had come his way. He lived in a small two-roomed hut, attractively whitewashed on the outside, in the peach orchard at the edge of the village. His business

being to cultivate and look after the peach and other fruit trees for the agricultural co-op, children in the neighbourhood called him Grandpa Peach.

Grandpa Peach had always kept his *sona*, a pipe-like musical instrument, very carefully. He cherished this so much that he was never known to go anywhere without it. It had kept him company for nobody knows how long. He could play it so well that once he put it to his lips a crowd of children was sure to gather about him. He could play it not only with his mouth but with his nostrils, too.

To the children of the village, however, the greatest fascination lay in his rich stock of tales. In springtime, when peach blossoms seemed like a rosy cloud that had descended from the sky, the old man often sat under the peach trees, surrounded by the village youngsters, their eager eyes resting on his bearded mouth. They would remain spellbound and would not move even when their mothers strained their voices to call them back to supper. In the long winter evenings the warm corners of Grandpa Peach's well-heated *kang*<sup>1</sup> had

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<sup>1</sup> A brick bed which is kept warm in winter by piping heat under it.—*Tr.*

an even greater attraction for them. They would have kept listening to him till daybreak, had he not tactfully sent them home at bedtime.

One winter evening the sky was overcast. Feathery snowflakes were falling thick and fast. "It's snowing now. Nobody will turn up tonight," Grandpa Peach told himself. Behind the closed door, in an earthenware brazier placed on the *kang* he burned cornstalks which he had taken out of the kitchen stove. He watched the fire in the dark room, warming himself. By the time he was half through with his pipe, the door was suddenly pushed open and in jumped two small shadowy figures. He knew by their movements that they were Hsiao-man and Hsiao-niu, but he deliberately kept silent.

"Are you sleeping, Grandpa Peach?" asked Hsiao-man.

Grandpa Peach pretended to be snoring, quite loudly.

"He's sound asleep. Let's go," whispered Hsiao-niu.

"Not yet, not yet. How can he smoke when he's asleep?" Climbing on to the edge of the *kang*, Hsiao-man inched forward to have a closer look at the old man. "He's not asleep, I tell you,"



he burst out laughing, "his eyes are not even closed."

"No more stories tonight for you even though I'm not asleep," protested Grandpa Peach.

"Please tell us one. Just one story and we'll be off right away," coaxed Hsiao-man, taking hold of the old man's arm and rocking it back and forth.

"Don't bother me. Don't bother me. . . . All right, I'll tell you just one," consented the old man at last, asking Hsiao-niu meanwhile to light the oil lamp.

The lamp having been lit, Grandpa Peach took some moments for reflection and then began:

"Once upon a time there lived a woman who had a boy. . . ."

"What was his name?" inquired Hsiao-man, hastily, apprehensive in case he might be involved in this story and made the butt of ridicule.

"Don't be afraid. His name was anything but Hsiao-man," continued Grandpa Peach with a chuckle. "The boy's name was Pai-sui. Well, be patient, my little boy, let me tell you the story of how little Pai-sui travelled from place to place looking for his father."

## THE STORY AS TOLD BY GRANDPA PEACH

Pai-sui and his mother lived in a hilly region to the west of Peking. In the winter of 1945, the year the Japanese invaders were defeated, they were very poor and miserable for there wasn't an inch of land they could call their own. Since it would be a sheer impossibility to stay alive in their native village, despite the inclement weather they decided to go to somewhere north of the Great Wall to look for their missing husband and father.

Pai-sui was a clever lad, with regular features and large bright eyes. When he was seven, Tsao Lao-kuei, his father, had had to run away from home for safety's sake and since then had never returned. Word was brought back soon after his departure that he was working in a coal mine at a place called Lower Garden to the south of Chang-chiakou. Pai-sui remembered very well how his father, an old man with a bushy, rumped beard, would often take him to the fields to teach him how to stand on his own little hands, turn a somersault or catch sparrows. He remembered best of all the magic appeal of his father's favourite

instrument, the *sona* — he could play it as well as Grandpa Peach — and for that, his father's name was well known for a good many miles around. On market days those who met Lao-kuei would often beg him for a *sona* performance and their requests were rarely turned down. They found the greatest pleasure in his rendering of *A Hundred Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix*. He imitated all the singing birds known to him, such as larks, cuckoos, swallows and orioles. Even the birds on the trees would be charmed by his rare skill. They would stop twittering and hold their breath with their heads cocked on one side, looking down in amazement.

