

## Golden 19

### Chapter Nineteen: The Gathering (Part Two)

It's been seven or eight years since I graduated from junior high. Back then, Zhuang Rui and Liu Chuan were quite unconventional. Whatever fun activities were popular among students, these two were sure to lead the whole class, even the entire grade, in doing them. However, Zhuang Rui's grades were excellent, while Liu Chuan was consistently a negative example in the eyes of teachers and parents throughout junior high.

Students back then were more innocent and their interactions were less driven by self-interest, unlike schools today where, starting from elementary school, class officers are selected based on a comparison of who has the most powerful, wealthiest, and highest-ranking parents. This fosters a serious culture of competition among students.

Compared to the intense study life of high school, junior high school left Zhuang Rui and Liu Chuan with many wonderful memories. After graduating from high school, Zhuang Rui went to university in Shanghai and almost lost contact with his former junior high school classmates. When he heard Liu Chuan's suggestion, he really wanted to see his classmates from back then.

Lei Lei transferred to Hong Kong in her third year of junior high school. As everyone knows, in the early 1990s, almost no one in Hong Kong could speak Mandarin. Many Hong Kong people even had difficulty understanding Mandarin. For mainlanders going to Hong Kong, if they could not speak Cantonese, they would definitely find it difficult to get by. When Lei Lei first arrived in Hong Kong, she did not have any friends at school due to the language barrier. Naturally, she missed her life in Pengcheng very much. When she heard Liu Chuan say that, she was immediately tempted.

"Liu... uh, Da Chuan," Zhuang Rui was so used to calling Liu Chuan by his nickname that it was really hard to change.

"Of our junior high classmates, apart from a few who went to the same high school as us, we've basically lost touch with the rest. How are we going to organize a reunion? Do you have a plan?" Zhuang Rui was a little doubtful. Many of his classmates hadn't been seen for seven or eight years; he probably wouldn't even recognize them if they met.

"Isn't that obvious? I'm a local big shot. We had a get-together three years ago. I have all their contact information. By the way, didn't I call you to tell you last time that you couldn't come back from Zhonghai?"

Liu Chuan wasn't exaggerating. After failing to get into university in high school, he started mingling in society. Once you leave school and enter society, social connections and networks are crucial. Liu Chuan's pet shop has only been open for a few years, but he has already earned a considerable amount of money in Pengcheng. This is inseparable from his loyalty and love of making friends. Pengcheng is only so big, and most of his junior high school classmates are in the same district, so they reconnected with each other.

Among the classmates, some were doing well and others were not. They could help each other out occasionally, so Liu Chuan organized a reunion a few years ago. In terms of interpersonal skills and social skills, Zhuang Rui was far inferior to Liu Chuan.

Upon hearing Liu Chuan's words, Zhuang Rui remembered that such an event had indeed occurred a few years ago. However, he was studying in Zhonghai at the time, and his studies were quite demanding, so he hadn't paid much attention to junior high school reunions and had long forgotten about them.

"Da Chuan, the day after tomorrow is New Year's Eve. It's probably too late for a pre-New Year's gathering..."

During the Spring Festival, from the first to the fifth day of the Lunar New Year, people visit relatives and friends to offer New Year's greetings. If a gathering is arranged after the New Year, it will be at least after the fifth day. However, after spending the New Year in Pengcheng, she and Qin Xuanbing will go to several other cities to investigate the market, so she probably won't be able to make it to this gathering. Therefore, Lei Lei had a slightly regretful expression on her face.

Liu Chuan's eyes darted around. This was an opportunity to show off his abilities. He secretly calculated in his mind that the day after tomorrow was New Year's Eve, so if the gathering was to be held before the New Year, it could only be arranged for tomorrow. There were 38 classmates from junior high school. More than a dozen of them went to study in other places, but most of them came back to work after graduation. Those who stayed in other places should be spending the New Year in Pengcheng now. He had kept in touch with about seventeen or eighteen people. If he asked them to contact a few more, he estimated that more than twenty people could come. The key was whether these people would have time tomorrow.

"You don't need to worry about it, I'll arrange it. We'll have a get-together tomorrow at noon," Liu Chuan said after considering it for a moment and feeling that it was about right.

Liu Chuan hadn't been idle all these years; he was very organized. First, he called the hotel to reserve a few tables. Then, he pulled out a contact list from somewhere and started making calls. In less than half an hour, he had found about ten people—five male classmates and seven female classmates. After giving them the hotel's name, they all agreed to arrive on time the next day. Some of them could even help contact other classmates. So, there were already seventeen or eighteen people. There were still a few who didn't have phones at home, and Liu Chuan planned to drive over later to notify them one by one.

