

Shaona kept her eyes shut, trying to sleep. Outside, the noonday sun was blazing, and
5 bumblebees were droning in the shade of an elm. Time and again one of them would
bump into the window's wire screen with a thud and then a louder buzz. Soon
Teacher Shen's voice in the next room grew clearer.

"Oh please!" the teacher blubbered on the phone. "I'll pay you the money in three
months. You've already helped me so much, why can't you help me out?"

10 Those words made Shaona fully awake. She moved her head closer to the wall and
strained her ears to listen. The teacher begged, "Have mercy on me, Dr. Niu. I've an
old mother at home. My mother and I have to live. . . . And you know, I lost so much
blood, because of the baby, that I need to eat eggs to recuperate. I'm really broke
now. Can you just give me another month?"

15 Shaona was puzzled, thinking how a baby could injure her teacher's health. Her
grandmother used to say that babies were dug out from pumpkin fields in the
countryside. Why did her teacher sound as though the baby had come out of her
body? Why did she bleed for the baby?

Teacher Shen's voice turned desperate. "Please, don't tell anyone about the abortion!
20 I'll try my best to pay you . . . very soon. I'll see if I can borrow some money from a
friend."

What's an abortion? Shaona asked herself. Is it something that holds a baby? What
does it look like? Must be very expensive.

Her teacher slammed the phone down, then cried, "Heaven help me!"

25 Shaona couldn't sleep anymore. She missed her parents so much that she began
sobbing again. This was her second week in the kindergarten, and she was not used to
sleeping alone yet. Her small iron bed was uncomfortable, in every way different
from the large soft bed at home, which could hold her entire family. She couldn't help
wondering if her parents would love her the same as before, because three weeks ago
30 her mother had given her a baby brother. These days her father was so happy that he
often chanted snatches of opera.

In the room seven other children were napping, one of them wheezing with a stuffy nose. Two large bronze moths, exhausted by the heat, were resting on the ceiling, their powdery wings flickering now and again. Shaona yawned sleepily, but still couldn't go to sleep.

5 At two-thirty the bell rang, and all the nappers got out of their beds. Teacher Shen gathered the whole class of five- and six-year-olds in the corridor. Then in two lines they set out for the turnip field behind the kindergarten. It was still hot. A steamboat went on blowing her horn in the north, and a pair of jet fighters were flying in the distant sky, drawing a long double curve. Shaona wondered how a pilot could fit
10 inside those planes, which looked as small as pigeons. In the air lingered a sweetish odor of dichlorvos, which had been sprayed around the city to get rid of flies, fleas, mosquitoes. The children were excited, because seldom were they allowed to go out of the stone wall topped with shards of dark brown glass. Today, instead of playing games within the yard as the children of the other classes were doing, Teacher Shen
15 was going to teach them how to gather purslanes. Few of them knew what a purslane looked like, but they were all eager to search for the herb.

On the way, their teacher turned around to face them, flourishing her narrow hand and saying, "Boys and girls, you'll eat sautéed purslanes this evening. It tastes great, different from anything you've ever had. Tell me, do you all want to have purslanes
20 for dinner or not?"

"Yes! We do," a few voices cried.

The teacher smacked her lips. Her sunburned nose crinkled, a faint smile playing on her face. As she continued walking, the ends of her two braids, tied with green woolen strings, were stroking the baggy seat of her pants. She was a young woman,
25 tall and angular, with crescent eyebrows. She used to sing a lot; her voice was fruity and clear. But recently she was quiet, her face rather pallid. It was said that she had divorced her husband the previous summer because he had been sentenced to thirteen years in prison for embezzlement.

When they arrived at the field, Teacher Shen plucked a purslane from between two
30 turnip seedlings. She said to the children, who were standing in a horseshoe, "Look, its leaves are tiny, fleshy, and egg-shaped. It has reddish stems, different from regular veggies and grass. Sometimes it has small yellow flowers." She dropped the purslane into her duffel bag on the ground and went on, "Now, you each take charge of one row."

