

New China Is Ours [Chp. 11]

Jin gripped his spinning bed with both fists. A streak of light repeatedly floated upwards towards the ceiling. He gagged and rose on one arm to look for a basin. Sharp pains attacked his elbow and shoulder. His wrist was strapped to the bed rail. He fell back and watched the streak of light vibrate upwards.

His skull felt as though it had been split. A thick bandage surrounded his head like a turban. His throat felt as though it had been chopped into pulp and left to harden in the sun. He closed his eyes to stop the motions of the streak, then opened them again to arrest his fall through space. A plastic sheet underlay the creased bedsheets. His joints ached. The bed stank of urine.

He remembered the sound of gunfire. He gagged and again rose on his arm. Aiya! He closed his eyes, opened them. Was he dead? Yes. Poisoned like the Yongzheng emperor.

A curtain separated him from his sleeping roommate, whose wind groaned chaotically through dry, obstructed passages. Yes, he had died. This was Hell. "Expose all ghosts and monsters," the Chairman commanded. Done. After twenty years, Jin Wuming was exposed.

Jin slept. A nurse appeared at his bedside. Her nostrils marked the center of a blurred face. Shapeless stains blotted her apron. Jin realized he was not wearing his glasses.

"Are you awake?"

Jin said nothing.

"How do you feel?"

"Mm, not bad."

The nurse checked the hanging bottle and the needle taped to Jin's arm. She reached her hand under the sheet.

"You're all wet. Do you need anything?"

Jin shook his head, wincing at the sharp pain in his head.

"Good. I'll be back to change the sheets."

Yes, he was dead. Young Zhu could marry her captain and live in a new Army apartment. Xingxing would miss him. And he would be too young to appreciate the benefits of his father's death. If Jin was dead, the city committee would refrain out of deference to his father from labeling him a counterrevolutionary. If he lived he would bring disgrace on the poor boy. Eventually Xingxing would learn about

Jin's activities with the Red Mansion. He would read about the criticism sessions and the destruction of paintings, sculptures, scrolls. He would hear about the Battle of the Ancient Lotus Pool Academy and the Burning of the Pavilion of Great Mercy.

Jin closed his eyes, opened them. It was exhausting to be dead. Too many thoughts and dreams. He awoke a short time later, his skull feeling like a well-kicked soccer ball. Had he been shot in the head? Someone had opened the curtain over the window. For five minutes he lay still, striving for painless immobility. No. Even in stillness there was pain. He was dead. Shot in the head and poisoned. A bowl of porridge sat on the night stand, with a skin like a cobweb or the film on a blind eye.

He turned his head and stared at the gray sky. He should have died at the Lotus Pool Academy. By home-made mortar shell. By grenade. By the bullet that killed Young What's-her-name. The one that killed Young Liang. The first to die of the Five Revolutionary Comrades. Their bold opera hero. Or that kid shot in the lung. A foaming, nine millimeter hole. He should have died when they burned down the Pavilion.

He looked up at the ceiling. What reactionary thoughts! He should be proud of his contributions to the Revolution! He made to clench his fist, but pain enveloped his wrist and fingers. His invaluable contributions. He

had seen the Chairman waving from the rostrum over the Gate of Heavenly Peace. He had carried the red banner of the Chairman's Thought to Shenyang, Taiyuan, Xi'an. He had helped uncover revisionists and spies in the schools, government offices and public organs. He had waged tit-for-tat warfare against little Khrushchevs, Titoist renegades, bourgeois reactionary scholar-tyrants, out-and-out naked exploiters and ogres of every description, arresting and criticizing members of the Four, Five, Seven, Nine and Twenty-Three Black Categories.

He faced the window. If he had died, he would never have seen Young Tang shot, by accident, by the 38th Army. The second to die. He would never have seen Young Zhou and Young Han despatched to tame the frontier in Heilongjiang. Young Xiang packed off to starve in Shanxi.

He would not have spent five years of his youth clearing fields for the Army where the peasants had always pastured sheep. A mild fate, but wasn't it still a waste of five good years? He would not have seen senior cadres dance around a bonfire to celebrate the latest edition of the Selections. He would not have worked in the battery factory.

Jin closed his eyes. The Five Revolutionary Comrades. Exiles all. No monuments to the martyrs. Our Great Teacher and Deceiver. "Let a hundred flowers bloom!" A million Rightist enemies step forward. "Bombard the

headquarters!" Ten million "Leftist" children volunteer. As one of Han Xin's officers said after his victory over Chen Yu, "Your tactics are too deep to comprehend."

Jin turned to the night stand and reached for a white enamel cup. Arrested by pain in his elbow, fingers, wrist, he seized the cup then fell back on his pillow. When would they change the sheets?

A doctor held a small light to his eye, pressing down the lid with a slender thumb. He asked Jin if his head hurt. His face was an unfriendly blur.

"Mm," Jin said. "Was I shot?"

"You fell and you hit your head on the curb," the doctor said.

"How is it?"

"We'll see."

Underneath his white coat the doctor wore olive trousers and black leather shoes. Maybe the Army hospital in Baoding, Jin thought. The window showed only gray sky. Jin considered asking his loud neighbor but the man might be an informer. After a time a nurse entered, a short heavy young woman. Olive trousers under her apron. Jin shivered as he sat half-naked on a folding chair while she stripped the bed. When she had finished he clambered to his feet, pain gripping his ankles and knees. He understood. He was dead and his corpse had stiffened.

"May I wash, Comrade Nurse?" he asked. Time to wash the corpse.

