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## Subcontracted

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All was well with Mayor A. The government had just designated his town as a “new town,” which meant something big—what that was exactly, no one had a straight answer, but big was big—and with such recognition came increased outside investment, some of which Mayor A funneled into the purchase of an Audi A8 L with supercharged V6 that was far more powerful than the A8 L with the standard V8 owned by Mayor B the next county over. The two towns were linked not only in competition but also by a new provincial expressway that sliced the countryside in two, and every time Mayor A entertained real estate enterprise executives, he would drive them down the expressway, dodging eighteen-wheelers and sedans with video-game aggression, pointing out this verdant hill as a condo site, that clump of homes with rattling tin roofs that could be done away with in favor of an industrial park, his top-of-the-line V6 purring in agreement. Coupled with ten-course banquets and cash gifts, these gestures were enough to entice further investment, which led to a commensurate increase in government funding—a

satisfactory state of affairs for Mayor A's wife, who received enough of a share from this arrangement to purchase 999.9 gold pendants and bracelets from Chow Tai Fook, and overlook Mayor A's misadventures with other women.

To Mayor A, bookkeeping was an afterthought. Official A, the regional budget overseer, was appeased with well-timed banquets every few months and the gift of an Audi Q5, roomy enough to accommodate Official A's eight-person extended family. But when the government started its "trace the vine to the melon" anti-corruption campaign, Official A was spirited away from sight and rumor. His replacement Official B possessed several quaint virtues, morality and inflexibility among them. And so the countdown to the End of It All began: Official B e-mailing requests for expenditure reports, fund allocations, detailed and accurate accounting, each e-mail more terse than the last, Mayor A countering with *No problem, soon!* which became *My idiot administrators keep misplacing the data, it's hard to find decent help out here in the boondocks, it's unforgivable really, ten thousand pardons, but thanks for your patience*, which became outright avoidance. During this span of time, Official B had arranged for Mayor B to be arrested on corruption charges, scheduled to be executed, and as far as Mayor A could tell, Mayor B's indiscretions were nowhere near as expansive as Mayor A's. On a cold spring night, the sound of the thunderstorm on Mayor A's windows like slaps to the face, he compiled rough estimates of how much he had profited from his little arrangements, and the figures were both outrageous and infuriating: such large sums which seemed to belie the tiny rewards he and his wife had granted themselves. If he had bothered to actually track the numbers, maybe he could determine where had the rest had gone, but it had been lost somewhere down the line of payoffs and petty expenses, like rainwater down the drain, no use to anyone now, and the most creative accounting in the province wouldn't be enough to save him.

On one of Official B's early visits Mayor A had met his second-in-command Official C, an older, jollier man, and as Official C shoveled Beggar's Chicken in his mouth during dinner, something in the way his eyes met Mayor A's during pregnant moments—particularly when talk turned to investment opportunities—suggested to Mayor A that Official C would be amenable to a fresh arrangement under which Mayor A's economic activities could continue, and more to the point, he would stay fucking alive. From there the crucial matter became how to remove Official B from the chain of oversight. The first thought was to remove Official B from existence entirely, which of course was foolhardy, unconscionable, a non-starter, but as it often is with things, the first thought was best, and Mayor A returned to it over and over. The next matter of priority was method. Mayor A had sufficient self-awareness to recognize he was out of his depth, but he was acquainted with a Hoodlum A who had performed favors for him.

Mayor A invited Hoodlum A to one of his private ten-course banquets and explained the situation in broad layman terms, without getting too caught up in the actual numbers at stake. While

Hoodlum A may have had the appearance of a ruffian—squat build, bulky leather jacket a size too large, criss-cross knife scars on his cheek—he was as delicate with confidentiality as Mayor A, and accepted the latter’s circumspection without a qualm. When Mayor A outlined what was to be done, he could anticipate Hoodlum A’s misgivings, so he quickly moved on to the key figure: one million yuan for service rendered. This was close to twenty percent of Mayor A’s total revenue, but he was canny enough to understand that one cannot haggle in matters such as these, and besides, profits from future years would compensate. As expected, the figure was impressive enough to overcome any objections, a deadline was set, and the agreement was sealed over clinks of beer glasses, Hoodlum A accepting secondment as Killer A.

