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WAS TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD, STATIONED at a commune in Yunnan. Chen Qingyang was twenty-six, working as a doctor in the same place. I was in Team 14 at the bottom of the hill. She was in Team 15 up at the top. One day, she came down from the mountain to ask me whether she was a loose woman, a so-called old shoe. I didn't know her at the time, I had only heard of her. What she wanted to talk about was this: even though everyone called her an old shoe, she didn't think it was true. Her theory was that loose women steal men, and she had never stolen anything, let alone anyone's man. Even with her husband having spent the past year behind bars, she had never taken a lover. And even before that, she had never done it. Therefore, she just couldn't understand why everyone called her an old shoe. Comforting her would have been easy. I could have done it just through logic. If Chen Qingyang was an old shoe, then she must have had affairs, and those men, at least one of them, must still be around to testify. So far, no such person could be found; therefore, calling Chen Qingyang an

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old shoe was unfounded. But still, what I said to her was, Chen Qingyang you are definitely an old shoe, there is no doubt about it.

The whole thing with Chen Qingyang asking me to prove that she wasn't an old shoe started when I went to her for a shot. The story went as follows: during the busy planting season, our captain didn't hand me a plow, but asked me to plant rice seedlings instead, so that most of the time my back was bent downward. As anyone who knows me also knows I have an old injury to my lower back, and I stand over 1.9 meters tall. After a month of transplanting, I was in so much pain that I needed a cortisone shot just to go to sleep. Our infirmary only had a bunch of old busted needles with barbed tips that ripped the flesh straight out. They left my lower back looking like it had been shot with a shotgun, leaving lingering shrapnel wounds. It was then that I remembered that Team 15's Chen Qingyang was a graduate of the Beijing Medical University. I figured she could probably tell a needle from a fishhook, so I went to her to get treated. It wasn't more than thirty minutes after I returned from the doctor's visit that she came barging into my hut, asking me to prove that she wasn't an old shoe.

CHEN QINGYANG SAID, it wasn't that she had anything against loose women. As far as she could tell, they tended to be kind, helpful people who hated to let anyone down. She had some admiration for them. But the point wasn't if they were worthy women or not, it was just that she was not one of them. It was just like how cats weren't dogs. If a cat had found itself being called a dog, it also would have felt uncomfortable. With everyone calling her an old shoe, even she herself was beginning to question what she was.

Chen Qingyang appeared in my hut wearing a white doctor's medical gown with bare arms and legs. It was the way she had looked earlier in the infirmary with the exception of a handkerchief tied around her long hair and a pair of flip-flops on her feet. The

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sight of her led me to wonder: was she wearing anything under that white gown, or was she not? The fact that she didn't care what she wore was proof of Chen Qingyang's beauty. She had the sort of confidence that had been nurtured from a young age. I told her she really was an old shoe and began to explain: the term *loose old shoe* is a stereotype. If everyone calls you an old shoe, then that is what you are. It doesn't have to obey logic. If everyone says you are having an affair, then you must be having an affair. You can't reason with it. As for why everyone wants to call you an old shoe, I think the reason was this: everyone believes that the kind of married woman who doesn't have affairs should have leathery faces and saggy breasts. Your face isn't leathery and your breasts don't sag; therefore, you must be what they say. If you don't want to be an old shoe, then you should weather your face and let your breasts sag. Only then will people stop calling you an old shoe. Of course, that would be quite a sacrifice. If you aren't inclined to make such a sacrifice, then you should just have an affair. That way, even you will agree that you are an old shoe. They don't need to figure out if you really had affairs before calling you an old shoe. You are the only one responsible for making sure that no one can call you names. When Chen Qingyang heard these words, her face turned red and her eyes bulged out. She looked like she wanted to slap me in the face. This woman was notorious for her generous slaps, many had felt the heat of her palm on their cheeks. But she sighed and said, "Fine, whatever, but what is or isn't leathery or saggy is none of your business." She added that if I pondered these things too much, I would probably get slapped.

