

Ben Sonnenberg

Ankle

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ANKLE

Wendy Law-Yone

I can't say how old I was exactly, but I was old enough to wonder how my father had ever got mixed up with a man like this, a man who went around biting people for sport.

All I knew when he first appeared was that my father and he were close friends, or had been. They were enjoying some sort of reunion. This happened shortly after we'd moved to Mandalay. My father's job with the Public Works Department took us from province to province, where we lived in government quarters all identical in this one respect: the previous tenants, in my mother's view, were pigs.

We were still unpacking when the guests arrived. I remember annoying my mother when I dropped a piece of peanut brittle into one of the half-unpacked dealwood boxes. You'd think a little thing like the peanut brittle would escape my mother's notice at a time like that. But no; my mother had a nose for little things. She ordered me to find the piece then and there. Otherwise, the ants would come and by nighttime there'd be enough of them to carry me away in my sleep, etc.

While I rooted around in the wads of newspaper stuffing, my father and his old friend regaled each other. There was a lot of talk about army days, a lot of loud laughter that went unchecked. Often at night, when I ran around in that last burst of energy and hilarity preceding collapse, my mother would yell, "Enough of that! Don't you know too much laughter ends in tears?" She was right, of course. My father and his friend were laughing in the same way now. It had to lead to tears. They slapped each other on the back and called each other the names of animals, among other things.

Dogface!

Dumb cow!

Donkey brain!

Monkey tricks!

"He's a big shot now," my father said to my mother. "None bigger than him."

"Yes there is, aw-haw-haw yes there is," protested his friend.

"Bigger than you?" my father said. "Bigger than you is only an elephant."

In between jokes the two men shoved, elbowed and hit each other in the mean and funny way of clowns.

"Are we related?" I asked my mother.

"Related!" She gave a kind of laugh closer to anger than humor. "Related!"

"We're better than related," my father said, looking radiant. He clapped his friend on the back. "Better than brothers. He saved my life!"

My father's savior pointed an imaginary machinegun at him and made loud, stammering noises. My father shocked me by falling to the floor and playing dead. Just as he sprang up, shouting and laughing, his friend gave him a push that made him trip and almost fall over a carton of empty bottles.

"The bottles, the bottles!" my mother said.

"*He's* the one that saved *my* life," the friend protested. By now the two men were convulsed, almost in pain.

The woman who'd come along with the friend leaned over and drew me to her. She made little kissing sounds as if I were a cat. "We are your Anty and your Ankle," she explained as I stood staring at her breasts. Her nylon blouse had the look of an expensive net in which was caught a pair of plump and slippery creatures. From the very center of this enticing catch arose a scent: a little sweaty, a little sweet. My mother's rosewater-soaked hankies, when slightly soiled, had the same scent.

I could tell my mother was impatient to get on with the unpacking but she smiled a lot, admired the woman's lolly-pink plastic handbag (a layer of clear plastic over a layer of polka-dot fabric), and pressed cream soda and coconut cakes on her. But after the guests had left, the first thing she said was, "Anty and Ankle! What is she, American? Talking through her nose like that!" Mimicking her, my mother made some exaggerated nasal sounds, imitating what sounded like a fire siren.

My father, who had been smiling to himself, gave one of his yawns—a little yelp—and left the room, swinging his arms happily.

Once we'd settled in, Anty and Ankle came to visit often. Sometimes they brought their two sons with them. These boys were about the same age as my two teenage brothers and should have had things to talk about, but friendship never took. My brothers were always in trouble of one sort and another. Not long after our move to Mandalay, they got involved with a boy who owned a BB gun. With this gun my younger brother managed to graze a monk in the armpit—an accident that took a lot of negotiations between my mother and the monastery before the monk could be persuaded not to press charges.

Ankle's two sons seemed much older: serious, well-mannered, a little hunched. One of them, the older one with ears that stuck out from his head at a degree very close to 90, had already decided on a career in the air force; the other—the one with the thick spectacles and the fleshy mole that looked like a piece of dried fruit someone had playfully squashed into the middle of his forehead—was said to be outstanding in mathematics. These boys didn't say much, but whenever they opened their mouths, out would drop words like *gasket*, *dynamo*, *exhaust*, *manifold* and *carburetor*. Their clothes were neat, they bowed when passing in front of adults, spoke only when spoken to, and acted at the table as if they were ashamed of eating. The four boys mingled awkwardly. When the guests were gone, my brothers began the ridicule.