Truth be told, Killer A, formidable appearance and all, was very far from a killer or even a hoodlum. While he had earned a reputation as someone not to be fucked with, a status built on smidgens of truth and more than a few hyperbolic rumors that are the currency of certain braggarts and ruffians, violence wasn’t his *métier*. His present-day milieu was more that of a well-connected operations manager, what with his plush furnished multi-room office, where he could drink tea and straighten picture frames, deploying the correct proportional amount of resources to complete any given task. Monday: Collect on overdue loan, utilizing local teens who may have lacked grace but were very good at getting a point across. Tuesday: Convince residents in decrepit housing to vacate the premises so the condo project undertaken by Mayor A’s favored construction contractors could begin, a more delicate chore best handled by Killer A’s associate Hoodlum B, with Hoodlum B overseeing negotiations and the local teens only supplying demonstrative force if absolutely necessary. Wednesday: A *tête-à-tête* with black society members from Town B to confirm and reinforce boundaries and restrictions, or seek recompense for small transgressions, such as that time the previous week when Town B hoodlums had busted up a bar in Town A and harassed several young women. (Unlike the mayors of Town A and B, Hoodlum A and his Town B counterpart thought nothing of commiserating over their lot over beers.) And so on and so forth, with Killer A content to pilot, politick and suggest rather than outright participate.

Killer A had additional concerns, foremost among them a son on the way, the prospect of new life predisposing him to regard life in general with a new appreciation. Life in general had also treated him well: call him soft and he would scowl, but he had grown accustomed to bathroom floors with radiant heat, the weekend getaway apartment down south, the freedom to take long afternoon breaks on his veranda, soaking in warmth and cocktails (for even though he had no issue with sharing cheap beers with underlings, he had gained a love of cocktail mixing and had created hand-printed drink menus in leather-bound covers for his more discerning guests). And while the woman who would have his son was not his wife and likely never would be, he was fond of the way she swatted him on the head whenever he made a poor joke, or how she would curl and uncurl her toes on the couch without thinking about it, and it would be foolhardy to

jeopardize that kind of stability. So after weighted consideration, Killer A invited his buddy Hoodlum B out for drinks and a proposal: If Hoodlum B carried out the actual assignment in Killer A's stead, Killer A could go back to being Hoodlum A, Hoodlum B would become Killer B, Hoodlum A would receive a dividend for being a middleman, and Killer B would receive a hefty half a million yuan, or half of Killer A's payout (out of confidentiality, propriety and other reasons, Killer A never revealed the original million-yuan figure to Hoodlum B). To Killer A, half a million yuan was impressive; to Hoodlum B, who had yet to come up in the world like Killer A, it seemed an impossible fortune.

Killer B was a thorough sort, so immediately after acceptance of Killer A's terms, he scouted out Official B's circumstances: access points to his home, his work schedule, his haunts. All in all, Official B lived the kind of dull life one would expect from a county official if one actually performed all of one's duties as a county official while also maintaining a specific, stifling sense of rectitude. Official B was fastidious about routine and appearance, especially the urge to run a hand through the strings of his thinning hair, an instinctive tic Killer B shared. Official B's colleagues and almost-friends considered Official B to be remote and unapproachable, which Killer B had to admit was similar to how others viewed him. But it still came as a shock that Official B spent his off-hours in the same bars and restaurants and karaoke lounges that Killer B frequented. More than that, Official B ordered the same meals and drinks as Killer B, and in the same amounts too: two glasses of Cheerday beer, braised bamboo shoots (half of them boxed up to be eaten at home, as was Killer B's custom), and fried rice with bean sprouts, with two spoons of hot chili sauce on top (and this is where Killer B became outright fearful, because he also practiced the two-spoons-chili-sauce routine). At first paranoia took hold—was Official B mocking him? Was he informing him in not-so-subtle fashion that he was onto him? For several days and nights Killer B took obsessive note of his surroundings, on the lookout for snoops and spies and stalkers. Once he established that no one was following him, a deeper, more existential dread began to take hold. He and Official B were karmically linked somehow, and to kill him would be tantamount to killing himself. Such disturbing speculation became overwhelming when Killer B tailed Official B to the local karaoke bar and stared, slack-jawed, as Official B grabbed the microphone with a brio lacking in every other corner of his life and sang the Faye Wong song about the easily hurt woman, his voice cracking at the exact point in the song Killer B's voice would crack when he sang it, because Killer B also sang this song at the bar and it was a favorite, just as it was Official B's favorite.