35 Following her orders, the children spread out along the edge of the field and then walked into the turnip seedlings.

Shaona lifted up the bottom of her checked skirt to form a basket before her stomach and set out to search. Purslanes weren't difficult to find among the turnips, whose greens were not yet larger than a palm. Pretty soon every one of the children gathered some purslanes.

- 5 "Don't stamp on the turnips!" Uncle Chang shouted at them from time to time. Sitting under an acacia, he was puffing away at a long pipe that had a brass bowl, his bald crown coated with beads of sweat. He was in charge of a few vegetable fields and the dilapidated pump house.

- 10 Shaona noticed Dabin, a rambunctious boy, sidling up to her, but she pretended she didn't see him. He nudged her and asked, "How many did you get?" He sniveled—two lines of dark mucus disappeared from his nostrils, then poked out again.

She lowered her skirt, showing him about a dozen purslanes.

He said with one eye shut, "You're no good. Look at mine." He held out his peaked cap, which was full.

- 15 She felt a little hurt, but kept quiet. He turned away to talk to other children, telling them that purslanes tasted awful. He claimed he had once eaten a bowl of purslane stew when he had diarrhea. He would never have touched that stuff if his parents hadn't forced him. "It tastes like crap, more bitter than sweet potato vines," he assured them.

- 20 "Not true," said Weilan, a scrawny girl. "Teacher Shen told us it tastes great."

"How can you know?"

"I just know it."

"You know your granny's fart!"

"Big asshole," Weilan said, and made a face at him, sticking out her tongue.

- 25 "Say that again, bitch!" He went up to her, grabbed her shoulder, pushed her to the ground, and kicked her buttocks. She burst out crying.

- 30 Their teacher came over and asked who had started the fight. Shaona pointed at Dabin. To her surprise, the teacher walked up to the boy and seized him by the ear, saying through her teeth, "You can't live for a day without making trouble. Come now, I'm going to give you a trouble-free place to stay." She was dragging him away.

“Ouch!” he cried with a rattling noise in his throat. “You’re pulling my ear off.”

“You’ll have the other one left.”

Passing Uncle Chang, Teacher Shen stopped to ask him to keep an eye on the children for a short while. Then she dragged Dabin back to the kindergarten.

5 Shaona’s mouth fell open. The boy would be “jailed,” and he might get even with her after he was released. On the second floor of their building was a room, a kitchen used only for storage, in a corner of which sat three bedside cupboards. Sometimes a troublesome boy would be locked in one of them for hours. Once in a while his teacher might forget to let him out in time, so that he had to go without lunch or
10 dinner.

About ten minutes later, Teacher Shen returned, panting hard as though she had just finished a sprint. She counted the children to make sure nobody was missing.

Shaona soon forgot Dabin, immersed in looking for more purslanes. For most of the children this was real work. Few of them had ever tasted anything they had gathered
15 themselves, so they were searching diligently. Whenever their little skirts or caps were full, they went over to unload the purslanes into the duffel bag, from which their teacher was busy picking out grass and other kinds of herbs mixed into the purslanes. The children were amazed that in just one and a half hours the bag was filled up, and that they had almost combed the entire field. Their teacher kept
20 reminding them of a proverb they had learned lately—“Many hands provide great strength.”

When they had searched the field, they were lined up hand in hand behind the pump house, ready to return to the kindergarten. But before leaving, for some reason their teacher gave several handfuls of purslanes to Uncle Chang. With grudging eyes they
25 watched her drop almost a third of their harvest into the old man’s wicker basket, but none of them made a peep. The old man went on smiling at the young woman, saying, “All right, enough, enough. Keep the rest for yourself.” As he was speaking, spittle was emitted through his gapped teeth.

Shaona’s mind was racing, and she couldn’t wait for dinner. She thought, If purslane
30 tastes real good, I’ll pick some for Mom and Dad. She knew a place in the kindergarten—inside the deserted pigsty—where she had seen a few purslanes.

To her dismay, dinner was similar to other days’: corn glue, steamed sweet potatoes, and sautéed radishes. There wasn’t even a purslane leaf on the table. Every one of her classmates looked upset. Not knowing what to say, some children were noisily
35 stirring the corn glue with spoons. Shaona wanted to cry, but she controlled herself.