What idjits!

Goody-goody idjits!

Flatheads!

Elephant ears!

Four eyes!

"Like a lumpal" I contributed.

My brothers looked at me. "Say that again," one of them said, "and we'll have to call the police."

"And what will the police do?" I challenged.

"Come and burn your tongue. With long matches."

"What's wrong with 'like a lumpa'?" I asked. I'd heard *them* say it often enough.

"It means, Like a lumpa shit. Savvy?"

"Zed," I replied in their language, which I had recently picked up. Zed for Zero, or No.

"Idjit!" they said, this time to me.

Whenever they met, Anty and my mother reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of their sons. Anty's sons were full of strengths; my mother's were all weakness. In her coquettish way, as if confiding some girlish secret, Anty let it be known how studious and responsible her boys were. To show admiration, my mother clucked; but in a manner that was not altogether convincing. Then she would take great satisfaction in presenting her sons in the worst possible light. "How lucky you are!" she'd say; "what good, good boys! Now, these devils here. All they bring are headaches and heart flutters." She smirked as she detailed their shortcomings. Anty, confused, would raise her heavily penciled eyebrows and whimper like a dog that's just been kicked by an ordinarily friendly person. I stared, hoping to see Anty laugh outright and flash her gold front tooth, which was always shiny because it was always wet (she licked her upper teeth whenever she laughed).

Ankle was the real laughter in that family, though. It didn't much matter what the joke was. Or even if there was a joke. If he wasn't telling one himself—and enjoying every minute of it—he was chuckling. Even when someone else was talking, even when nothing funny was being said. Chuckling and snorting with impatience. He could hardly wait for the other person to finish and allow him, for pity's sake, to laugh outright again. The minute he saw an opening he'd barge in with yet another hilarity, then bounce around the room, guffawing into peoples' faces, taking stock of his own wit as if taking up a collection. Everyone obliged; there was no choice. But no one was more tickled by Ankle than my father, who egged him on, dredged up old comedies and laughed along unstintingly. My father was a giggler, not a guffawer like Ankle. The two kept up a duet, my father sounding the treble with his *akhee-khee-khee*, Ankle doing the bass with his *aw-haw-aw-haw-aw-haw*.

When Ankle drove off in his jeep, my father would stand coughing in the dust his friend had left behind, a fond smile on his face, and say something like, "What a crackpot!" He used the English word. English words gave him a lift. He stood on his toes when he uttered them.

"Crackpot, my foot! Why give crackpots a bad name?"

my mother would reply. She looked exhausted. "He's a drunk."

"But a happy drunk!"

"No drunk is happy."

It was when Ankle was at his happiest that he tended to bite. He may have bitten others before, but of course what I remember is the first time he bit me. At first, too young to be part of his audience, I was lucky enough to escape his notice. But one day, during an uncharacteristic lull in Ankle's carryings-on, my father decided that I should sing for everyone. He told me to stand in the center of the room and sing the doggie song. I was very proud of the doggie song. I'd recently learnt it at school—my first full-length song in English. It had a lovely tune that played in my head and cried out to be hummed. I especially liked the flourish of singing softly when I came to the part about the cow's soft moo, and raising my voice when I came to the part about the jamboree. So I sang.

I like to hear the birdies sing;
I like to hear bells ting-a-ling;
But most of all I like to hear
My doggie say bow-wow.

I like the cow's soft moo;
The humming of the bees;
I like the lamb's baa, too;
And to hear the wind sigh through the trees;

I like to hear a jamboree;
I like to hear a symphony;
But most of all I like to hear
My doggie say bow-wow.