Killer B didn't have much time to ponder the implications; Mayor A's position was more precarious by the day, and he had reminded Killer A, in harsh language that included a lot of mother-fucking and why-are-you-spending-your-time-fucking-with-yourself and other references to fucking, that a resolution was needed within a week. In turn, Killer A had reminded Killer B with more finesse but no less alacrity that the teens Killer B worked with could see to Killer B's

affairs if Killer B didn't move forward on his assignment, post-haste, because for all his accoutrements of softness and luxury, Killer A was still someone you wouldn't want to fuck with. Killer B was in deep water and fierce fire, as they say. Killing the man who was his doppelgänger could risk a disastrous circular kismet; refraining from doing so would bring similar repercussions. Drinking enough Cheerday at his favored bar to send him into a stupor, Killer B was at rock-bottom of his existential well, but as a different kismet would have it, young Hoodlum C approached and treated him to another beer. Newly minted a hoodlum, Hoodlum C wasn't familiar with Killer B's peccadilloes, and thus regarded him as someone to be emulated, right down to his Peacebird gradient print shirts, and as further kismet would have it, Hoodlum C was also wearing a Peacebird shirt that very night, which in turn inspired a new solution in Killer B's head. Hoodlum C could take on the literal and metaphysical burden of the assignment, removing Killer B from the karmic wheel. For Hoodlum C, it would be like taking the wheel of a self-driving car; Killer B had already written up a scouting report on Official B, including prime opportunities, locations, times. All Hoodlum C had to do was follow through, only it had to be done quickly, and for fuck's sake, just make it look like a mugging or home break-in gone wrong. Hoodlum C expressed misgivings—after all, he had just administered his first beat-down earlier that week, and it hadn't been the smoothest of operations, what with the beatee soiling himself and then attracting help, the smell of the beatee's defecation so overwhelming that Hoodlum C had to flee to a vacant alley to puke afterwards—but Killer B, soon to become Hoodlum B again, was set in his intentions. Think of it as a growth opportunity, he told Hoodlum C, with the added bonus of Hoodlum A's gratitude. Killer B cited a payout of three hundred thousand yuan, which meant that he would only pocket two hundred thousand of his original sum, and rational cost analysis would suggest that he should have kept at least three hundred thousand after all the time put in on research and legwork, but the karmic benefits would outweigh the loss, and if all went well, he would even consider donating the rest to the local Buddhist temple.

The killer formerly known as Hoodlum C hoarded a nervous tingle about this turn of fortune, much like the tingle a young man gets when he's in a woman's bedroom for the first time, the clothes not yet doffed, consummation still left to the imagination, the man reduced to mute wonderment, like he is a boy again, no matter how brutish he is as a man. For all his commitment to the hoodlum life, Killer C's musings tended to lean more towards genteel metaphors such as these. In fact, his initial enthusiasm about his assignment, tenuous as it was, soon revealed itself to be trepidation, and then panic, as he visualized the various ways one could snuff another life. Where others would squash ants and smash spiders, he was one for letting them be, out of a sense of pantheistic oneness with the universe. He was growing less and less sure about this hoodlum lifestyle, overall. True, it bequeathed a certain status and financial security, and he sure as hell needed the latter, and as long as one stuck to intimidation and exercised restraint in the beatings, one could justify it on some sort of twisted Marxist-capitalist grounds, but one didn't