"Liu Chuan, I didn't expect you to be so popular! You've kept in touch with your female classmates all these years." Lei Lei asked with a smile as soon as Liu Chuan hung up the phone, which immediately made Liu Chuan regret calling his female classmates. He could have just asked his buddies to inform them.

"Well... she's a mother now, and I've already attended a few people's full-month celebrations. Let's go, Lei Lei, Miss Qin, I'll take you home first, and then I'll go and inform everyone one by one." Liu Chuan quickly changed the subject, speaking with righteous indignation.

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"Lei Lei, you must have a lot of suitors in Hong Kong, but I've never seen you date anyone. So you have a childhood sweetheart boyfriend at home? Liu Chuan is a nice guy, but he's not particularly outstanding. How did you end up with him?"

Lying on the large bed in Lei Lei's room, Qin Xuanbing's previous aloofness vanished, replaced by a somewhat mischievous tone. She genuinely wondered why, given the influence of Lei Lei's maternal grandfather's family and her own circumstances, she shouldn't have been able to find a more suitable boyfriend.

"Do you know what I looked like when I first went to Hong Kong?" Lei Lei was playing on her computer by the bedside when she heard this, so she turned around and asked Qin Xuanbing.

"Hehe, back then you wore thick glasses and your clothes were really old-fashioned. A lot of people in the class called you 'Mainland Girl,' right..."

When Lei Lei first arrived in Hong Kong, she joined Qin Xuanbing's class. At that time, Lei Lei couldn't even understand Cantonese, and the other students couldn't understand her Mandarin either. If Qin Xuanbing hadn't grown up with her grandfather and could speak Mandarin, they wouldn't have become such good friends.

"Yes, I was like that before I came to Hong Kong. Back then, everyone in my class called me 'Four-Eyes Girl.' Liu Chuan was quite domineering in class, and many people were afraid of him. However, he never bullied anyone. Once, he beat up a classmate who called me 'Four-Eyes Girl,' and from then on, no one called me 'Four-Eyes Girl' anymore..."

Lei Lei recalled that the incident had a great impact on her later life, and perhaps Liu Chuan's image was imprinted in her mind at that time.

"I'm not going to let Liu Chuan support me. By the way, Xuanxuan, are you going to let Young Master Wang support you, or offer yourself to Young Master Huo? If they find out you've come to the mainland, they'll definitely come after you." Lei Lei's words immediately enraged Qin Xuanbing, and the two started playing around on the bed.

They only stopped when they were both panting heavily from exhaustion. Lei Lei was worried that Qin Xuanbing would be bored at home while she went to the party the next day, so she asked, "Xuanxuan, why don't you come to the class reunion with me tomorrow? By the way, Zhuang Rui is quite nice. You could also find another admirer in the mainland..."

"You're going to die! You're making such awful noise. I'm not going. I have no interest in that man at all. He's all lustful when he looks at people. By the way, Lei Lei, have you noticed how elegant Zhuang Rui's mother is? She doesn't seem like she comes from a humble family."

Qin Xuanbing's words surprised Lei Lei as well. The elegant manners that Zhuang's mother displayed at the dinner table today were something that could only be achieved by someone who had been raised in a good environment for a long time. This surprised even those of them who usually paid great attention to etiquette. In front of Zhuang's mother, they even felt as if they were facing a family elder.

Lei Lei didn't say anything more. Perhaps Zhuang's mother was a person with a story, but Zhuang Rui was obviously not born into a wealthy family. Given Qin Xuanbing's family background, he and Qin Xuanbing were clearly from two different worlds and could never cross paths. Therefore, she had no intention of trying to bring the two together.

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Before 11 a.m. the next day, Zhuang Rui was taken to the hotel where the party was to be held by Liu Chuan. According to Liu Chuan, he was one of the organizers and naturally had to come and help. After dropping Zhuang Rui off at the hotel, Liu Chuan went to pick up Lei Lei.

When Liu Chuan returned, only Lei Lei got out of the car. This made Zhuang Rui happy but also a little disappointed. Although he didn't want an ice block next to him in the dead of winter, he could admire her from a distance if he was a little further away. As the saying goes, beauty is food for the eyes.