I knew the proper way to sing an English song: to look straight ahead and clasp my hands in front of my navel as if I had just caught a frog. But even though I'd assumed this posture, I couldn't help seeing from the corners of my eyes that Ankle was merrily wagging his head as I sang, and by the time I got to the jamboree, he was not only wagging his head but also clapping loudly to keep time—so loudly that even when I raised my voice as I was

supposed to, almost shouting out *jamboree!* and *symphony!*, he managed to drown me out.

For once I was spared the awkwardness of finding myself at the end of a performance, not knowing quite what to do next. All eyes were on Ankle, not on me. He was continuing to wag his head and clap as if in time to some catchy tune, while calling out, *Hey! Hey! Hey!* He got up from his seat and hopped around for a bit, *Hey!* (clap) *Hey!* (clap) *Hey!* Then he pranced toward me, took my head in his hands, gave it an irrepressible shake, and bent over as if to kiss me on my cheek, which instead he bit. It wasn't a deep bite—he didn't draw blood or break the skin—but it was definitely a bite and a quite painful one, too. Tears came to my eyes. I remember running to find my mother and being caught by Anty. She imprisoned me in an embrace and said, "Poosy, your Ankle *loves* you. Right down to the liver. You know how when a baby's cheeks are so fat you have to pinch them? That's how much he loves you: enough to pinch, enough to bite." (She always called me Poosy or Pawpy, never by my name. She thought of me, I suppose, as a small cat or dog.) Then she squeezed my cheek precisely where it had just been bitten.

I was the only one who wasn't laughing. Anty's gold tooth was winking. I managed to escape to the kitchen. The meat safe had tin-panel doors that served as mirrors just right for my height. When I brought my cheek up close to the tin, I saw some new marks there, as deep as dimples.

Once, after I'd been bitten repeatedly by Ankle—thankfully, not always on the cheek—I asked my mother if he was related to the devil. I didn't ask if he *was* the devil, just in case he was and held it against me for suspecting the truth. My mother screwed up her nose, as if she smelled something rank. "The devil is not such a silly fool," was all she said. "Then why does he bite?" I asked. "Why do snapping turtles bite?" my mother replied. "Because they can't help it."

The next time I went to see the turtles, I studied them closely. In those days we made monthly pilgrimages to a certain pagoda on the outskirts of town, where my father was now posted. I always looked forward to these outings. I liked the damp, jasmine-scented gloom of the pagoda,

the chant and ritual of worship: reciting my prayers, lighting joss sticks, kowtowing before the shrines. But what I looked forward to most was the spectacle awaiting me afterwards, outside. There, in a scummy little moat surrounding the pagoda, the sacred turtles paddled about and poked their heads through litter that consisted mostly of popcorn. Pilgrims could buy balls of caramel corn from the vendors at the bridge and throw this delicacy, after shredding, to the turtles below. I watched this ritual now with even more than my usual fascination. The turtles snapped a lot. For no visible reason at all, one would suddenly snap at another; the other would snap back. Sometimes there'd be a group tussle. It was really impossible to tell why they snapped or bit—they didn't seem to be fighting over food, nor did it look like mere play. It appeared, as my mother had said, that they snapped because they couldn't help it.

Once, profanely, I had myself taken a bite out of a popcorn ball before tossing it into the moat. The kernels crackled with burnt sugar. I now had another unholy thought: this delicious sweetmeat was wasted on the turtles who had clearly lost their taste for it. They lunged automatically when you threw a morsel at them, but appeared almost disappointed to discover the same old fluff again. The whole moat seemed in danger of choking up with uneaten kernels. The sacred turtles, I now felt sure, were frantic to escape their feed. Yet this was what the pilgrims would go on feeding them, for this was what had always been done.

I went away enlightened. Ankle was possessed, that was all. A turtle had entered his soul, just as dogs and cats and monkeys were said to have entered mine whenever I misbehaved at home. This theory was easier to grasp—and preferable to my original suspicion that Ankle was really the devil in disguise. After all, the devil as I'd imagined him scared the wits out of people, whereas Ankle seemed to be scaring no one but me—even though by now he was biting indiscriminately (that is to say, everyone except my mother, from whom he wisely kept his distance, at least where biting was concerned). My brothers he bit almost fondly, usually in greeting—a nip on the shoulder or the forearm. Nothing significant, to judge from my brothers' reaction. They laughed as they rubbed their arms or shoulders from Ankle's passing bites, as if he had simply jabbed

them with his fist and not sunk his teeth into their shirts, sometimes even leaving stains.