"Can you get into bed yourself?" Her expression gave way to a jolly smile. Her cheeks flushed red. The good little soldier was a good little peasant girl from the Hebei countryside.

"What is it?" Jin asked.

"Your buttocks," she said, chuckling and pointing her finger. "The chair."

Jin twisted his neck painfully but could see nothing. Then he noticed the perforations in the seat of the metal chair. A sunflower pattern.

"Ei, well, good," he said, falling on the bed. His head was spinning. "Sunflowers turn, turn their faces to the sun," he sang discordantly. "We turn, turn our faces dum-dum-dum."

The nurse laughed again. "I'll wipe you off," she said. She reappeared with a cloth and a small bowl.

"Roll over, OK?"

She wiped his back, buttocks and thighs. He felt like a long abrasion. Fever skin.

"I'll do the front," Jin said.

"Good, I'll go now."

Jin dreamt he was riding in some kind of airship across northwestern China. Tying his ship to a minaret, he proceeded through a series of waiting rooms past guards

armed with Type 81 automatic rifles. He was dressed like Ali Baba in turban, baggy pants and a gold vest and was carrying a scimitar. A Turkish carpet lay on the floor of a small study, bookshelves lined the walls. A bulky figure sat at the desk, his back to the door. Comrade Deng stood nearby. "Don't make me look at his face," Jin thought. The figure untied a kerchief from his neck, exposing a wen the size of a hen's egg.

Jin awoke gagging and spitting. How disgusting! He thought of Jing Ke, who failed to kill the First Emperor, shivering his sword on a bronze pillar.

Jin leaned to the edge of the bed and spat on the floor. Looking up with a start, he saw there were two soldiers in the room, standing like blurred ghosts at the foot of the bed. They held their round olive hats between their fingertips.

"Uncle, how are you?" one of them said.

Jin squinted, his turban of bandages slipping over his eyes. It was his nephew, his sister Wuyi's eldest son, a cadet at the new Army university.

"Young Shengsheng!" Jin cried, his voice betraying his emotion.

"Uncle, we've come to see you every day."

"How many days? Which hospital is this?"

"This is no hospital, just our school infirmary."

"Is this your friend?" Jin propped himself on one elbow. He was shaking.

"Squad Leader Zhang," his nephew said.

"You've been here three days, Comrade Jin," Zhang said.

"Mm."

"It appears there was an attack on the sentries at the Middle South Sea compound," Zhang said. "Maybe you tried to intervene. You slipped and cracked your skull on the curb."

"Is that it?" Jin asked. "Is that what I have? A cracked skull? No bullet wounds?"

"They took X-rays," his nephew said.

"You also had a fever."

Jin lay back and gazed at the shapes of the two soldiers. An attack. He had slipped.

"We picked you up at the public security office," Shengsheng said. "Granddad called our ma."

"Was anyone killed?" Jin muttered.

"Not you, in any case," Zhang grinned. "We don't know any more about it. It's still being investigated."

Jin closed his eyes and let himself fall, as though he had been pitched out of heaven like Sun Wukong. He opened his eyes at the ceiling.

"Good, Uncle. We'll go now and let you rest."

"Good," Jin said. "My warmest thanks for your help, Leader Zhang. Shengsheng, tell your mother I'm OK."

The soldiers were gone. He was OK, for a ghost in Hell. What did his presence here mean? Mainly it meant trouble for Young Sheng.

The next day Jin was able to swallow some rice porridge. In the afternoon he received a delegation. Without his glasses he could not distinguish their olive tunics and severe coiffures, but Shengsheng told him that Leader Zhang, Captain Jian, the deputy Party secretary of the university, and a Major Yin from an Army security unit had all come to see him. Captain Jian inquired after Jin's health and told him he was the Army university's guest. All but Major Yin wished him well and departed.

Yin rested his plump ink-stained hands on the bed rail. His corpulence, unusual in an Army officer, strained the buttons of his tunic. Jin feared that if he sat down his buttons would pop open, revealing rolls of pink flesh.

Yin leaned towards him. Wiry hairs sprouted over his lip. "The doctor says you fell," he said quietly.

"I suppose that's possible," Jin said. The major's pink face filled his vision. Jin closed his eyes. He pictured the street rising up like a serpent and knocking him on the head.

"We're doing a little routine investigating. Is it true you never met those students before the day of the incident?"

Jin felt a ripple run through his brain. His skull was cracked. He could not think through the implications of the question. He looked at Yin and spoke as sincerely as he could.

"My head, you know. It hurts. But I think that's right. I really don't remember." He closed his eyes. There were ten thousand watchfires in Tian'anmen Square.

"Do you remember whom you spoke to?"

Jin hesitated. "No," he said, "I don't remember. Someone on the bus, maybe."

"It doesn't matter," Yin said. Jin opened his eyes. Yin was sitting on the edge of the bed, smiling like a rosy Buddha. "It doesn't matter. The investigation is already closed. Do you remember any discussion about breaking into the compound?"

"No," Jin said positively.

"It doesn't matter," Yin said again. "You remember, though, that you signed the petition?"

Jin flushed. "You've seen it?"

"Of course. And you remember that a small crowd gathered at the gate of the compound?"

"Some people gathered, I think that's true."

"And someone demanded to speak with Secretary Zhao."

Jin pictured a pale young man addressing a fur-hatted guard. He pictured students shouting and waving signs. It could have happened. It was certainly no less likely than Jin's having borne a mutilated Sui Mingfu on his back to the rostrum over the square.

"It's possible," he said.

"The guards refused to let them in."