That was twenty years ago. I can still picture Chen Qingyang and me exchanging words about old shoes. My face was tawny and my parched lips were specked with shreds of paper and tobacco. My hair was like the mess of a bird's nest. I wore a tattered army coat with more than a few taped-up patches. With one leg over the other, slouching on my wooden plank bed, I looked like a hooligan.

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You can only imagine how Chen Qingyang must have felt listening to a guy talk about saggy breasts, how her palm must have itched. It made her neurotic that it was always healthy, strong men coming to see her at the infirmary. They weren't sick. They weren't interested in seeing a doctor. They just wanted to see her. I was the only exception. My lower back looked like I had two farm rakes built in it. Never mind the pain, the cavities alone warranted a visit to the doctor. Those cavities somehow gave her hope that I could prove she was not a slut. Having one person believe it was qualitatively different from having no one believe it at all. But I let her down.

My thinking went like this: if I had wanted to prove that she wasn't an old shoe, and that my will to do so would have been proof enough of her innocence, then life would have been too easy. In truth, I couldn't prove anything aside from some mundane facts that needed no further proof. In the spring, the captain accused me of shooting out his dog's left eye, forcing it to constantly tilt its head like a ballerina. After that, the captain began giving me a hard time. If I had wanted to prove my innocence, I could have asserted the following:

1. The captain didn't own a dog;
2. Said dog was born without a left eye;
3. I had no hands, so I couldn't have fired a gun.

Of the three assertions, none was true. The captain did, in fact, own a brown dog. Said brown dog's left eye was, in fact, blinded after birth. And not only was I capable of pulling a trigger, I was quite a good shot. Not long before the incident, I had borrowed an air gun from Luo Xiaosi. Using a bowl of mung beans as ammunition, I exterminated a kilogram of rats in the empty silo. Of course, I wasn't the only sharpshooter in our team. Luo wasn't bad either. The air gun belonged to him and when he

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shot the dog blind, I was standing next to him, watching. I wasn't one to tattle. Luo and I were pretty close. Besides, if the captain had had the balls to confront Luo Xiaosi, he wouldn't have had to pick on me. So I kept quiet, and quiet meant guilty. That was how I ended up transplanting rice seedlings in the spring keeled over like a broken utility pole. After the fall harvest, I was ordered to herd oxen again. It meant no warm meal for me all day. Of course I didn't just give in. One day, at the top of a hill, when I just happened to have Luo's air gun with me, the captain's brown dog crossed my path. I took the opportunity to put a bullet in its right eye. The dog was blind in both eyes now and couldn't have found its way home for the captain to find out—heaven knows where it ran off to.

I REMEMBER IN those days, other than herding oxen and lying in bed, I didn't do much of anything. It was like the world had nothing to do with me. But once more, Chen Qingyang came down the hill to look for me. Apparently, there was a rumor that Chen Qingyang and I were having an affair. She wanted me to prove our innocence. I said, to prove our innocence, we must prove one of the following:

1. Chen Qingyang is a virgin;
2. I was born without a penis.

Both of these propositions were hard to prove; therefore, we couldn't prove our innocence. In fact, I was leaning more toward proving that we weren't innocent. When Chen Qingyang heard these words, she first turned white with anger, then red, then without a word she stood up and left.

Chen Qingyang later said, that from the start, I was an asshole. The first time she asked me to prove her innocence, I rolled my

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eyes and spewed a bunch of nonsense. The second time she asked me to prove our innocence, I ended up offering her a serious proposal for sexual intercourse. She decided then that she was going to slap me sooner or later. Had I known what she was up to, perhaps the following events would not have happened.

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ON MY TWENTY-FIRST BIRTHDAY, I was herding oxen down by the river. In the afternoon, I took a nap on the grass. When I woke up, the banana leaf I had covered myself with before dozing off was nowhere to be found (the leaf might have been eaten by an ox). The dry season's subtropical sun had seared my bare skin crimson red. It was painful and itchy as hell. My little monk was pointing straight up to the sky in an unprecedented size. Such was the state of the world on my birthday. I woke up to the sun's blinding light and a sky terrifyingly blue. A layer of fine dust, like baby powder, had settled over me. Of all the boners I was to have in life, none was ever to match that one in mightiness. Maybe it was because I was in the middle of nowhere, in solitude.