The stains were red and added to his bloodthirsty aura. They were actually betel-nut stains. Chewing betel nut was something I'd seen only Indian street vendors do, but Ankle had picked up this messy habit which involved a lot of spitting on the ground. He was an incessant chewer. If it wasn't betel nut, it was tobacco. Or the inside of his cheek. This last habit produced an expression on his face not easy to forget: cheeks sunken, lower teeth bared, and gums a bright betel-juice red. His lips, also red, appeared tender and inflamed, as if swollen from a brawl. They had a remarkable, elastic quality. When he made faces they looked stretched all out of shape. I thought he'd never manage to get them shut again.

I couldn't hide from him. Hearing his jeep pull up in front of our house, I ran and took cover wherever I thought he'd be least likely to find me. He always did, though. Chortling and smacking his lips, he'd drag me out of my hiding place. Sometimes, to prolong my agony, he'd hoist me by an arm and a leg and carry me, dangling, to a nice comfortable spot—a beast dragging its kill to where it can feed in peace—before giving the dreaded bite. The bite itself wasn't all that painful, but pain is not the only dreadful thing about being bitten.

I came to fear even his stories. He enjoyed them so much. And anything he enjoyed was likely to end in an exuberant bite. Or a kiss. Coming from Ankle, a kiss wasn't better than a bite. Wet and sticky, it left a feeling as from the suction of a leech. He liked to tell me one particular story: A young girl was walking through some rice fields where she came upon a man. The man was squatting on the ground, sneakily trying to hide something under his hat. Curious, the girl stopped to ask what it was. "A little bird," said the man; "I just caught a little bird." "Let me see?" asked the girl. The man considered. "I don't know," he said. "Birds are quick. Lift the hat and it'll fly away." "But if we are careful?" asked the girl. The man relented. "With *that* hand," he instructed, "lift the hat very slowly, just a crack. Then quickly put your other hand in and grab." The girl did exactly as she was told.

"And what do you think she caught?" Ankle would say

at this point, shaking his hand in exaggerated disgust. "Ka-ka. A big pile of ka-ka!" He stretched his huge lips, red froth at the corners, into a pained grimace. "Haw-haw-haw," he brayed, eyebrows and shoulders jerking in tandem, watching me closely all the time, expecting something—delight, perhaps—I was simply unable to give. Grounds for another bite.

The ka-ka joke was a great favorite of his. It went through many versions. One of these involved a bar of duck-brand soap. In this pantomime, Ankle would lumber across the floor on all fours, demanding, "What am I? Ha? Ha? Who can guess?" Then he'd drop the soap. "Now what am I?" he'd insist, laughing so hard he could barely hold his head up. When his face was almost purple, he'd shout, "Give up? Give up?" He looked ready to explode from the strain of containing his joke. "An elephant!" he'd trumpet; "an elephant making ka-ka!" But there was more. "Wait!" he'd say, picking up the soap, inspecting it as if for the first time. "What's this? Duck-brand? An elephant making duck brand? Elephants should be making elephant brand, aw-haw, aw-haw."

By now, we'd all heard Ankle's stories and jokes many times over. They were no longer funny, but they still got a laugh—from Ankle, mostly, but also from others laughing over Ankle's laughter.

My mother wasn't among those still amused. She wasn't laughing too much anymore—or talking, for that matter. She went to some lengths to avoid conversation with my father. If he addressed her, she'd answer, of course. But too precisely, too briefly. I was often the intermediary in their peculiar exchanges. "Ask your father," she'd say to me (although he was present in the same room), "when he wants his dinner." Or, "Tell your father the bread man wants to be paid." My father would say to her, "How much do we owe?" My mother would then tell me, my father would hand her the money, but she, turning away, would ask me to take it from him and set it down somewhere, as if to let an object touched by him cool down before she could pick it up safely.