"I'm not surprised."

"The guards ordered the crowd to disperse but some people began throwing stones. The guards defended themselves and summoned help from inside the compound. Eventually order was restored."

Jin remembered nothing of this. "It's possible," he said. "But I don't remember any of that. Maybe it didn't happen."

"Maybe you were already down," Yin said, leaning over him, a frown of concern creasing the pink clay of his cheeks. "It appears you tried to intervene. To prevent trouble, of course. That's when you fell."

Jin said nothing. It appeared that Yin, or his superiors, did not intend to hold him responsible for the "incident." If the students were blamed, their teachers and Party leaders would be criticized.

"It's true, I remember falling," Jin said. "I hit my head on something." He closed his eyes. Orange fires

burned in oil drums. "Maybe I heard gunfire," he said.
"How many died?"

Yin peered at him sternly, sweat beading on his bristly upper lip. "No one," he said. "Not a shot was fired. Despite provocation. Despite the stones. You were already down. You heard no gunfire. You don't remember gunfire. You were already down."

Jin closed his eyes. Maybe it was true. He looked at Yin, who was straightening his hat.

"Good," Jin said. "But I really don't remember."

When Jin awoke the next morning his fever had abated and the pain seemed less concentrated in his skull — until he reached for his cup of water, when a pain like the blade of a cleaver halted him in mid-stretch. A rapid series of ripples dizzied his mind. He closed his eyes, opened them. After a rest in which he realized there was no sound coming from the other side of the partition, he replaced the cup and took the bowl of porridge that had been left with him the night before. He chewed the hard paste. A momentary nausea rose in his throat. He stopped chewing. When it subsided he swallowed. After a rest he repeated the operation. He ate half the bowl, then lay and stared at the ceiling.

He had recovered enough to feel bored at the prospect of another day of confinement. Was he a prisoner here? A nurse seemed to come by only twice a day, a doctor once or

not at all. He hoped he would see Young Sheng again. His only relative to visit. Doubly red. The third generation. Yes, ghosts too have their generations. Ghosts too need to touch their sons.

Ghosts too need to urinate, Jin thought when the nurse failed to appear. He felt like a cow that needed milking. He would start lowing if no one came soon. He had regained control of his bladder, which meant he had a choice between the shame and discomfort of wetness and the pangs of self-restraint. He could cry for help but he did not want to hear his thin ghost's voice whistling unheeded down the corridors. As in Tunnel Warriors.

He swung into action, unclipping the intravenous tube from the bed rail, lowering the rail, dropping his feet to the floor. The effort inflamed his knees and elbows and sloshed a ripple of bile into his mouth. He hovered for a few seconds with his fingers resting on the bottle stand, but a surge of dizziness almost knocked him down. He saved himself by flopping on to the bed. When the tide of misery ebbed, he hobbled around the bed, keeping one hand on the mattress, with the other budging the stand an inch at a time. A cold draft sneaked under his gown. When he reached the end of the bed it was an easy matter to launch himself towards the sink. He lifted the gown.

"Aiya! The dirty pig!" It was the tall lean-faced nurse, appearing in the doorway with the doctor behind her.

Jin knew he was a sight, leaning against the sink in the gray light, a tube in his arm, his head a bundle of bandages. The nurse assisted him back to bed.

When Jin was stowed the doctor took his pulse and opined that he had improved. Jin asked how long he had been at the infirmary. Five days. How soon would he be able to go home? Soon enough. And now that he could eat and drink through his mouth, would they remove the needle? Not yet. He needed the salts, the glucose, the water and a small dose of medicine to help him sleep.

Jin fed himself his tepid porridge and tea-water. Lying back he studied the ceiling, the walls, the sky. Could he move without awakening the pain in his joints or the sickness in his head and belly? Only by a sort of super-slow gymnastics. He sat up without using his arms. He was exhausted. His forehead was damp. He could smell the urine in the sink. He was the urinating ghost.

The short fair nurse came to milk him early in the afternoon. Jin asked her if she could take him to the day room to watch television. He was bored, he said. In fact he wanted to see whether he was being treated as a prisoner.

"You have to rest," the nurse said.

"But I'm bored," Jin said. "Do you want me just to lie here and count the seconds? I don't even have a

watch." His voice was a childish whine. He fell silent. No need to give further proof of his impotence.

"I'll bring you a newspaper," the nurse said as she took away the porcelain vial.

She returned with a copy of People's Daily. Jin asked her to prop him up with more pillows. "I have a constitutional right to work, you know," he said. Though he was probably still suspended.

Jin passed several minutes squinting at the newspaper. He held it up to his eyes, at arm's length, at various angles to the light. He could not read one line of text, not even a headline. He turned it upside-down and sideways but could not even make out the date. Angrily he flung the paper at the window. It opened its wings like a bird and fluttered gently to the floor. Let it sit there. Day and night. His guard duck, ready to quack like mad if he dared to hobble towards the sink.

He was bored but did not call the nurse. Though it was fitting for a ghost to cry unheard. He was trembling all over. Did ghosts feel fear? Evidently. Gazing at the window, he groped mournfully for the notes of a foreign song. "Wherefore I expostulated to myself: I must criticize the Lord of Heaven! Let him send forth the sun, which has retired to seize forty winks." American music. Take a firm stand against bourgeois liberalization.

The next morning the lean-faced nurse refused to take Jin to the day room. Jin gathered that the cadres did not want him mixing with the cadets. When he asked for a radio, she said he needed rest. He snorted. As if rest could cure his disease.