I got up to look for the herd and found them crouching far off by the river's fork, chewing on grass. In that quiet moment, a white breeze hewed across the field. By the riverbank, a couple of local bulls charged at one another with bloodshot eyes, frothing at the

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mouth. These bulls had tight ball sacks and strong long shafts. Our oxen didn't do this sort of thing. If any of the bulls were to challenge them, they would have cowered. To avoid mating-related injuries, which would have affected spring plowing, we castrated them all.

I was there during all the castrations. For ordinary bulls, a simple slice of the scrotum sufficed. But for more temperamental animals, the crushing technique was used, which meant first pulling out the bull's testicles then mashing them to a pulp with a wooden club. Henceforth, the crushed ox knew nothing besides eating and working. It didn't even need to be tied up for slaughter. The captain who wielded the wooden club had no doubt that the crushing technique could work just as well on men. Whenever he yelled at us, he would say: all you bunch of bull testicles need is a good crushing! According to his logic, this bright red, foot-long thing pointing perpendicular to me was the very incarnation of evil.

Of course, I saw things differently. In my opinion, the thing was of utmost importance, the essence of my being. Clouds drifted lazily across the darkening sky. That day, I turned twenty-one. In the golden age of my life, I was full of dreams. I wanted to love, to eat, and to instantly transform into one of those clouds, part alight, part darkened. It was only later that I understood—life is but a slow, drawn-out process of getting your balls crushed. Day by day, you get older. Day by day, your dreams fade. In the end you are no different from a crushed ox. But I hadn't foreseen any of it on my twenty-first birthday. I thought I'd be vigorous forever and that nothing could ever crush me.

I HAD INVITED Chen Qingyang over to eat fish that evening, so I should have gotten hold of some fish in the afternoon. But it wasn't until five o'clock that I thought to check on the fish trap I had diverted

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from the creek. As I was getting to a bend in the river, two Jingpo* kids came fighting down the trail. They hurled clots of dirt everywhere, hitting me in their crossfire. They wouldn't stop until I grabbed one of them by his ear and shouted:

“Where are the fucking fish!”

The slightly older one said, “It’s all fucking Le Nong’s fault! He sat on the dam and broke it!”

Le Nong shrieked, “Wang Er! You didn’t build the fucking dam strong enough!”

I replied, “Lies! I sodded the dam myself. Who says it wasn’t strong enough?”

I took a closer look. Whether it was because Le Nong sat on it or because I hadn’t built it strong enough, the dam had collapsed and the water that was diverted from the creek flowed back out, along with all the fish. A whole day’s work was wasted. Of course, I couldn’t say it was my fault, so I blamed Le Nong. Le Du, the other kid, took my side, making Le Nong furious. He jumped up high in the air and screamed, “Wang Er! Le Du! Shit! You guys are ganging up on me like brothers-in-law! I’m gonna go tell dad and he’s gonna shotgun you both!”

The little rascal tried to scamper up the riverbank, but before he could get away, I grabbed him by the ankle and pulled him back down.

“Just walk away and leave us to herd your oxen? In your ma’s dreams!”

The little punk tried to bite me but I pinned him down to the ground. His mouth foamed as he cursed in a mixture of Mandarin, Jingpo, and Dai.[†] I returned the verbal assault in back-alley

*The Jingpo are an ethnic minority in northwest Burma and the adjacent parts of China.

[†]The Dai are an ethnic minority native to China’s Yunnan province. Their language is related to the Thai and Laotian languages.

Beijingese. Suddenly, he stopped cursing as he lowered his eyes down my torso with a look of admiration. I looked down. My little monk had perked up again.

Le Nong couldn't help but admire, "Wow! Is that for Le Du's sister?"

I immediately tossed him aside and went to put on some pants.

WHEN I LIT the gas lamp in the water pump room at night, Chen Qingyang would appear and begin to talk about how pointless her life was, and how she really was innocent on every count. I told her the fact that she felt so immaculate was in itself the greatest sin. The way I saw it, every person was by nature horny and lazy. By going out of your way to protect your body like a precious jade, you've already committed the sin of phoniness, a sin worse than lust or sloth. She seemed to listen, but she never agreed to any of it.