None of this seemed to unsettle my father very much. He'd meet each rebuff with a giggle ending in a dry little cough. After a while, he'd approach my mother with an-

other question or observation, new hope in his voice. This was not to say he was a happy man. I'd seen him happier—usually in Ankle's company.

But nowadays, Ankle's visits were not so frequent. My father and he still met, about once a week—but elsewhere. In his noisy jeep, Ankle would pick him up and drop him off at the head of our street. As for Anty and her boys, they hardly came to see us anymore—not surprising in light of my mother's behavior. Each visit from them brought out such a rush of false hospitality and sarcasm that Anty just sat for long stretches saying nothing, her breast heaving fearfully, as my mother went through the exercise of heaping insincere praise on Anty's sons, then just as insincerely harping on my brothers' faults.

One day my mother left us. It didn't happen quite that suddenly; it couldn't have. There must have been attempts to prepare me. But all the warnings in the world cannot prepare you for certain events. My mother's departure was such an event. I remember none of the foreshadowing; just the aftermath, the shocking knowledge that she had thought about leaving us, had planned it and then done it.

On the morning after she left, I could scarcely believe that nothing had been set out on the kitchen table for me to eat. I went to school hungry to the point of tears and all day long worried about who would cook our meals now. My father had once tried to fry an egg which never did fry because he'd mistaken Karo syrup for cooking oil. My brothers, to my knowledge, were as useless in the kitchen. It scared me a little that all these men in my family—my brothers so puffed up with their worldly experience, my father a war veteran—were not to be counted on in a crisis like this.

When I got home that afternoon, I was both dismayed and delighted to see Anty there. Dismayed because I sensed her arrival was linked in some unwholesome way with my mother's departure. Delighted because Anty was unpacking a tiffin-carrier filled with steaming rice, fish soup, cold cucumbers and squash, and a meat omelette. "Anty's little Poosy," she murmured over me as I ate ravenously (we were at the low, round kitchen table, sitting on the floor). Just as I was finishing up, she covered her mouth with her short little fingers made even shorter by their

many rings. Tears filled her eyes. She unwrapped her *longyi* at the waist and used a corner of it to wipe the tears away. I felt let down. Usually, when she pulled out a corner of cloth from around her waist, it was to undo a knot and bring out a hidden coin to give to me. Now she blew her nose into the cloth before tucking it back into her waist. "She'll be back, Pawpy," she said, sniffing. "Never worry. She'll be back."

The events of the previous night were still weighing on me. I had been awakened by my mother's voice, angry, loud, accusing. My father coughed a lot. His voice came through every now and then, trying feebly to interrupt the tirade which had to do with tickets of some sort. And habits. "If I hadn't found these tickets . . . old habits . . . tickets . . . habits . . . habits . . . tickets . . ." My mother railed on and on with a monotony that sent me finally back to sleep.

"Do you know about the tickets?" I asked Anty. As soon as I'd said this, I sensed it was a mistake. "Tickets? What tickets?" She sized me up with new interest. I was no longer Poosy or Pawpy but the holder of an important piece of information. I didn't know whether to be afraid or proud of this status.

"Mama's bus tickets," I said, thinking better of things.

Anty was diverted. "Of course she bought round-trip tickets, Pawpy. Would your mama ever leave a precious daughter like you?"

My worries about meals were over. Anty brought an elderly woman, related to her in some undisclosed way, to cook and clean for us. This old woman said very little but sighed a lot. "A simpleton," Anty said about her, patting the woman on her bony shoulder, approvingly. "Doesn't drink, doesn't steal and won't gossip."

Things were quite different now at home. I hardly ever saw my brothers during the day. At night, they took to sleeping out on the small veranda, a habit my mother had denounced as uncivilized. Now I'd have to step over their bodies on my way out to school. In the afternoons, the old woman would squat on the back steps and light up. Through clouds of cheroot smoke she would watch me in a daze, letting me do as I pleased. I ate with my fingers, using both hands, wrist-deep in curry. I swung like a gib-

bon from the veranda rails. With pocket money Anty kept giving me, I bought a lot of unsanitary snacks from the vendors outside our school—salted plums, preserved mangoes coated with chilies and salt, Indian sweetmeats—and sucked on them all afternoon long, which gave me stomach cramps.