It was because of this magic instrument that Tsao Lao-kuei had been in great personal danger. The Japanese aggression against China had always made him sick at heart, and he vented his disgust in a song of his own composing. He often played it on his *sona*, alone in his house, while squatting on the *kang*. The ditty was so strange that nobody could guess what it was about. One day Pai-sui and some of his little companions tiptoed to a corner outside the window and listened. After making several attempts to understand the song,



Pai-sui suddenly realized what it was about and shouted across the window:

"I know what you are playing about, papa."

"What's that, my boy?"

"You're speaking through the sona, papa."

Jumping and clapping his hands, the little boy began to sing:

*Drink the cold water, you Japanese devils,  
Drink your fill,  
And be ready to be shot down by our bullets!*

The old man gave vent to his feelings only in private at first, but as time went on, he became bolder. One day he even played the same tune to a big crowd in the market place. Informed by some of their lackeys, the Japanese soldiers stationed nearby rushed to the scene, fired a few shots and arrested some people.

Lao-kuei dared not return to his home, so he ran away. All this had happened about seven or eight years before my story begins.

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As mother and son set out on their journey, the woman was very reluctant to leave her home. She often turned back to cast a lingering farewell

glance at it. After a short distance she would sit down for a while, and then go another short distance and sit down again.

"Are you too tired to walk, mama? May I carry you on my back?"

"Oh, what a silly boy!" the woman said with a forced smile. "Don't be so childish! How can you carry me on your back? See, there's a large cart coming along, just over there. Go and say something nice to the driver and see if he will give us a ride for a short distance."

Pai-sui saw on a side road was a mule-cart loaded with earthenware cooking-pots coming along. Perched on one side of the driver's seat was a man of heavy build, with thick eyebrows. His voice was rough and harsh as he shouted at the beast.

"Uncle! Uncle! Are you going to town to sell the pots?" the boy cried out as he ran up to the cart.

"Want to have a ride, do you?" the driver asked, drawing the reins a bit while casting a sharp, critical glance over Pai-sui.

The boy stammered bashfully, "It's not that I want to ride. My mother is too tired to walk. . . ."

"Does your mother want to have a lift because she is too tired to walk?" the driver asked, knitting his bushy eyebrows. "Don't try to beat about the bush. That sounds girlish, doesn't it?" Then he jumped off the cart and, tapping the shaft with the handle of his whip, he said briskly, "Sit up here."

After mother and son had climbed onto the cart, the driver started off with a sharp crack of his whip.

"This is a very good man indeed. But how is it that he has such a hot temper?" Pai-sui asked himself. "It seems that he is always angry with somebody and is likely to flare up at the slightest provocation." All the time Pai-sui tried to induce the driver to talk, but he only introduced himself as Lao-pien and would go no further. The moment, however, he learned that Pai-sui was on his way to Lower Garden to look for his father, he brightened up a bit and exclaimed enthusiastically:

"Go! Go! Lower Garden is in another world, it's quite different from ours."

"Do you say so?" Pai-sui asked, quite puzzled.

"Ah! There's a world of difference, indeed!" Then Lao-pien became mysterious as he looked

round. "First of all, it is a Liberated Area. There's no lack of food and clothing for the poor and needy over there, they say, whereas here we are. . . ." At this point, a visible change came over his voice and expression and he began to swear angrily. "Things are as 'good' here as anywhere else. Here, every hour of the day you are made the target of bitter abusive attacks by those bastards, those sons of bitches. Where can you find anyone entirely free from headaches or other ailments? If you have to lie in bed a little while longer than usual, your boss is sure to heap abuse on his mule as a way of scolding you. Right outside your window, he will give the mule a violent kick and then curse the beast: 'Sleep! Sleep! You know nothing but sleep! I provide fodder for you not with a turn of the wrist either, but you tuck it away into your stomach while you do nothing. If I catch you sleeping again tomorrow, I'll cut your throat and eat your flesh!' "

At this point, Lao-pien raised his whip and thrashed the mule as hard as possible, while cursing bitterly:

"You dumb brute! You eat man's food but never speak man's word. Even if I beat you to death I wouldn't want to eat your flesh!"

The mule dodged backwards and sideways with its neck stretched and eyes rolling in fright. Lao-pien tightened the reins and beat it harder than ever. The beast struggled on, kicking and pounding the ground like mad with its hind hoofs. A moment later the reins suddenly slipped from his grasp and the beast darted forward and sideways in a wild fury with the cart behind it. Greatly frightened, the woman who was unable to steady herself tumbled down from the cart on to the snow-covered ground and was nearly run over by the swift-moving wheels. Pai-sui quickly dashed forward and helped her to her feet. The beast stumbled over something and its fore legs slipped into a snow-filled hole by the roadside. The cart overturned. The pots were all broken to pieces.