That night, I lit the gas lamp and waited for Chen Qingyang for a long time. It wasn't until after nine that she appeared at my door shouting, "Wang Er, asshole! Come out!"

I went outside and found her dressed in white, looking extra elegant, but with a tense look on her face. She said: you invited me over for fish and a heart-to-heart, where's the fish? I could only answer that the fish was still in the river. All right, she said, so we are left with the heart-to-heart, we can talk right here. I insisted on talking inside. She agreed, entered my room, and sat down with a flustered look.

On my twenty-first birthday, I had wished to seduce Chen Qingyang because she was my friend, her breasts were big, her waist was thin, and her butt was round. Not only that. Her neck was also gracefully long and her face very pretty. I wanted to have sex with her, and was hoping she might agree. If she had wanted to borrow my body to explore anatomy, I would have let her; so I hoped it would have been fine for me to explore her body as well. The only problem was that she was a woman and women tend to be a bit

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picky. I needed to inspire her, so I began to explain the meaning of *epic friendship*.

In my view, epic friendship was the way great warriors wandering rivers and lakes would honor each other. For the heroes in *The Water Margin*, murder and arson were commonplace; but the moment Ji Shiyu's name was pronounced, they immediately bowed in respect. I, too, wanted to be a reckless hero who believed in nothing, but who would never violate the bonds of friendship. As long as you were my friend, no matter how much evil you had done, even if the whole world had wanted you gone, I would still be there by your side. That night, I offered my epic friendship to Chen Qingyang. She was so moved she not only accepted my friendship, but wanted to repay me with an even more epic friendship. She would never abandon me even if I were a wicked scumbag. Her words set my worries at ease so I went on to conclude my point: I'm already twenty-one years old, but I still haven't experienced the thing between a man and a woman, it really bothers me. Upon hearing me out, she froze, perhaps in surprise. She didn't react to anything I said. I put my hand on her shoulder and felt her muscles tense. She could have turned around and slapped me any time, it would have been proof that women knew nothing about friendship. But she didn't. Abruptly, she scoffed, and smiled. She said: how silly of me! I fell for your trick so easily!

I asked, what trick, what are you talking about?

Nothing, she replied. I pushed her to answer what I had just asked her. "Screw you," she blushed. She was acting a little coy, so I took the initiative and touched her. She shoved me away a few times and then said, not here, let's go up the mountain. So I followed her up the mountain.

CHEN QINGYANG LATER said she still couldn't figure out if my epic friendship was real or something I made up just to seduce her. But she also admitted that my words were like a spell that beguiled

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her; they made her feel like even if she were to lose everything, she would have no regrets. Indeed, my epic friendship was neither real nor fake. Just like everything else in this world, if you believed it to be real, it would continue to be real; if you suspected it to be fake, then it might be fake. My words weren't entirely a lie. I would always stand by them, even if they undoubtedly meant doom. It was this very attitude that led no one to trust me. Even though I thought of friendship as life's great endeavor, I somehow still only ever made a couple of friends, including Chen Qingsyang. When we went up the mountain that night, we stopped halfway because she wanted to go back home for a minute. She told me to wait at the summit. I suspected that she might hang me out to dry, but I stayed quiet and made my way to the summit for a smoke. Soon after, she arrived.

Chen Qingsyang said, the first time I went to get a shot from her, she was at her desk snoozing. People in Yunnan had a lot of time to snooze. As a result, everyone was always just waking up. When I approached, my shadow darkened the room. Most of the light coming into her mud-walled hut came in through the doorway. She woke, looked up, and asked me what I needed. I said my lower back hurt. She told me to lie down. I dove face-first onto the bamboo cot, nearly breaking it. My back was in too much pain for me to bend over. Had that not been the case, I wouldn't have needed to see her in the first place.