need to mull over the possible outcomes of this new career opportunity, this swerve into fucking murder, to recognize the downside. And while Hoodlum B had been someone Killer C had looked up to, something in the man's face, his hard crinkle of a smile, the way his eyes veered off course, warned him of instability, maybe even insanity. And who would support Killer C's younger brother if something happened to him? (Killer C's parents he couldn't give a fig about, he was among those younger generations who looked upon that filial Confucian stuff as a joke, not that his parents gave him anything but bile and beatings during his youth, which somewhat explained his current lifestyle, if one were to be psychoanalytical about it.) If Killer C were taken off the board, so to speak, his brother would be forced to return to Town A from Tier One City A where he was studying sustainable science and technology, when the very point of him going to Tier One City A was to get the hell away from Town A, a goal Killer C supported with all his might, to the extent that Killer C had taken up these hoodlum activities for capital inflow. Killer C felt nothing but love for his brother, but his envy also overfloweth, just looking at his brother's photos of Tier One City A, skyscrapers perched on impossible hills, glowing dragon gold neon at night, and hearing stories about meeting new people, absorbing new ways of thinking, life moving at light speed compared to Killer C's existence.

Killer C considered options, including refusing the assignment, but that would involve loss of face and possibly future income, and he also had to reckon with Hoodlum B's potential reaction, which given that face and those eyes, could be lethal. So Killer C began a new set of calculations: how to carry out the assignment at minimal risk and maximum gain, a shaky proposition given the proviso that no death could be involved. Coupled with these deliberations was a growing need for change, to push beyond the provincial boundaries of this podunk town, much like the kids in that movie he had seen recently, and true, some of them came to bad ends, but at least they had stretched out their souls while doing so, and if Killer C's life was to be shit anyway, then at least let it be shit in a daring venture. Taking over Hoodlum B's surveillance, he observed the comings and goings of Official B in Town B, himself an invisible stranger, and the pleasing anonymity filled him with longing: if he could be this way just one town over, unencumbered from judgment and obligations, think of what it must be like to be in a Tier One City! He was sitting at Official B's favorite bar a few tables over from Official B when he had these thoughts, and as if hearing them, Official B turned to stare right at him. In retrospect, it might have been just a coincidence, Official B's head filled with numbers and appointments and niggling inconsistencies, and he had turned to stare at nothing, but their eyes met and for Killer C it was a reckoning, a new path, a solution and salvation. He called Official B over to his table to offer him a Cheerday and a proposition. Displaying Hoodlum B's copious notes, he explained Official B's precarious position, to which Official B reacted with predictable panic, but Killer C, now Hoodlum C once again, mowed past the objections, detailing a method by which both men could profit from the situation. All Official B had to do was feign his death—corn syrup, red dye, and a few artfully composed photos would suffice—and once Hoodlum C had submitted his

proof of completion to Hoodlum B and received his payout, he would pull out of town for a new life, which in turn would give Official B the go-ahead for a startling resurrection, sweeping in to arrest Hoodlum B thanks to all the materials Hoodlum C would provide, making Official B a stand-up hero, generating excellent news fodder for years. In return, all Hoodlum C wanted was clemency and time to leave town. Official B could even have the money originally budgeted for his own execution, if he wanted it, the full one hundred thousand yuan (Hoodlum C had fudged that number, but he figured the accounting error wouldn't be revealed until he was long gone). Official B, stickler for integrity that he was, wasn't inclined to accept that kind of financial arrangement, but while he didn't say yes, he didn't say no—it would be tabled for a later discussion, perhaps after all the hubbub had died down. In all other respects, the proposition was sound to him, and while both men knew that a handshake deal meant little in this line of business, convention held as they sealed the agreement.