Greatly alarmed, Pai-sui rushed to Lao-pien's assistance, trying to help him pull the wallowing beast out of the hole.

"Its leg is broken," the driver said, shaking his head helplessly. Squatting down with his arms crossed, he did nothing but knit his brows in a blank stare.

"Uncle! What if your master finds out all about it?" asked the boy with concern.

At this Lao-pien rose abruptly to his feet: "What do I have to fear? Will he dare to kill me?" Then, he said with a vigorous wave of his hand: "What are you waiting here for? You go! Go off at once! Over there, just ahead of us, is the railway station. The sooner you get 'there' the better."

As he led his mother slowly on to the station, Pai-sui felt very concerned with the fate of the carter. They were just in time for a north-bound train, so they bought two tickets for Lower Garden and boarded it in great haste.

It was Pai-sui's first trip by train. The train was running on the wings of the wind. "This will certainly take us to our destination in less than forty winks," Pai-sui told himself. He tried to put this to the test by closing his weary eyes and at once he fell fast asleep. He had been asleep for quite a long while when his mother woke him up. "Get up, my boy! Get up and see if we have arrived."

He opened his eyes with a start. "Have we arrived at Lower Garden already, mama?" he asked in a daze.

At the iron door of the carriage stood a stout, dark-skinned soldier with a white band round his



left arm, idly watching everything. Hearing the boy's words, he turned and took stock of him from head to foot. "Get down, get down! You've arrived!" the soldier called out in a crisp tone of affected friendliness.

Pai-sui's mother was frightened. She thought, "This must be one of those villainous men, belonging to what are called the 'White Bands'." She realized that she had better fight shy of such people, so with the boy's hand firmly in her grasp, she climbed down hastily and timidly and tried to walk away without attracting further notice.

"Open your parcels!" commanded the stout dark-skinned soldier, seizing the boy by the shoulder. The parcels having been opened, he rummaged through the contents, searched Pai-sui and his mother's bodies, cross-questioned them and then pushed Pai-sui away to turn his attention to other passengers.

"How far is it from here to the coal mine? Don't you know, mama?" inquired the boy, packing up their things in haste. He was anxious to meet his father.

"Not very far. No more than five hundred *li*<sup>1</sup> away," remarked the soldier indifferently. See-

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<sup>1</sup> 1 *li* = 0.5 kilometre = 0.3107 mile. — *Tr.*

ing that his casual remarks had thrown the woman into great confusion, he added with a chuckle. "What? Far away? Five hundred *li* is nothing to the ten thousand *li* Meng Chiang-nu travelled in the olden days in search of her missing husband." Then he sauntered off in a leisurely manner, his hands behind his back.

Mother and son felt puzzled and lost. A detailed inquiry revealed that the train they had boarded had arrived at its destination, Green Dragon Bridge, and would go no further. The mother was sure, however, that she had bought tickets for Lower Garden, so she promptly produced them and showed them to a man close by. It was discovered at once that the tickets were only for Green Dragon Bridge. Being told of the price she had paid for them, the man stared at her in amazement: "What? How much? Even a ticket for Changchiakou doesn't cost as much as that!"

Something was buzzing and whirling about in the mother's head. She felt her legs give way; her whole body, unable to support itself, sank to the ground. She had very little money left in her pocket, barely enough to buy a few more meals. She had cherished great hopes of meeting her husband and settling down to a better life. But now,

having covered only half the journey, they were left completely alone to cope with the hopeless situation confronting them. Alas, what was to be done?

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The two of them stayed at the station that night, huddled together in a corner of a small room throughout the night, shivering with cold. The next morning they asked the way to Lower Garden and slowly started out, intending to cover the rest of their journey on foot. The exasperating experience of the previous day and night had had a bad effect upon the mother: her teeth were aching. To make things worse, it was snowing. Huge snowflakes were flying about. After travelling twenty or thirty *li* in wind and snow and with an empty stomach, she was completely worn out; sparks began to dance before her eyes, and her head swam, till finally she was unable to move any further. The boy was scared. As luck would have it, through the blinding snowflakes he saw a walled village and a little way from it, a small hut standing alone and desolate. Slowly he helped his mother on till they reached the hut. It was a small, poor, one-roomed cabin for night watchers