After a noon meal of soggy noodles, the doctor appeared with the short nurse and announced it was time to change Jin's bandages. The nurse used a cloth dipped in water to loosen the cemented layers of gauze. As she unwound his turban, Jin realized his head had been shaved. He was sitting up in bed, dizzy and queasy, and the doctor had turned his head to one side with a fingertip pressed to the cleft of his chin, when he heard a cry. He turned quickly, almost swooning from the dizziness produced by the sudden movement. It was Young Zhu and with her stood Shengsheng, Xingxing and Squad Leader Zhang. Their faces were blurred.

"Ai! Ai!" she cried. "Old Jin! Old Jin!" Holding her fists to her chest, she broke into loud theatrical sobs.

Jin waited for the dizziness to recede. Hot tears stung his eyes. The weeping ghost. Zhu stood beyond the foot of the bed. He could see she was wearing her maroon sweater, her white blouse with the scalloped collar and a calf-length gray plaid woollen skirt. Quite a stylish outfit, for a worker.

"Ei, Young Zhu," Jin said with an uneasy smile, "you look as though you'd seen a ghost."

"Aiya, Old Jin, I'm sorry, but you look like a ghost." She came a step nearer and halted beside the bed. Her skin looked dry and purple circles ringed her eyes.

"Well, I'm sorry, but you look ten years older yourself," he said with a strained grin. "Even so, I thank you for your visit."

"Don't mention it," she said. "I'm here to take you home." The doctor opened his mouth. "When they release you, I mean."

The doctor asked for quiet while he and the nurse washed Jin's head. Jin grinned at Xingxing, a shy blur beside his older cousin. The only sound in the room was dripping water when the nurse squeezed her cloth.

Leader Zhang spoke. "Comrade Zhu, he's much better now. Four days ago he was more dead than alive."

When the nurse had taped the bandage in place and returned Jin to the position of Cadaver Awaiting The Grave-Robber, Zhu summoned Xingxing to the bedside. Jin felt a sharp contraction in his chest. He had never seen his son looking more miserable. Xingxing's small, sad face seemed faint and wan. He seemed strangely anonymous, as though he had joined the Army at the age of eight.

"Young Xing, how are you?" Jin said with a grin. "Ei, don't be afraid, my hair will grow back. Do I look so terrible?"

"Young Xing has something for you," Zhu said sternly. "Give it to him," she said.

Xingxing proffered his hand over the bed rail.

"What is it?"

"Your wristwatch, my ba."

"My wristwatch?"

"His teacher brought it to our building," Zhu said. "He traded it to an older boy. For a ball."

"Let me see."

Jin held the watch in his hand. Brown nylon strap, steel case, white face. Well. "I wondered where this was," he said. He smiled at Xingxing. "You know, this was a gift to me from your grandfather. It's Army issue. He wore it himself for many years. He would want you to have it. But you should take care of it, not trade it away. We can buy a new soccer ball." He handed the watch back to Xingxing.

"You should never steal things," Zhu said, looking down at the top of Xingxing's head. "If you want to be a soldier, you must always be honest."

"That's right," Jin said, lying back and closing his eyes. "One of the Eight Points of Attention."

"The second of the Three Main Rules," Shengsheng corrected. "'Never take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses.'" Number three of the Eight Points of Attention is 'Always return what you borrow.' Xingxing has done that."

"He's the fatherland's good little soldier," Leader Zhang said.

Jin tousled Xingxing's hair and smiled at him. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Ask your cousin to show you the university if he has time. I need to talk to your mother."

The doctor remarked that he had not given permission for Zhu's visit and that above all Jin needed rest, both physical and spiritual. He gave them five minutes. When the others had left, Zhu lowered the rail and sat on the side of the bed, smoothing her skirt under her hips.

"Look, Young Zhu," Jin began. His head hurt furiously. "Let's open the door and look at the mountain," he said. "Do you want a divorce? If so, you can have it." His throat felt constricted, as though someone were tightening a rope around his neck. The hanged ghost. Yes, ghosts too have feelings. Like the hair that grows on a corpse.

Zhu said nothing. Tears welled in her eyes. She searched for Jin's hand.

"Why, Old Jin?" she said. "Have you found someone else?"

"No. But you have, right? Your soldier friend? Guarding our frontiers? Earning foreign exchange from our Moslem comrades?"

Zhu's face reddened. She moved her mouth in a soundless curse.

"I'm right, right?" Jin said. He drew his hand from under the quilt and placed it on hers, which felt small and cold. "That's OK. You should have what you want. Forget about me." His eyes burned. He squeezed her hand but she tore it away.

"What are you thinking, Jin? Are you mad? How can you say I have someone? I talk with one stranger you don't know and you think I'm having a love affair? I can't believe how stupid you are!" Tears spilled down her cheeks. She covered her face with her hands. Jin touched her arm but she batted away his hand.

"That's right, I have a friend, Jin. I like another man. Is that a crime? We've only met twice. Once at the wedding. And once to talk about you. To help me find you. I also talked to Secretary Sui and Old Shen and your parents. I didn't know what else to do. It's not a love affair!" She hid her face and gave out an anguished sob.

Jin felt the rope tighten around his neck. Poisonous tears stung his eyes. He pressed his attack.

"I won't stop you. You should have a love affair. I'm no good."

"Ai! You're disgusting! Is this your bourgeois liberalization? Remember, proletarians don't have love affairs!" She stared at him in alarm, her cheeks red and swollen. "You scare me, Jin. You look like a ghost with those bristles on your chin and those ugly bruises around your eyes." She studied the bandages. "What happened, anyway? Is something wrong with your brain?"