The “murder” was simple in conception, quick in execution. A photo shoot in Official B's modest one-story house, belongings misarranged and strewn, all the better to enforce the idea of a break-in (and whatever damage was caused would be more than made up for with the notoriety Official B would receive), Official B on his back on the floor, one knee upraised as if in a futile effort to rise one last time, his right palm spread on his chest, not enough to cover the stains that ran down his body, corn syrup dribbling from his mouth, pooling under his left side, as if he was an oil can and the puncture was right there. Hoodlum C spent a half hour on the photo shoot, and even during this clinical phase of the operation, he couldn't help admiring his camerawork, just a bit. Artful amounts of exposure, interesting angles, an almost contemplative tone to the work, as if the viewer was transfixed at the scene, the mournful senselessness of it all. Maybe he would make a great photographer someday. Daydreams of a new artistic life waltzing in his brain, Hoodlum C sent copies of the photos to Hoodlum B. Hoodlum B went through the photos with a jaundiced eye, unable to discern signs of falsification, and then passed them up to Hoodlum A, who sent them to Mayor A for inspection. *Excellent* texted back Mayor A, who promptly discarded the burner phone he was using to communicate with Hoodlum A. *Good work*, texted Hoodlum A to Hoodlum B. *OK*, texted Hoodlum B to Hoodlum C.

Mayor A released a tantric-worthy sigh of relief and celebrated with a drive down the provincial highway, speed limits be damned, sunroof open and sun baking the top of his head. Hoodlum A patted his woman's burgeoning stomach, anticipating the incoming red-egg gift of one million yuan (soon to be a half-million) that would soon be invested in more properties down south; Hoodlum A suspected that the future lay with real estate management rather than construction. Hoodlum B stared at his ghostly upside-down reflection in his beer glass, mulling over the consequences of Official B's death, and if an existential hammer would fall. Hoodlum C's countdown clock ticked. He texted Hoodlum B to inquire about the immediate final payout Hoodlum B had promised, only to receive silence. Hoodlum B was curious about the payment

schedule himself—Hoodlum A had made assurances of prompt remittance but of course there was nothing in writing to confirm dates, and Hoodlum B, ordinarily such a thorough planner, should have double-checked it all ahead of time, but this job had addled his mind, just another sign that it was all a karmic curse. Hoodlum A had enough access to Mayor A to pass a handwritten note: *Payment?* Mayor A passed his own note back: *Soon*. He meant it too; one didn't earn his position without honoring promises. But with the housing market crash and the shuttering of several real estate enterprises that were heading up Town A construction projects, much of Mayor A's theoretical rewards were tied up in bankruptcy, and coming up with even half of the agreed-upon million yuan would be an impossibility in the short term.

So Mayor A waited, just as Hoodlum A waited, as did Hoodlum B, while Hoodlum C could wait no more. Official B couldn't stay dead forever, after all, for he had duties to perform, and calling in sick for more than a few days would only be countenanced up to a certain point, and besides, the longer this undertaking lasted, the more strain it was putting on his morals. On the evening of the fourth day after the "murder," Hoodlum C boarded a bus pointed towards Tier One City A one thousand kilometers away, seeking at least temporary refuge with his brother, and around the same time Official B readied himself for a call to the local police, his notes on the whole affair typed up on his laptop and ready to recite, including a thorough account of Hoodlum C, because no matter his promises of confidentiality, Official B was not one to hide the truth, and he was quite convinced that with a Hoodlum C and a Hoodlum B there must be a Hoodlum A, and quite possibly even a Mayor A, and wouldn't catching so many fish with this single net be worthy of commendation and congratulation and a few official ten-course banquets and maybe even an Audi A8 L with a supercharged V8?

However, all did not come to pass as Official B intended. Official C, ever-mindful of his position *vis-à-vis* Official B, had tasked his hacker-minded son to monitor Official B's laptop, and in the strangeness of the narrative that materialized before his eyes, line by line, as Official B typed out his report, he saw opportunity. Contacting Assistant Police Chief B of Town B, a man who like Official C also thirsted for opportunities, Official C dangled the possibility, just the hint of a suggestion, that perhaps Official B had orchestrated the whole scheme for self-aggrandizement and reward, which jibed with Assistant Police Chief B's sensibilities, as he would have done the same if he was in Official B's position, not that anyone would ever know that. Plus, it was an a chance for Assistant Police Chief B to get one over on his boss Police Chief A, who was a bastard above all else. He dispatched armed units to Official B's home, a maneuver that smacked of over-kill, especially since there was no actual killing to be found anywhere in the whole affair, and arrested Official B on the spot, ninety-three hours post-"murder." It would take a day and a half of interrogations, negotiations and explanations for Official B to state his side of the matter, whereupon a province-wide search was conducted for Hoodlum C, a search which concluded in a dreary backwater brothel halfway between Town A and Tier One City A (as a bonus, the local

