

March 20

The stink of vomit hangs like a soggy blanket. Some men reach the bucket just in time to throw up. Others leave a soupy mess on the floor. Our deck is dark but people smell the sour before they step or slip into it. Words and voices are muffled, so people must be covering their noses. Crossing the ocean takes forty days. Can I live that long in this stinking hold?

March 21

Ba is lucky: he is not seasick. He wolfs down food. People glare at him with death in their eyes. He brought me water yesterday but not today. Good. I do not want him thinking I am still sick.

Ma's blankets eat up my narrow bed and fall to the floor. I jump from the upper bunk and grab them before they get dirty. The floor is warm. I hear that the ship burns coal whenever the winds fail. Will such a fire burn a hole in the ship and sink us all?

Around me, men mutter about bad luck. Landlords seized their farms. High taxes ruined them. They surrendered in a clan war. They complain the food here is too measly, too plain and too soft. I wish they would clap their mouths shut. Just hearing talk of food makes me want to vomit. The

men remind me of beggars at our store, waiting for tea and telling stories in return.

This joke made me laugh:

A farmer sends two sons to buy an ox. He warns them traders will cheat them.

"Sons, whatever you do," the farmer says, "don't pay what they ask."

At the market, his two sons look around and find an ox. Its seller wants 3000 cash.

"Don't cheat me!" says one son. "Here's 2000 cash. That's all you'll get."

"Don't cheat me either," echoes his brother loudly. "Here's *my* 2000 cash!"

March 22

I went exploring, groping my way along bunkbeds. My hands landed on foreheads, feet and stomachs, so people cursed me, even kicked me. I got lost. Good thing I was counting while I stumbled along. There must be over five hundred beds.

At the eating areas, lamps are lit to let us see our food. The mush is awful, as if what we threw up has come back for a second life. Scrawny men and beggars shovel food into their mouths. I thought the Company hired only the most capable workers. Sell-Ginger cursed the iron road. He said Red

Beard Ghosts paid the Chinese workers only one-half of what they paid their own kind. The Red Beards worked the Chinese day and night until they fell down. Sell-Ginger predicted we would die from cold, illness and accidents.

“Is there no medicine in Gold Mountain to save us?” asked someone.

“Your wages are too low to afford it,” snorted Sell-Ginger.

I recalled Meng-ping’s father’s shouting, “Don’t call it Gold Mountain! Don’t go there: the gold is finished. The Red Beards treat Chinese as beasts, not humans.”

But the iron road pays a dollar a day. A day’s wages buys 25 kilos of rice! We will earn more money than Sell-Ginger! The work cannot be all bad; this is Ba’s second year in Gold Mountain. All he has said to me is: “No running on the ship. Act like an adult. No pesky questions. Men have no time for children.”

If Ba spoke to me like an adult, then I would become one. Too bad he refuses.

March 24

Disaster! I saw Ba and Poy Uncle in a noisy crowd under the yellow glow of lanterns. When I went closer, I could see both men slapping coins down on a fan-tan cloth. I left before Ba could see me.

He is not to gamble! He promised Grandfather! Grandfather had hurled his own dice into the river after *his* foolish losses. Too bad it was too late. Every day the street brats surrounded me and chanted:

Run, run, run away, the cashless can’t repay.

Run, run, run away, go suck a bone today.

How can Ba be playing, after all our troubles? When Ba came home, he roared at Grandfather for losing our store. I was surprised that Grandfather did not shout back. Instead, he stared at the ground and meekly said, “I did wrong. I will never play again. You must promise to do the same.”

Grandfather admitting he was wrong to Ba? Unheard of!

“You play badly!” Ba fumed. “I know how to gamble. I never lose like you.”

But Grandfather hounded Ba day and night until he gave in and vowed to stop.

I want to grab the money from the fan-tan cloth and run to a dark corner. Better yet, I should hurl it overboard into the ocean so that no-one gambles any more. If a boat is sailing in the opposite direction, I would hail it and swim over to board it!

Ba knows nothing about the months we waited for his money to arrive from Gold Mountain. We gnawed meat from garbage bones. Friends stopped calling, afraid we might beg for food. With no rice on

hand, Ma thought the only way to feed Grandfather was to sell Little Brother, but somehow she managed to keep the family together without resorting to that. Grandfather sat in a dark corner, slapping his face and muttering, “Heaven, kick me to death. I’m truly stupid. Heaven, kick me to death.”

How can I tell Ba to quit gambling? It is easy to ask about the iron road, but even Ma does not give him orders. No one tells Grandfather what to do either. When will it be my turn, when nobody can order me around?

March 25

More ruin and loss.

Once the ship reaches Canada, this Rock Brain will bolt for home. He once imagined himself as a mighty warrior who single-handedly rescues his entire family. What a fool!