"There was an 'incident.' I fell on the sidewalk. I really don't remember."

"Young Sheng says they're not calling it an 'incident.'"

"Well, downgraded again. That's fine. Look, Young Zhu, if you want a divorce, I'll agree. Captain What's-his-name aside, you should divorce me because I'm dead."

Again Zhu flushed. "I know you want to divorce me, Jin. I can see that. I know I'm just a worker and I'm ugly and stupid. I know you want to return to your first wife or go with one of those pretty young workers at the station. Old Gui says I should let you go. That you're a bad element. That you participated in beating, smashing, and looting. But I have news for you, Reporter Jin. You can broadcast it to the whole city. I don't want a divorce. If you want to divorce me, you have to fight me."

Jin felt a splitting pain at the mention of Young Xiang and closed his eyes. But Xiang was not his first wife. Number One was the girl-knight, the cadre's

daughter. His poisoner. When the pain passed, Zhu looked ten years younger. He gave her a crooked smile.

"Young Zhu, I don't care about other women. I'm only thinking of you."

Zhu bowed her head and asked timidly, "Then you still like me?"

Jin heard in her voice the twenty year old who first welcomed him to her parents' apartment. He turned his head and looked at the gray sky. The tears scalding his eyes were a deadly venom. He said in a thin gasp, "I'm a ghost, Young Zhu. My feelings don't matter any more."

When he faced Zhu again she was staring at him. She leaned over him and stroked his bristly cheek. "My poor husband," she said.

Jin felt shrunken, like the dry stick that remained when a ghost has been destroyed with hot oil. Young Zhu was a woman, still attractive and young. He was the urinating ghost. They were not a good match. But she did not understand.

"OK, that's enough." The doctor reappeared from behind the partition. He spoke with the false authority of an actor. They were all natural actors, these medical people. A lot like cadres. "Comrade Jin needs his sleep," the doctor said. "Comrade Zhu, we will send word through your nephew when it's time for his release."

"Were you spying on our private conversation?" Jin asked indignantly, a glare of lofty anger in his eyes.

"No," the doctor said, unimpressed. No doubt the collarless gown and the turban of white bandages were less than intimidating. "I was down the corridor. Besides, I'm your doctor. You don't have 'private conversations' under my care."

Zhu stood to go. "OK, Old Jin. We're staying with your sister Wuyi. I'll try to visit you again."

Jin waved his hand. Zhu followed the doctor out of the room.

Zhu did not return the next day, or the next. Unable to walk or read, Jin again asked for a radio. One day Shengsheng and Leader Zhang brought him a Japanese-made cassette deck that Shengsheng had purchased in Beijing. Jin questioned them about the investigation. Zhang had spoken with Captain Jian. "He waved his hand and said, 'It doesn't matter. It's not even an incident.'" They had not heard anything new or seen anything in the Army newspapers.

The radio seemed to relieve Jin's isolation. Satisfied with the results of his first complaint, he told the doctor he needed new eyeglasses. An optician from a neighboring base arrived with her case the following day. She fitted Jin with a pair that allowed him to make out her face. She was a flat-cheekboned, flat-chested officer whose thick-lensed, black-framed eyeglasses made her look

like Jiang Qing. But the newspaper she brought Jin from the day room remained a blank. They must be magic glasses, he thought. Jiang Qing would have us see only herself. When he told Dr. Jiang he still could not read the characters, she opined tartly that he must have a mental, not an optical problem. Jin laughed. She was not Jiang Qing after all. "At least it's not a political problem," he said.

He found solace from his boredom in his long walks to the latrine. Soon after the visit from Non-Jiang, he was issued a frame of metal tubing, a stepladder with no rungs, which he used to navigate the corridor with the velocity of a crippled turtle. Although dizziness and nausea beset him as long as he stood upright, he learned to read the position of his body from the sensation of weight on his palms and on the soles of his feet. Oddly there were no other patients on the corridor, as if the leaders had emptied the infirmary for the Urinating Ghost of Baoding.

A few days later the doctor and the lean-faced nurse appeared in Jin's room. With his new eyeglasses, he could see she had a fine fair skin, if not a pretty face. They unbandaged Jin's head and removed the stitches. Unbending a bit, now that the end of their time together was near, the doctor told Jin he had not lost much of his brain. In any event, he had a big head and could easily spare a kilogram or two. Jin chuckled obligingly.

The following afternoon the short nurse, who turned out to be as ugly as a pig but had a lively, humorous eye and an easy manner, brought Jin his clothes (all laundered or brushed clean) and a rattan walking stick with a curved handle. She shaved his chin and helped him dress. Young Zhu, Xingxing, Shengsheng, Leader Zhang and Captain Jian accompanied him in a car to Beijing Station. Before boarding the train Jin thanked Jian and Zhang for the hospitality of the Army university and for his three-week stay in their infirmary. Perhaps Baoding City would reimburse them, he added doubtfully.

Captain Jian cut him off with a wave of the hand. "It's nothing," he said, smiling at Zhu and Xingxing. "You're an Army family."

Old Ba had prepared pork dumplings. Jin thanked her and Zhu and Xingxing for their welcome and told them how happy he was to be home. No one asked when he would return to work or mentioned his sudden flight to Beijing.

He spent several days sleeping and watching television. Although he was only a urinating ghost who would never be able to expiate his crimes in a thousand years of unrelenting torment, he took comfort in being permitted to sit at the table with living beings and to lie in bed beside a living woman. How she could endure his

presence he had no idea — unless she had somehow turned to stone — but at least he could refrain from defiling her body.