police had the pleasure of closing down the brothel and ogling all the half-clothed women in the process), Hoodlum C's last thoughts before he was apprehended landing on the spackled and crackled ceiling of his room, and how it might make for a good evocative photo. While in custody, he gave his full and honest account of his involvement in return for vague promises of leniency, Official C supplying a few fatherly pats on the arm, a gesture so unlike Hoodlum C's own father that it brought him to tears. From there the police of Town B, in collaboration with counterparts in Town A, both units enjoying each other's company for once, arrested Hoodlum B, locating him in his favorite bar, mute and clutching a karaoke mike, wanting with everything in his heart to sing Faye Wong but still wrestling with all the implications of being indirectly responsible for the death of his fellow Faye Wong lover, and it didn't take much for him to detail the particulars of his connection with Hoodlum A, what with his need to atone for all that he had done, which the police accepted with exchanged quizzical glances, because it wasn't like a hoodlum to get all weepy about karmic wheels of fate, at least not without a diagnosed mental condition. Hoodlum A escaped to his getaway apartment down south, and might have executed a clean departure from the country entirely, only for his woman to break water just as they were packing for the airport. A lesser man would have continued on alone, but Hoodlum A was serious about fatherly duties and escorted his woman to the local hospital, where the newborn's cord was cut just as local officers, accompanied by Official C to the sound of cameras clicking, arrived on the scene. For an instant, it looked as if Mayor A's Audi 8 AL might be involved in a merry chase down the provincial highway, and Mayor A would have liked that, one last chance to play a real-life video game, and maybe even entertain the idea that he would outdrive all these assholes and just keep on driving, but Town A police cars hemmed in his driveway.

The trial required three years to conclude, given the unusual amount of publicity which rose to provincial and then national levels, prompting motions for new regulations, legal studies, pontifications on the nature of society and justice, heated speeches at plenaries, back-and-forths on social media where each side accused the other of being a bot. During this time the four accused were remanded to prison, spending their days in cold slabs of cells while dressed in gray, flabby T-shirts and shorts that were as comfortable as jammies. Hoodlum C only made it to year two: he caught a variant of COVID and died within a fortnight, sparing him the indignity of hearing his final sentence, which was only a few months shorter than the one given to Hoodlum A. (Indignation was reserved for Hoodlum C's brother, who was forced back to his small-town existence without Hoodlum C's funding and would live out the rest of his days with unsettling dreams of places that shared Tier One City A's neon glow.) Hoodlum B was sentenced to three years and six months and emerged a shell of a man, planting himself thereafter at the local bar, unbecoming whiskers sprouting from his chin, convinced that the rest of his life would be nothing but fated consequences. Hoodlum A was given three years and nine months, which was no problem for him, as he was after all someone not to be fucked with, but by the time he was out his woman and his son were long gone. Mayor A was made an example of, as Official B had

intended, with execution the final sentence, but that was from his trial for graft, as plotting a single death was one thing but stealing from the state was equivalent to killing thousands, as the Great Leader once said, or at least one of his deputies. For Official B it was a case of battle won, war lost, for enough doubts had been engendered about his complicity in his “death” that he was forced to give up his position and move to a backwater province where he would spend the rest of his civil career overseeing miniscule budgets for coal-burning towns caught in eternal death throes. Official C inherited Official B’s position, and as the new Official B, struck up professional relationships with the new Mayors A and B that didn’t involve exorbitant payoffs, and this newfound local respectability was held up as a beacon for fairness and scrupulous practices, even if it did allow some leeway for unbooked expenses that enabled the new Official B to buy his teenage son an Audi A8 L with a supercharged V6. This didn’t make his son more popular with his peers, as they all saw him as a roly-poly “Little Emperor” with a sneer for a smile, but it mattered not a jot to the son, who had always wanted an A8.

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