Anty came on weekends to dress me up and take me out. With cosmetics from her polka-dot bag, she would paint my face to look like one of those celluloid dolls sold in the bazaars, braid my hair, bend my eyelashes between her eyelash curler and make me put on one of the many mint-green or indigo-blue nylon dresses—the kind made for celluloid dolls—she liked to buy for me. Then the two of us would catch a trishaw into town. At the market, Anty would buy me sweets: lumps of unrefined jaggery or sugar marbles spun with color. Then she'd do some shopping, taking her time to bargain and gossip. As she paraded me around, licking her tooth whenever anyone remarked on my doll-like appearance, she hinted that I was a child in need of compassion. "Her mother's gone," she would say, winking ferociously, "to take care of the old lady."

I was enjoying all this attention and all of Anty's gossiping and haggling, but the stench of the meat market, where we often lingered in search of delicacies like pigs' trotters and tripe, often made me want to vomit. Also, I dreaded the pi-dogs—skinny, mangy and wild-eyed—that roamed all over town, sniffing at us with low growls. Last but not least, I feared having to stop at Anty's on our way home, where I might encounter Ankle. Luckily for me, their house was some distance away, in a semirural tract just outside town.

In the days when both my parents still socialized with them, we had once paid them a visit. For a long time afterwards my mother went on about the shock of that visit. "The husband drives a jeep," she said, her voice high with satisfaction and ridicule; "the wife's getting long ears and long arms from all those heavy diamond earrings and gold bangles . . . and they live in a hut." It wasn't a hut, exactly, but it wasn't much of a house, either: corrugated iron and thatch on the outside; inside, an assortment of buckets, basins and spittoons to catch leaks from the roof. "Very little furnitures," Anty apologized. Then she laughed, as if

realizing the grandiose English word only made the bareness seem more bare.

"Such modest people," my mother said afterwards, twisting her mouth. "Concealing their wealth."

It wasn't the house I minded, though. It was the fear of Ankle's presence and, even worse, of finding myself alone with him. This fear came to pass one afternoon when Anty left me in his care. We weren't strictly alone: one of his sons (the mathematician with the mole) was sitting at a tin table, listening to a soccer match on the radio and drawing things in an exercise book with a compass and set-square. I wondered how he could see anything at all in his dark corner. It was daylight, but the house let in very little of it. Still, he went on soberly measuring and drawing while the hysteria of the soccer game ebbed and flowed out of his radio. In his industry, in that gloom, he looked old and misguided, like some has-been wizard busy with useless instruments. No help from that quarter, I guessed.

Ankle, I knew, wasn't going to leave me alone. I could tell from his mood, from his red eyes and strong, pickled breath. He offered me some sticky rice—most of which he ate, smacking his lips and sucking his teeth.

"I heard you cried at school," he said. "A-hoo, a-hoo."

"Not true," I lied, turning hot with shame. Then I grew alarmed that he would know such a thing. I couldn't think who might have told him. I *had* cried. It all started with my laughing in class. The teacher ordered me to stop. I laughed even more. Again and again she warned me: if I didn't stop, I'd have to stand on my chair like a dunce. I continued to laugh—desperately now, no longer with pleasure—because I couldn't think of a way to back down. The class fell silent, waiting for the showdown.

"Stand on the chair!" the teacher shouted at me finally. "I don't have time for clowns."

I stood on the chair and burst into tears. I didn't mind being the dunce as much as I minded crying in front of everyone. I hated the thought that they'd all feel sorry for me now that my mother was gone.

I hated even more the fact that Ankle had somehow heard about this humiliation. He seemed to know everything that scared and shamed me. Now he said, "Come outside, I'll show you something nice."

I was afraid to go. Oblivious though the son seemed, at least he was there, another person, inside the house. Outside, I would be wholly at Ankle's mercy.