Shi Kuihua brought him his salary. She would not discuss his suspension and told him only that in editorial matters she was following the lead of the Central Television Network. The first news Jin had relating to his future at the station came from his father. About two weeks after his return from Beijing, he and Zhu and Xingxing took the bus down to West Horse Pool for dinner. The commander said that a number of cadres in city Party and city government organizations had been transferred as a result of Hu Yaobang's dismissal. Sui Mingfu was being considered for the standing committee of the city Party committee.

"Who knows?" the commander laughed. "When you recover from your injury, maybe you can return to the station as Party secretary. Why not? The Army has many seats on the city committee." Jin smiled and shook his head, wincing at the sudden pain. He sat motionless while it passed.

"Let the tigers fight," he said gravely. "We know that Right and ultra-'Left' overlap. The only safe spot is on top of the mountain."

"Or crossing the sea under Heaven's muffled eye," his father said.

Jin did not discuss his status as a ghost with his father and mother. The bandages were gone and his growing hair concealed the purple scar. He watched himself in the mirror as he turned from left to right and hopped up and down with his stick. He was satisfied that he could conceal from others the sickness and dizziness he felt whenever he moved.

Although the air was still cold, the late winter skies glowed a rich blue. Jin was tempted to take his stick and descend into the streets of Baoding. He asked himself whether a urinating ghost had the right to impersonate human beings. He thought it did. He had revealed the truth to his wife. He felt no obligation to reveal it to others, who would only add torments of their own to those already imposed by Heaven.

Stick in hand, he set out the next day for downtown Baoding. It hurt his hand to grip the stick and his feet and knees were stiff. He limped into hardware stores, stationers' shops and clothing stores. He stopped for oil twists at an outdoor stand and a cup of tea in the Baoding Restaurant. He hobbled home for his noon meal and a nap, content to have shown his face among the living. He began to make daily rounds. Some recognized him, some did not. No one asked about the stick. They knew these were complicated times and that he was really a small fish despite his local fame. He spoke little and found himself

readily accepted in the population of convalescents, retirees, job-waiting youth, disabled workers and persons whose light duties permitted them to spend the day chatting with friends. Curses spiced their talk like pepper in soup. They were not journalists or Party members.

One morning Jin rose early. He had an eight o'clock appointment at the Army hospital, where he planned to ask permission to return to work. Although he would always be a urinating ghost under sentence of torment, he intended to pass as a human being in the eyes of his comrades and fellow citizens. He declined Zhu's offer to carry him to the hospital on her bicycle and set out with his stick in the bright, coal-scented chill.

Crossing Vanguard Road, he limped alongside a crumbling sky-blue wall. Faded red traces of clumsy, outdated graffiti were visible under the paint. Learn from Dazhai. Learn from Henan. A train of joggers, students at Hebei University dressed in colorful synthetic gear, trotted past with wisps of steam trailing from their mouths. Cooperation Road was empty of vehicles save for a few peasant-drawn carts. Jin passed the gates of the university, which were flanked with exhortations to Revolutionary service. Beating a steady rhythm with his stick he soon reached the garrison.

Before entering he composed himself by gazing southward across the bare fields. He was light-headed and

sweaty from his long march. He kept his eyes on the horizon and his weight on his toes and stick, then tried using the stick as a counterweight instead of leaning on it. After several experiments, he thought he could convince the doctor that he could stand.

He waited in the front office for only a few minutes before a doctor led him to a private room. Army doctors, he thought. A new TV show. There was a Soviet show about civilian doctors. They were harried professionals who had problems with their wives, their husbands, boyfriends and girlfriends, arrogant, high-ranking patients and arrogant, alcoholic colleagues. As if class struggle (now more acute and complex than ever) were no longer a problem. The State monopoly capitalist-bureaucrat clique. Heirs of the revisionist Khrushchev clique.

The doctor, who was younger than Jin, manifested an impersonal, formulaic respect for his new patient. He bade Jin sit while he quietly reviewed his file. Military courtesy, Jin observed. More civilized than Western informality. A good foundation for the new show. The doctor asked whether Jin was eating properly, was he sleeping well, was he eliminating. He looked at the scar, then took Jin's pulse and asked if he had bicycled to the garrison. Jin said he had walked. He needed the exercise. The doctor asked Jin to follow him. Jin hurried grimly after, knees and feet seized with pain, nervously leading

with his stick. When they reached the X-ray room, Jin was drenched with sweat. He asked the doctor if he could return to work.

"No problem," the doctor said, his eyes moistening and a sudden, violent smile creasing his cheeks. Jin saw he had somehow created an electrical current between them. "But go easy," the doctor added gravely. "You're a valuable asset to the fatherland." He squeezed Jin's hand so hard in parting that Jin had to yank it away. "Is he mad?" Jin wondered. "Or is he a ghost like me?"

From Cooperation Road, Jin hobbled downtown and ventured to walk past the station. He kept to the far side of Journalism Street and did not linger to see whether Old Hun would notice him.

He did not stop until he reached People's Park, where he decided to visit the zoo. The breeze, though biting cold, had the damp nip of spring in it, as it blew through the huge velvet tent. The dark skirts of the cedars swayed above swaying pale grass. The cages were mostly empty. Apparently the beasts preferred the shelter of their cells to their bare chilly porches. A porcupine and a small wild pig were the only creatures Jin could see. They seemed unaware of his presence. Could they even see him?