Chen Qingsyang told me that even as a young man, I had wrinkly beggar lips and black bags under my eyes. I was tall, dressed in rags, and didn't like to say much. After I got my shot, I left. I might have said thank you, or maybe not. By the time she realized I could help her prove she wasn't an old shoe, I had already gone. She ran out after me but saw that I was taking the shortcut to Team 14. I swooshed down along the undulating hill, as fleet-footed as if I were wearing wings. It was morning during the dry season. Wind swept up from the valley, muting her voice as she called out to me. I never looked back. Like that, I just walked away.

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Chen Qingyang said, she wanted to chase after me but knew she would never catch up. Besides, she wasn't sure if I could prove her innocence yet. She returned to the infirmary. Later on, she changed her mind and decided to look for me because everyone who called her an old shoe was an enemy. It was possible that I wasn't yet an enemy. She didn't want to miss this opportunity and allow me to become just another enemy.

THAT NIGHT, I smoked on the summit of the mountain. Despite the darkness, I could see far. The moon was bright and the air was crisp. I could hear dogs barking in the distance. I saw Chen Qingyang as soon as she got out of Team 15. Even during the day, you couldn't always see that far. But it felt different, perhaps because there was nobody around.

I couldn't be entirely sure there was nobody around because everything was just a silvery gray. If someone had walked around carrying a torch, it would have indicated to the world that someone was there. Without a torch, you might as well have been wearing an invisibility cloak, only those who knew you were there would feel you, and no one else would see a thing. As I watched Chen Qingyang move closer, my heart thumped. Instinctively, I knew what I had to do—before doing the thing, we should play.

Chen Qingyang's reaction to me was as cold as ice. Her lips were frozen. She was unresponsive to my caresses. When I clumsily tried to undo her buttons, she pushed me away and began undressing piece by piece. She stacked her clothes neatly by her side and lay stiffly on the grass.

Chen Qingyang's nude body was so beautiful. I quickly took off my clothes and went to her. Once again, she pushed me away. She handed me something as she asked, "Do you know how to use this or do you need me to teach you?"

It was a condom. In my eager state, the sharp tone of her voice barely registered. After slipping on the condom, I quickly crawled

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to her side. I tried to find my bearings, but it clearly wasn't working. Frostily, she sneered, "Hey! Do you even know what you're doing?"

I said, of course I know, but could I trouble you to scoot over a bit? I want to study your body under the light. I heard a crash loud like a thunderclap in my ear. She had smacked me hard. I stood up, grabbed my clothes and bolted.

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DIDN'T MANAGE TO GET AWAY that night. Chen Qingyang grabbed me and made me stay in the name of epic friendship. She admitted it had been wrong to hit me and that she had not been fair. But she added that my epic friendship was fake, and that I had tricked her out there just to study her anatomy. I replied, if I'm a fake then why did you believe me? I did want to see and touch her body, but only with her consent. If she wasn't interested, she could have made it clear without hitting me. She laughed and said she couldn't stand looking at my thing. The sight of that stupid-looking shameless thing made her angry.

The two of us kept arguing, entirely naked. My little monk remained upright, covered in plastic, shimmering in the moonlight. She noticed that I was upset and tried to be conciliatory: anyway, your thing is hideous, don't you admit?

The thing hovered like an enraged cobra, it was indeed rather unsightly. If you don't want to see it, then forget it, I said. I wanted to put on my pants but she said, come on don't be like that. So I lit

a cigarette. When I finished my smoke, she hugged me. Then two of us did it on the grass.

Until my twenty-first birthday, I was a virgin. That night, I seduced Chen Qingyang to go up the mountain with me. The night began with a bright moon. After it descended, the sky was full of stars, as many as morning dewdrops on a meadow. It was a windless night; the mountain was quiet. Chen Qingyang and I had sex; I was no longer a virgin. But it didn't really make me happy because all along she didn't make a sound. She rested her head on her arms and stared at me contemplatively. From start to finish, it was a solo show; not that I held on for very long, I came right away. The whole thing left me angry and disappointed.