Ankle shooed me out the door. The tract on which their house stood had been cleared in the front down to the dry, cracked dirt; but in back it was all wild weed and elephant grass that scratched the back of my knees. I couldn't imagine what nice thing he had to show me out there among the burrs and the vines, in heat so brutal it was hard to breathe. I was determined not to be taken in by any bird under a hat.

Ankle went ahead and stopped at what looked like a low brick wall almost completely covered with weed. He was eager to show me something on the other side. I went up close and only then, standing on my toes, discovered I was looking down into a deep well.

At that moment, he seized me by the ankles and swung me upside down into this hole.

My hands hit the sides and felt the fuzz and slime of moss. I heard the echo of a faintly recognized scream: my own, as it turned out. Either from sheer fright, or from sensing the danger of Ankle's losing his hold and dropping me head down into the black pit, I did not put up a fight. I simply let myself hang there by my feet, pointed down at a depth impossible to fathom. This couldn't have lasted very long, but it was long enough for me to be impressed by two things: One was that blood was rushing to my head. My mother was always after me to keep this from happening, always stopping me from standing on my head or swinging upside down. Now my head was filled to throbbing with something explosive. Blood, no doubt.

The other impression was that I was somehow falling into the sky. I don't know whether this seemed so because, hanging down, I looked back up toward Ankle and saw the sky, or because, looking down into the depths of the well I saw, or imagined I saw, a reflection of the sky. Years later, I read about the old Persian belief that when the sun is bright, you can look up from the bottom of a well and still see the stars. I don't remember any stars in my vision from the well—only the sky, a vast depth of sky into which I was being sucked.

When earth and sky righted themselves again, I found myself back on my feet, in the dead center of a loud thumping that settled at last in my chest. For once, Ankle wasn't laughing or telling some hideous joke. He was looking at me with odd concern. "What happened? What's the matter? I was only teasing. Don't you like to play? What's the matter?" he kept insisting. Then he took me inside and gave me the rest of the sticky rice, first blowing off the ants that were swarming all over the dish.

Very early one morning—so early I thought it was still night—I woke up to commotion. My father and some other men—neighbors, most likely—were half-carrying, half-dragging Ankle into the house. Ankle was disabled but uncooperative. He was complaining in a language I couldn't understand, bellowing out every now and then. My father was giggling; he looked a little unsteady himself. The old woman, Anty's relative, seemed more amused than concerned. She stood to one side, her head jerking up and down at intervals like a wind-up laughing monkey. She was so taken by the spectacle that my father had to tell her several times to go and make tea before she could tear herself away.

By the time they finally got Ankle to lie down—on a bamboo mat on the floor—he was bawling like a baby. The bawling subsided long enough for him to smack his fist against his thigh, complain about aching bones, call my father a few names—some affectionate, some abusive—and exclaim with a yowl of remorse, "My poor wife and two sons!" Then he was back to bawling again.

Something terrible had happened to him, and no one would tell me what. When the neighbors—or whoever those attendants were—had cleared out, my father went inside our only bedroom, which my mother and I shared with him, and fell asleep. Ankle, after a period of restlessness, had also settled down and now was snoring loudly, somewhat threateningly. I couldn't resist going up close to him to get a better look. His big red mouth hung open. Strands of straight black hair fell over his forehead. His nose was twitching. He looked like an unlovable Chinese baby.

Suddenly, without opening his eyes, he reached out for

my arm. Before I could get free, he gave it a bite. This time he did break the skin, leaving little crescents of blood on the inside of my forearm.

After this incident, I didn't see Ankle for a long time. Anty's visits had fallen off, too. Now, when she did come, she seemed breathless and preoccupied, moaning with relief as she lowered herself onto a kitchen stool, as if just sitting down had become a great luxury. Then she'd bring out a powder puff from her Pan-Cake makeup jar and pat it over the beads of sweat on her temples, upper lip and neck. "A sick man," she said, referring to Ankle, "is more work than a sick baby."

Afterwards, I asked the old woman about this sickness. She smiled, her lips sliding far back into her cheeks. "Bitten by a mad dog," she said.