"Little brother," Jin said to the porcupine, "are you too a ghost?" The porcupine stood in the center of its porch, sniffing the damp breeze. "What crime did you

commit?" Jin continued. "Are you a counterrevolutionary? What fierce quills you have! But useless. You're caged. You may dream of tigers and foxes pouncing on your back and of raising your quills to pierce their eyes. It will never happen. The fact is, Comrade Porcupine, you're trapped in a concrete box. You'll freeze in winter and roast in summer under the eyes of your exploiters until your little heart stops. Think of it, little brother. Seek truth from fact." Jin paused. Could a porcupine be a journalist? "No, don't think of it," he said. "Down with Chen Duxiu's Right-opportunist capitulationism! Down with Zhang Guodao's flightist liquidationism! Down with the revisionist defeatism of the renegade Khrushchev clique that disarms and demoralizes the revolutionary peoples of the world!"

The porcupine did not answer. He turned his head and his eyes touched Jin but took no notice of him. "Ah, little brother, maybe your enslavement has deadened your spirit. Maybe you can't even subject your historical situation to a dialectical-materialist analysis. I'm sorry I didn't interview you earlier, but maybe you can't distinguish between principal and secondary contradictions, or between the major and minor aspects of principal and secondary contradictions." It was as if the porcupine were deaf and dumb. "I see," Jin said. "You know nothing. Big Buddha is merciful."

Jin felt tears sting his eyes. His throat tightened. The porcupine stood immobile, its tiny eyes unblinking, its quills lifting slightly in the breeze.

Jin moved to the neighboring cage, where the small pig, more enterprising than its neighbor, was sniffing along the edge of his porch.

"Little brother, have you eaten yet?" Jin asked politely. The pig raised its snout, the moist, coal-black flesh quivering around the nostrils. "What do they feed you? Dried corn? Sorghum mash? Have they fed you this morning? No? Well, think of it this way. At least you don't have to work for your supper. You're lucky, really. Your brothers and sisters at Red Star pour out their heart's blood for one year's board. Imagine. And they don't even oppose the Revolution. Always ready to make the ultimate sacrifice. Aren't they authentic socialist heroes? Suppressing selfish desires, sacrificing everything to the collective? Aren't they good little students of Lei Feng? 'A hundred million people with one mind.' You, by contrast, are merely a prisoner. Don't ask me why. Maybe you were a landlord in another life, or a comprador-capitalist, or a Nationalist spy, or a running dog of the social imperialists. Maybe you were a rich peasant with better than average instruments of production, or you exploited others by hiring their labor. Maybe you were a reactionary scholar-tyrant who filled the minds of

your students with Confucian trash about studying hard to become an official."

The pig lowered its snout and continued its fruitless search. "You only eat and sleep. How can you complain? What does a pig care about culture? Ah, but maybe you like to be with other pigs. Maybe you like to feel your heart race with lust or the thrill of combat or the hunt. The odors of roots, earth, flowers, grubs, snakes, mice, their urine, their spoor. You are a ghost, little brother. Little sister. Comrade Pig. A pitiful, urinating ghost. You are a prisoner. The people come to stare at your busy black snout and hopeless eyes. They mock you in your captivity. You object of mass surveillance. That is the labor for which we reward you so poorly. You have life, you need not die to serve, but your life is ours. You can't use it to find your food or a mate. Do you have a revolutionary consciousness? Can you be reformed? No. Once a pig, always a pig. A pity you were not born in the Soviet Union, where the pigs seized power in 1984."

The pig did not answer. Jin could hear it snuffling at the base of the wall. "That's right, little ghost. Never surrender. Sniffle and snort, though we've taken everything you had. Sniffle and snort until you die. Such was the life of the masses before Liberation."

Jin shivered and wiped the tears from his cheeks. The cold wind made his eyes water. It was especially cold and

damp in the shade. His skull ached, his brain spun and his mouth tasted of bile. He limped into the light and past empty cages to the monkey mountain, but there was not a single monkey in sight. Maybe later when the sun warmed the rocks.

He came to the bear pit and leaned against the low stone wall to regain his balance. He looked down to where the bear was sitting. Aside from a few clots of excrement, the pit was well swept. Jin shivered.

"Ei, King Yu, how are you today? Where's your stone wife? Sorry, I didn't bring any food. Not even an apple. Not even a grub. Ai, for many years you seemed to serve the people heart and soul, teaching generations of cadres how to be good Communists. Who could have dreamt that all along you were engaged in a campaign of sabotage, constantly speaking up for the Right-opportunist line? Who could have suspected that all along you were plotting to topple the Chairman, abandon the socialist road and seize supreme power for the revisionists? You still claim to be innocent? What did you say?"

The bear did not look up. "Is this a shameless petition for a reversal of correct verdicts? Are you saying that the dictatorship of the proletariat, led by the vanguard of the revolutionary working peoples, has made a mistake? Impossible, comrade. Compose your self-criticism. The Party is lenient towards those who confess

their errors.. Even towards running dogs of the foreign imperialists. If they confess."

Jin shook his head as if to clear it of negative thoughts. He closed his eyes as a ripple of dizziness ran through his skull. He lost his balance but held to the low wall. The bear would not be so lonely if he were introduced to some other revisionists.

Jin hobbled to the gate of People's Park. Afflicted as he was, he felt the sunlight pour down on his shoulders in an inexhaustible cascade. So ghosts too feel the seasons, just like people. He would like to be speeding along Youth Road on his bicycle, racing out to the burgeoning countryside, but in his present state, merely walking was as difficult as swimming or leaping to catch a flying trapeze. Balancing on the saddle of a bicycle would be a leap within a leap, like turning a somersault in mid-air or running on water.