She remembered seeing her teacher leave for home with the bulging duffel clasped on the carrier of her bicycle. At that moment Shaona had thought the green bag must have contained laundry or something, because it was so full. Now she understood, their teacher took their harvest home.

5 Shaona liked sweet potato, but she didn't eat much. Anger and gas filled her stomach. Despite their sullen faces and disappointed hearts, none of the children mentioned purslanes. Everyone looked rather dejected, except for Dabin. He had kept glaring at Shaona ever since he was let out of the cupboard for dinner. She knew he was going to take his revenge. What should she do?

10 In the dusk, when the children were playing in the yard, Shaona caught sight of Dabin. She called and beckoned to him. He came over and grunted, "What's up, little tattletale?"

"Dabin, would you like to have these?" In her palm were two long peanuts. Her father had given her six of them when she was coming back to the kindergarten two
15 days ago.

"Huh!" he exclaimed with pursed lips, "I never saw a peanut with four seeds in it." He snatched them from her hand and without another word cracked one. His eyes glittered and his mouth twitched like a rabbit's while he was chewing the roasted kernels.

20 Within a few seconds he finished the peanuts off, then he asked, "Do you have more?"

"Uh-uh." She shook her head, her slant eyes fixed on the ground.

He touched her sweater pocket, which was empty. She had hidden the other four peanuts in her socks. He said, "You must be nice to me from now on. Remember to
25 save lots of goodies for me, got it?"

She nodded without looking at him.

Standing below a slide, she watched him running off on his bowlegs to join the boys who were hurling paper bombers and imitating explosions. Behind the cypress hedge, near the closed front gate, a couple of children were playing hide-and-seek, their
30 white clothes flickering and their ecstatic cries ringing in the twilight.

That night Shaona didn't sleep well. She was still scared of the dark room. One of her roommates, Aili, snored without stopping. An owl or a hawk went on hooting like an old man's coughing. A steam hammer in the shipyard on the riverbank pounded

metal now and then. Unable to sleep, Shaona ate a peanut, though the rules didn't allow her to eat anything after she had brushed her teeth for bed. She took care to hide the shells under her pillow. How she missed her mother's warm, soft belly; again she cried quietly.

5 It rained the next morning, but the clouds began lifting after nine o'clock, so the children were allowed to go out and play. In the middle of the yard stood a miniature merry-go-round, sky blue and nine feet across. A ring of boys were sitting on it, revolving and yelling happily. Dabin and Luwen, who was squint-eyed, were among them, firing wooden carbines at treetops, people, birds, smokestacks, and anything
10 that came into sight. They were shouting out "rat-a-tat" as if the spinning platform were a tank turret. Shaona dared not go take a spin. The previous week she had ridden on that thing and had been spun giddy and was sick for two days.

So instead, she played court with a bunch of girls. They elected her the queen, saying she looked the most handsome among them. With four maids waiting on her, she had
15 to sit on the wet ground all the time. Weilan and Aili were her amazons, each holding a whittled branch for a lance. The girls wished they could have made a strong boy the king, but only Dun was willing to join them. He was a mousy boy, and most of the girls could beat him easily. He should have been a courtier rather than the ruler. Soon Shaona couldn't stand playing queen anymore, because she felt silly calling him
20 "Your Majesty" and hated having to obey his orders. She begged other girls to replace her, but none of them would. She got up from the ground, shouting, "I quit!" To keep the court from disintegrating, Aili agreed to be a vice queen.

Because of the soggy ground, many of the children found their clothes soiled by lunchtime. Teacher Shen was angry, especially with those who had played mud pies.
25 She said that if they were not careful about their clothes, she wouldn't let them go out in the afternoon. "None of you is a good child," she declared. "You all want to create more work for me."

After lunch, while the children were napping, Teacher Shen collected their clothes to scrub off the mud stains. She was unhappy because she couldn't take a nap.