This morning, I saw that Ba’s bed had not been slept in. At breakfast, Poy Uncle laughed with friends, chortling so hard that rice flew from his lips. Then his face turned serious, and he told me to go tell Ba to stop gambling.

“You play beside him,” I retorted. “*You* talk to him. You’re his best friend!”

Last night Ba lost all his money, Poy Uncle said. The only way Ba could borrow money was

to sign over his wages. Worse, Ba gambled away that loan too. Then he borrowed more money by signing over *my* wages. He lost that too. Now the only way we will have wages to take home is if Ba gambles more and wins enough to repay his loans.

My body went cold. If I could climb to the little porthole, I would throw myself off this ship. My muscles would be more useful as food for fish than as railway labour. What’s the point of going to Canada if my wages don’t go home to where they are needed? Grandfather will not regain the store. Ma will run out of household money. She will think of selling Little Brother again. Does Ba ever ponder her heartbreak?

I crawl back into bed. Unable to sleep, I pick up my pencil.

A man keeps crying in his bed. He is shrill and loud. His face must be wet from his sniffing. Did he get scared listening to Sell-Ginger? People shout at him to be quiet. They fear his weeping will bring bad luck. Hah! They don’t know bad luck unless they know our family story!

Later

Ba took all my money even though I said I had none.

“Are you a woman?” he demanded. “A clucking hen like your Ma?” He made chicken sounds: “*Bok bok bok bok bok*. Listen, all men gamble. Look around. It’s what men do. You’ll do the same if you ever grow up.”

His new friend Ox Uncle waited with a lantern. I wanted to run off but that would have caused Ba to lose face. Finally I reached for the eighteen coins that Ma had given to me secretly. She had warned me to hide them from Ba’s eyes and safeguard them for emergencies. She had sighed wistfully and said, “I wish there was no need to say this, but you must keep money away from your father.” Never before had she spoken this way to me. Those were her last words to me. How did Ba know about the coins? They had been tied inside my pants.

“Hurry, you dirty beggar,” said Ox Uncle. “No one else wants your sweaty stinky coins.”

The two men laughed and strolled away, leaving me in the dark.

March 27

Ba gave me back my eighteen coins, and jingled another handful of them.

“Surprised?” he sneered. “I won back every coin I lost, and took even more. Watch me and learn! A man with money, he must make it grow. He has to

take it out and put it to use. If he sits on it, he may as well drop it into the outhouse.”

I hated that kind of talk. Instead, I asked quietly about my railway earnings.

He sucked in an angry breath. A coin hit my face and fell to the floor. Ba snapped that there was plenty of time for him to win more money. That on his last trip, he had bet against his wages and won them back before landing. I had not known that.

“You better win,” I retorted. “Otherwise I will run off and find work elsewhere.”

Ba sneered that I wouldn’t dare because the Company would hunt me down. I told him to wait and watch! He stomped off as I groped for the coin on my hands and knees.

March 30

Cannot write. Several days of storms. Even the gambling stopped. The sailors stopped emptying the toilet buckets, so foul smells are spreading through the deck.

April 1

Fierce waves cause the ship’s walls to creak and squeal. Men are sick again. Others weep from fear but not me. Others call out to the gods.

If our ship sinks, will my journal float to Hong Kong and reach Grandfather?

April 3

I have work! I can earn money!

A young man asked me to write a letter.

“I can pay you,” Wong said. “Four cash.”

He must have seen me writing. But he cannot send the letter until the ship lands! Why pay now? What if he wants to write more during the trip?

I worried about knowing too few words. Then I picked up my pencil.

We started with greetings and good wishes for the New Year. His father had worked on the iron road, but went home injured and refused to let Wong go to Canada. But Wong wanted a better doctor for his father. So he secretly signed up for railway work. Now Wong apologized to his father for sneaking away just before the New Year. He said his father was right about the harsh voyage; sickness had sapped his strength. I was glad he apologized but of course I kept quiet. In our family, the only acceptable excuse for missing the New Year is if you are an ocean away, in North America. When all our relatives gather, it is the noisiest and happiest of times. And to miss all the special foods is plain stupid.

When I gave him the page from my notebook, he yelled, “I won’t pay 4 cash! You used a pencil!”

He argued that someone could erase my words and change his meaning. He wanted a letter in ink. I told him no one can make changes and get away with it. It is absolutely impossible. Besides, who can do brushwork while riding these waves? We argued until I settled on 2 cash. He walked away grinning. I really am Rock Brain!

April 4

I strolled around and banged on my writing box with a stick, shouting I would write letters, 4 cash per page.

Ba slapped my head, hard. “What do you think we are?” he shouted. “Beggars? Anyone who hires this boy will have to deal with me!”

When no customers came forward, I wanted to tell the crowd how Ba had pledged away my wages. But I did no such thing. Our family name is one of the best.

Now I can go back to sleeping. I nap all day and all night. Why not? In the dark here, no one can tell time. I am forever tired, no matter how much I sleep.