Jin followed Bounteous China Boulevard to downtown Baoding. As the sky rained light on his head through the still naked trees, he sensed the general quickening of the human world. Despite the severe blow to reform represented by Hu's dismissal, despite the widespread fear of rising prices, old women were out shopping, workers were dragging wagon-loads of pipe and lumber to construction sites and cyclists were hurrying to their destinations as if they expected to accomplish something. The living lived on,

indifferent to the many-mansioned Hell on the roof of which they walked and shopped and talked.

When he turned left on Vanguard Road, Jin felt the magnetic current that emanated from Beijing pull at his sore feet. It even pulled at the foot of his rattan stick. So ghosts too are drawn towards the capital, he said to himself. How many ghosts are killing time in the, how many, forty-one ministries of the State? How many are roaming the streets disguised as tramps? He shook his head, seeing nothing. The traffic rumbled past. When he raised his eyes, he found he was facing the blackened walls and towers of the Number One Provincial Prison. "Aiya!" he said softly. "Da Lao! The big pen!" With walls that ran the length of a long city block, it could easily have been mistaken for an enormous factory compound, and in fact the prison housed the New Life Machinery Factory, producing machine tools, electrical devices, welding equipment and ceramic bottles.

Jin stepped queasily into the roadway. Bicyclists tinkling little bells passed before and behind him, missing his outstretched stick by a finger. A southbound minivan tooted twenty times before halting, horn blaring, at Jin's elbow. Jin opened and closed his eyes as his tormented feet inched their way across the pavement. Wavelets of sickness sloshed from his belly and wavelets of dizziness rolled through his brain. He saw only his stick, his hand,

his feet and the charred wall before him. A cream-colored Mitsubishi heavy truck, northbound, brakes screaming, lurched to a halt. No horn blew. "That's right," Jin muttered, "pity the poor ghost. The poor crippled urinating ghost."

He climbed the curb and stopped to regain his footing. Beads of perspiration clung to his forehead and his scarf was damp and rough on his neck. The prison wall was more red than black. Jin followed the strip of dust that lay between the wall and the road until he reached a paved driveway. A guard stood on each side of the metal gate. The nearer guard was in his mid-twenties and was fairly tall, but had weak, sloping shoulders and spotty skin. Greasy hair curled under his synthetic fur cap. His weapon, an ancient Type 53 bolt-action carbine, was a mere formality of office, more useful as a bludgeon than a firearm.

"Good morning, comrade," Jin said with a grin. "You have any ghosts in there?" The guard looked uneasily at Jin, then returned his smile.

"Thousands of them," he said. "All hard at work. You should see them. It's King Yan's kingdom in there. In fact I had breakfast with the king this morning. He's a Southerner. He likes to eat live baby mice."

"And you, comrade, are you a ghost?"

"No, we're devils," he said, nodding over at his partner. "We look after the ghosts. Keep them hopping. Make sure they work for their supper." The guard's partner, a darker, younger man with a vacant look, glanced at Jin but said nothing. A poor peasant, maybe, who felt that ghosts and devils were no laughing matter. Behind Jin's back the trucks roared past on the highway.

"OK, good," Jin said. "I can see you're no fool. You know, I'm a ghost too. Can't you see, Mister Devil? Why don't you invite me inside so you can beat me for my anti-socialist crimes?"

The guard dropped his smile. "Move along," he said bitterly. "We don't beat anyone. Get out of here."

Jin noticed that two construction workers, young men with longish hair and dusty ill-fitting clothes, were watching the exchange from a few steps away.

"Ghosts are not people," Jin replied in a loud voice. "You can beat and torture ghosts, who cares? No one. Maybe you'll get a promotion. Maybe a medal. Maybe nothing but the satisfaction of serving our unfortunate fatherland."

The guard looked from Jin to the workers. His gloveless hand tightened on the strap of his weapon. The pimples on his cheeks flared red.

"Are you crazy?" the guard cried. "Go! Move out! Comrades," turning to the young workers, "will you take this crazy man to the mental hospital?"

They shrugged their shoulders.

"Look, we don't want any trouble," the guard said. "Move along, or we'll have to call public security."

In fact, Jin wanted to turn and go, but he felt so dizzy and ill that he scarcely knew where he was. He could barely see. From the midst of this welter of misery, his words seemed to come of themselves.

"Aiya, the big devils!" he cried. "We're terrified, a great leap backward, a strategic retreat. But first, tell me, is Wei Jingsheng in here?"

"Who's he?" the guard said. "A friend of yours? Is he your father? Look, comrade, if you don't leave immediately I'll call my squad leader."

"Good, OK, we're going," Jin said. "But first, let me tell you." He looked at the nervous, nasty-looking young man two meters from his face and at his dark, inanimate comrade across the drive. "Friends, comrades, listen to me. It's a matter of life and death. Ghosts and devils, they're the same. There's no difference. Someday maybe you'll understand. Though by then it will be too late. Comrades," he said to the two workers, "help me cross the street."

Jin closed his eyes. Trucks rumbled past, filling his ears. The workers took his arms. He knew they were satisfied with his performance. He let himself be guided. He felt as though he were walking under water, with only water under his feet. He stood on smoldering feet on the other side, holding himself upright with his stick. He turned to look at the guard, who glared resentfully at him.

"Thanks, comrades," he said when the workers dropped his arms. "Thanks for helping a ghost avoid a beating."