And that was how I got the idea that Ankle was dying from rabies. The fear of mad dogs and rabies was never far from my mind ever since an incident in our neighborhood. A boy I had seen often playing in the streets had been bitten by his own dog, a mongrel that had turned rabid. News spread about how the boy had suffered horribly for a month before dying of a ghastly thirst he was unable to quench.

The longer Ankle stayed away, the more I imagined him dying like that. Maybe, I thought, he was already dead, and the adults had kept it from me because it was a disgrace to die that way.

Then, as if infected by such persistent fantasies about illness, I was taken ill myself. At first the fevers came on only at night, bringing nightmares about mad dogs and stern people who kept expanding and shrinking. By morning I'd be the same again, only weaker. Eventually, the chills and sweats continued into the day, too. When I tried to lift my head, I was borne on a merry-go-round and had to burrow back into the safety of the pillow. Unable to keep down anything I ate, I was also seized by a hopeless thirst: no sooner would I take a sip of water than I'd have to heave. And sip again. And heave again.

I remembered hearing that rabies could be caught not only from rabid dogs but from rabid humans as well. I remembered that for a bite to infect it had to break the

skin. The small scars from Ankle's last bite were still on my arm. Moaning, I told the old woman I was dying, but not what I thought I was dying from, because I dreaded the treatment almost as much as the disease. My brother had once described the treatment to me; "stomach injections," he said gleefully, waving a chopstick, "with needles this long."

The old woman made a poultice of wet tea leaves and ginger and placed it on my head. When she wasn't looking, I moved it to the spot where I'd been bitten. I begged to see my mother and whimpered, too weak for a really good cry.

At last my father, whose face seemed to have shrunk like one of those characters in my dreams, brought home a nurse in a dirty cream-colored uniform who dilated her large nostrils over me as she gripped my wrist as though I were trying to escape and placed an icy stethoscope on my chest. With the old woman peering curiously from behind her back, she gave me an enema and, surprisingly (since I didn't have a cold), a Vicks inhaler, before leaving.

I dreamed my mother had come home and was rubbing my forehead with eucalyptus oil. I was immensely relieved because this meant she would once more cook roast chicken with a dark gravy to pour over the rice. Life would be the way it once was, long ago. Perfect, had I but known it then.

When I awoke from the delirium, I heard my mother crying in the next room. I listened, confused about whether she was happy or angry to be back. One minute she was blaming my father for every kind of misery, the next minute she was vowing never to leave again. My father kept clearing his throat and making promises of his own.

"No more gambling?" (My mother's voice.)

"Yes, no more gambling."

"No cards? No tickets to the races?"

"No tickets whatsoever. Not even for the state lottery."

That must have given my mother pause. She liked buying lottery tickets.

"And no more drinking?" she continued.

"No drinking."

Then Ankle's name came up and my mother started to cry again. "That man! Spreading bad luck wherever he

goes! Gambler! Liar! Drunk! He'll go to his grave trying to ruin you. Not enough he almost ruined us once. All my jewelry, dumped in a pawnshop to pay your debts. Now he wants to shame us again. And his wife, that phony! Sweet as sugar cane, but rotten to the root. Both of them are rotten, two beans from the same rotten pod!"

My father tried to make soothing noises, but he was having trouble getting rid of the frog in his throat.

Then they fell silent. A familiar sound was coming from outside: the sound of Ankle's jeep shuddering to a stop right in front of our door.

"I'm not letting him in the front door," my mother said.

"Don't do like that," my father said.

"I'm not letting him in the front door."

"Can't do like that. We can't be rude, forgetting hospitality."

My mother began to cry again. "Useless, useless."

"Not useless, no. We must learn to live with others. Not just with friends, with enemies, too. That's life: friends and enemies knocking at your door."

Later, when Anty and Ankle followed my parents into the room where I was still in bed, I reached out for my mother's hand. When Ankle wagged his finger at me, saying, aw *haw*! I knew he would try to bite, so I pulled my mother down toward me.

"Don't let him bite," I whispered.

"What?" my mother whispered back.

It was my father who heard me. I'll never forget it was my father who heard me and, when Ankle leaned over the bed, who pushed him away—not rudely, but not timidly, either.

"Don't bite the child, man," he said.