Before long, classmates who were going to attend the reunion arrived one after another. When the meal started at 12 o'clock, there were 31 people. Except for a few classmates who were no longer in Pengcheng, almost all the classmates in Pengcheng were there. The appearance of Zhuang Rui and Lei Lei naturally surprised everyone and made the two, who had been away from their hometown for a long time, feel the strong old friendship.

The meal was quite lively. During the meal, Zhuang Rui and Liu Chuan became the targets of the students' complaints. What impressed everyone the most was that these two boys had cheated everyone out of money when they first entered junior high school. One of them played the good cop and the other played the bad cop, and they cheated a lot of pocket money from everyone.

At that time, many families already had television sets, and those who didn't often went to other people's houses to watch TV. As a large number of Hong Kong TV dramas entered the mainland, the earliest group of star-chasing fans emerged. It seems that Zhuang Rui came up with the idea, and the two boys took out all the New Year's money they had saved and went to Pengcheng Small Commodities Wholesale Market to buy a batch of stickers, which were small colorful pictures with celebrities printed on them that could be stuck on books.

Wholesale stickers featuring dozens of celebrities were very cheap, costing only about 2 yuan. The two cut the stickers into individual pieces and sold them in class, charging 2 or 5 mao (0.2 or 0.5 yuan) per piece depending on the celebrity's popularity and the size of the sticker. They also accepted food

coupons if needed. In the planned economy era, food coupons were practically used as money. Because of the flexible and varied transaction methods, their stickers were very popular.

Within a few days, the stickers were sold out. Not only their class, but the entire grade was buzzing about their stickers. Several middlemen, probably the youngest students in the country, emerged. After the sales were completed, the results surprised Zhuang Rui and Liu Chuan. They had only spent a little over 20 yuan to start, but they had actually made more than 300 yuan, which was much higher than their parents' wages at the time.

This discovery thrilled the two of them. Back then, having a few dollars in your pocket was considered a fortune. When the school organized field trips, their parents would only give them 50 cents or a dollar. In just a few days, they had earned more than 300 dollars, which greatly boosted their confidence. However, just as they were preparing to continue buying more goods and press their advantage, they were discovered by the teacher. Well, it should be said that Liu Chuan's mother discovered them. As a result, the two of them got a beating, and the one who carried it out was Liu Chuan's father.

The discovery was quite accidental. A student from another class bought two yuan worth of stickers but couldn't afford them, so he bought them on credit, promising to pay the next day. However, he didn't pay, so Liu Chuan stepped in and threatened him. To their surprise, a few days later, the student's parents came to the school teacher, and it turned out to be Liu Chuan's mother. Although their purpose was to return the money, it exposed the two students' actions.

A good beating from Liu Chuan's father made Zhuang Rui obediently go to university. However, Liu Chuan returned to the wave of reform and opening up a few years later. To this day, Liu Chuan still complains to his father that he stifled his business talent back then when his father is in a good mood.

Lei Lei naturally became the focus of the gathering. The little girl with thick glasses and blond hair back then was completely different from the beautiful woman in front of everyone now. Her fashionable yet understated outfit and just the right amount of light makeup made the female classmates surround her and chatter incessantly. Some of the unmarried male classmates couldn't take their eyes off Lei Lei, which made Liu Chuan extremely jealous.

The men, of course, judged each other by their drinking prowess. They all cherished the friendship they had formed in junior high school. With each toast, the atmosphere at the table became lively. Zhuang Rui and Liu Chuan had similar drinking capacities, thanks to the liquor they had been stealing from Liu Chuan's father. Now that Zhuang Rui's head injury had almost healed, he naturally drank his liquor in one gulp. He would also occasionally recount some embarrassing stories from his classmates back then, eliciting bursts of laughter.

The meal lasted for more than two hours. The bill was naturally paid by the wealthy Liu Chuan. Liu Chuan had originally planned to treat everyone to karaoke, but with the Chinese New Year approaching, everyone had their own things to do. The gathering ended in laughter and reminiscence, and the classmates exchanged contact information.

After returning home, seeing his mother busy in the kitchen and looking somewhat lonely, and recalling the lively scene at the gathering earlier, Zhuang Rui suddenly wondered if he had made the wrong choice to stay and work in Zhonghai. He was lost in thought, and the presence of spiritual energy in his eyes seemed to be able to change something.

"Xiao Rui, come help Mom fry the scorched leaves." His mother's voice came from the kitchen, interrupting Zhuang Rui's thoughts.