Chen Qingyang said, she couldn't believe it actually happened: I actually revealed before her that hideous male genitalia without any sense of shame. That thing itself was shameless too, sliding in between her legs. That men would use girls only because they have an opening in their bodies did not make sense at all. She had a husband who would do it to her every day. She never said a thing, only waited for him to one day feel ashamed enough to explain why he was doing it. But he never gave an explanation, even later when he was in jail. I didn't like what she was implying so I asked: if you're not up for it, why do you agree? She said, I don't want to appear stingy, to which I replied that she was stingy by nature. She said, let's not fight over it. She told me to come back another night to try again, maybe she would like it better then. I didn't say anything. In the morning, after the fog lifted, she and I parted ways and I went down the mountain to herd.

THAT NIGHT, INSTEAD OF going to look for her, I ended up in the hospital. The story went like this: in the morning, instead of waiting for me to arrive, a bunch of guys took it upon themselves to open the ox pen. They all wanted the stronger oxen for plowing the field. This one local fellow named San Mener was pulling on a big

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white ox. I walked over and told him that the ox had been bitten by a poisonous snake so it couldn't work. He didn't seem to hear me. I reached out and grabbed the ox's rein. The guy slapped me. I reacted quickly and sent him tumbling with a shove. Soon, we were surrounded by a circle of men eager to join the fight. The intellectual youths from Beijing were on one side and the local guys were on the other. They picked up sticks and pulled out their belts; but after some bickering, they didn't fight. Instead, they wanted me and San Mener to wrestle. San Mener knew he had no chance so he took a swing at me. With a single kick, I sent him flying into a manure pit. Covered in shit, San Mener got back on his feet, grabbed a pitchfork, and came at me only to be stopped by the crowd.

So that happened in the morning. At night, when I returned from herding the oxen, the captain said that because I had assaulted the poor and lower-middle-class peasants, it was necessary to hold a struggle session against me. I warned him that if he wanted to use the opportunity to bully me, he should really think twice; I just might start a riot. The captain said he had no intention of bullying me but San Mener's mother was raising hell, he had no choice. The old hag was a widow, mean as they come. He said such were the local customs. Later, he changed his tone and the struggle session became an amelioration meeting, meaning I had to go to the village to publicly apologize. If I disagreed, he would turn me over to the widow to do with as she pleased.

The meeting was pandemonium. The villagers carped on and on about how disrespectful the intellectual youths were, stealing and assaulting and all. The intellectual youths retorted, bullshit! Who is stealing things, have you caught anyone red-handed? We are here for the national border development,* we're not some exiled marauding soldiers, we will not respond to baseless accusations. I didn't offer any apologies, I just joined the fray. But I failed to

*In the 1960s, Chinese intellectual youth from the cities were sent to live and work in rural areas.

notice San Mener's mother sneaking up from behind me with a heavy wooden stool. Suddenly, she struck me on my old lower back wound and I blacked out from the pain.

When I woke up, Luo Xiaosi was leading a mob, calling for the burning of the ox pen. They demanded that San Mener's mother should pay with her life. The captain led another group to intervene, while the deputy captain ordered a few men to carry me onto an ox cart to be taken to the hospital. A nurse warned that if my spine was broken, I might die from being lifted. I told them my spine seemed fine so please cart me away. But no one was sure if my spine was really fine, so no one was sure if I would die the moment I was lifted. After a long wait, the captain came to check on me. He said, hurry and dial for Chen Qingyang so she can check if his spine is broken. It wasn't long before Chen Qingyang came swooping in with fluttering hair and swollen eyes. Her first words to me were: don't be afraid. If you are paralyzed, I'll take care of you forever. After a brief examination, the diagnosis was just as I had predicted. So I got on an ox cart and went to the hospital at the headquarter.

That night, Chen Qingyang stayed with me at the hospital until the X-rays came back showing no major injuries. Before leaving, she said she would come visit me in a day or two but she never came. After a week of convalescence, I could walk again so I ran off to look for her.

When I entered Chen Qingyang's office, I was carrying a back-basket overflowing with supplies. In addition to pots and pans, bowls and ladles, there was enough food for two people to eat for a month. She saw me come in and with a slight smile she said, how are you? Where are you going with all those things?

I said I wanted to go to Qingping for the hot spring. She sat back lazily and said, sounds good, the hot spring could help with that old wound. I said I wasn't really going to the hot spring but to the mountain out back for a few days. She said there was nothing back there, why not go to the hot spring.

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