30 Too exhausted to miss her parents, Shaona fell asleep the moment her head touched her pillow. She slept an hour and a half. When she woke up, she was pleased to find her sweater and skirt clean, without a speck of mud. But as her hand slotted into the sweater pocket she was surprised—the three peanuts were gone. She removed the terry-cloth coverlet and rummaged through her bedding, but couldn't find any trace
35 of them; even the shells under her pillow had disappeared. Heartbroken, she couldn't stop her tears, knowing her teacher must have confiscated the peanuts.

The sun came out in the afternoon, and the ground in the yard turned whitish. Again Teacher Shen led the twenty-four children out to the turnip field. On their way they sang the song “Red Flowers,” which they had learned the week before:

Red flowers are blooming everywhere.

5 *Clapping our hands, we sing*

And play a game in the square,

All happy like blossoms of spring.

When they arrived at the field, Uncle Chang was not in view, but the water pump was snarling, tiny streams glinting here and there among the turnip rows.

10 The sight of the irrigation made their teacher hesitate for a moment, then she said loudly to the children, “We’re going to gather more purslanes this afternoon. Aunt Chef couldn’t cook those we got yesterday because we turned them in too late, but she’ll cook them for us today. So everybody must be a good child and work hard. Understood?”

15 “Understood,” they said almost in unison. Then they began to search among the turnips.

Although most of the children were as high-spirited as the day before, there weren’t many purslanes left in the field, which was muddy and slippery. A number of them fell on their buttocks and had their clothes soiled. Their shoes were ringed with dark mud.

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Yet the hollow of Shaona’s skirt was soon filled with several puny purslanes, and some children had even dropped a load into the duffel, which began to swell little by little. Unlike the silly boys and girls who were still talking about what purslanes tasted like, Shaona was sulky the whole time, though she never stopped searching.

25 In front of her appeared a few tufts of wormwood, among which were some brownish rocks partly covered by dried grass. A swarm of small butterflies rested on the wormwood, flapping their white wings marked with black dots. Now and then one of them took off, flying sideways to land on a rock. Shaona went over to search through the grass; her motion set the butterflies in flight all at once like a flurry of snowflakes.

30 Suddenly a wild rabbit jumped out, racing away toward a group of girls, who all saw it and broke out hollering. The animal, frightened by their voices, swerved and bolted away toward the back wall of the kindergarten. At the sight of the fleeing creature, Teacher Shen yelled, “Catch him! Don’t let him run away!”

All at once several boys started chasing the rabbit, which turned out to have a crippled hind leg. Now their teacher was running after it too, motioning to the children ahead to intercept the animal. Her long braids swayed from side to side as she was dashing away. Within seconds all the children except Shaona joined the chase. The turnip field was being ruined, a lot of seedlings trampled and muddy water splashing from the running feet. Shrieks and laughter were rising from the west side of the field.

Shaona was not with them because she wanted to pee. Looking around, she saw nobody nearby, so she squatted down over the duffel, made sure to conceal her little bottom with her skirt, and peed on the purslanes inside the bag. But she dared not empty her bladder altogether; she stopped halfway, got up, and covered the wet purslanes with the dry ones she had gathered. Then with a kicking heart she ran away to join the chasers.

The rabbit had fled out of sight, but the children were still excited, boys huffing and puffing, and bragging about how close they had got to the animal. Dabin swore that his toes, peeping out of his open sandals, had touched that fluffy tail. Luwen said that the wild rabbit tasted much better than the domestic rabbit; a few children were listening to him describe how his uncle had shot a pair of wild rabbits in the mountain and how his aunt had cut them into pieces and stewed them with potato and carrot cubes. Their teacher stopped him from finishing his story. Without delay she assembled the children and led them out of the field, fearful that Uncle Chang would call her names on account of the trampled turnips.

Before dinner Shaona was worried for fear the chef might cook the soiled purslanes for them. To her relief, dinner turned out to be more of the usual. She was thrilled. For the first time in the kindergarten she ate a hearty meal—three sweet potatoes, two bowls of corn glue, and many spoonfuls of fried eggplant. The whole evening she was so excited that she joined the boys in playing soldier, carrying a water pistol, as though all of a sudden she had become a big girl. She felt that from now on she would not cry like a baby at night again.