

Taking Tiger Mountain By Strategy [Chp. 2]

Jin was awakened by a crash of metal. Silence, then another crash. Curling his feet on the icy concrete floor, he raised the blind and rubbed a gap in the condensation. In the purple morning air, two men were loading scrap metal on a cart. The cart was already piled high, so that when one of them placed an unrolled stovepipe on the heap, a square of corrugated roofing rattled to the ground. When the other crowned the load with a broken pan, a length of bent tubing slid off, and when they jammed the tubing into the center of the heap, a rusted washtub tolled on the earth like a gong. They laughed.

Jin dressed, hopping from foot to foot, and slipped out of the apartment without breakfast. He heard neighbors stirring in the corridors and plastic slippers slapping on the stairs. When he bounced into Youth Road on his aging Phoenix, the sky was fading to lotus-root gray and the sour whiff of coal smoke seasoned the air.

Jin rode past trains of joggers trailing puffs of breath. Old folks in black quilted coats swayed in slow motion or chatted while waiting for the milk cart, their saucepans lined up in the dust. Collectors in the side streets cried for bottles, paper, and scrap metal. A peasant leaned into the harness of his cart, withdrawing to a northern suburb with his fragrant treasure. The children had not yet left for school, but as Jin clattered into the ancient city, gripping his handlebars with icy hands, he caught sight of a boy Xingxing's age stepping through a doorway with a sheaf of oil twists. Jin stopped at a stand and bought two oil twists and a bowl of tea. As he stood and chewed the steaming yellow dough, The East Is Red began playing on the loudspeakers. By the time he reached the journalism compound, the red sun had risen over the city, and the piercing, sexless voice of the Central Network's exercise master was calling one, two, three to the whole fatherland.

Jin pounded the metal gate with a numb fist (one, two, three) and called for the porter. Old Hun's footsteps crunched on the gravel and the bolt squeaked. Old Hun was a scrawny, bewiskered old worker, whose Army-style coat, worn and patched like Lenin's, brushed his bare ankles. He started in the direction of the boiler room while Jin parked his bicycle and crossed to the TV building.

The newsroom was freezing. Jin thought of asking Old Hun for some heat, but it was still too early in the year. He was staring at the door when Old Hun appeared loaded with thermos bottles. Jin smiled. Framed by the bright morning, his breath lit from behind, with stringy whiskers streaming from his chin, his olive cape on his back, and red bottles dangling from his wrists, he looked like the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea. Did he want a sacrifice? Quick, throw him a virgin. No, not that one. Not that one, either. One, two, three.

"Good, thanks," Jin said with a grin. "Old Hun, you look like the Dragon King."

"Good, good," Hun said, wringing his weathered cheeks into a smile. Black hairs sprouted, a spare feeler, from a large mole on his jaw. Jin followed him to the tea-table, where Hun poured him a cup of tea-water. Jin offered Hun a cigarette and asked about his son in Tangshan, who had lost his wife in the great quake.

"The kid in good health?" Jin asked.

"Very good. How's Young Xingxing?"

"A good kid," Jin said, a smile straining his cheeks. "He's very clever, you just wouldn't believe it. And kicking the ball. It's amazing. Tomorrow we'll go to the post office to start his stamp collection. My father thinks he should study calligraphy. But I think stamp collecting will teach him more about the world." Hun

nodded solemnly. "He knows more foreign writing than I do," Jin continued. "They teach them foreign speech in school these days."

"That's good," Hun said doubtfully.

"It's very good."

One, two, three. Old Hun returned to the boiler room. Jin chuckled. Soon Old Hun would be boiled red, the sweet white meat inside ready to eat. Like a Radish Communist, as the Chairman called Khrushchev. Or vice-versa.

Jin sat at his desk and set out a pad of writing paper. "Baoding Television Station Writing Paper," said the red characters printed at the top of the page. He took a breath, held it, and slowly exhaled. Aiya. It was time to plan his "defensive counterattack" against the secretary. Aiya. Jin took another breath and aimed his pen. "One," he wrote. He lowered the pen and ran his fingers through his hair. His hair was stiff and needed washing, but the city workers' bath house was always crowded at his assigned time. Maybe next week, but Zhu would shower tomorrow at the factory. He could use the basin.

One, two, three. He studied the clouds of ink on his desk, a battleground of giant squids. Looking down at the paper, he scratched out "one" and began to plan. As Sun Zi says, "You must know your foe." And as Comrade Deng says, "Seek truth from fact." He would raise the Canceled Shoot

Incident with Comrade Shi when she came in, but without seeming to question her decisions. Her aim, she liked to say, was to maintain unity in the station's productive relations. Five fingers, one fist. Well, Jin was a finger too. Unfortunately, the one fist was ruled by a different finger. Old Sui could point her to the top of Mount Tai to fetch him a pack of Marlboros, and she would thank him for it with tears in her eyes. The comrades smiled. A good little student of Lei Feng. But a bad element might call her a feudal lackey, who would do for Sui what Deng Tong did for Emperor Wen. Those bulging, fishy eyes and tight lips. Jin glanced at the clock. In ten minutes he could have a cigarette.

The Cannery Incident. Jin removed his glasses and set them beside the marred page. Two eyes good, four eyes better. After Comrade Shi, he would visit Director Zhao. Zhao no longer bothered to come to the station, instead hiding out from his persecutors among the misty cliffs of Taoist superstition. Even if he managed to locate his office, he would find only a dusty storeroom for yellowing signboards and broken chairs.

Aiya. Old Sui, the branch secretary. Questioning him would be another matter. Maybe catch him off-guard by asking to re-edit the report on the cannery. Beg to be put on the list for the information workers' building.

Acknowledge his power over life-and-death matters. Clever hare digs three burrows.

One, two, three. The fitness spirit was almost spent. Jin tapped his pen on the heads of the little Dutch boy and Dutch girl (in Ming blue on white, with wooden shoes and upturned, brush-stroke eyes) who stood beside his pencil box. A gift from Young Zhu. Leaning towards each other for a kiss, they would hover in thwarted longing until the final realization of Communism. The true item. Not to be confused with the Shanghai Commune. Or with Tenth Month 1958. Or with "Soviet rule plus rural electrification."

He crumpled the paper and tossed it into a wastebasket.

"Good shot!" a young voice cried. "You're here early."

Jin replaced his glasses. It was Young Tun, a switchboard worker. She had worked at the station for a year, but Jin had only spoken to her on the telephone. She came into the newsroom unbuttoning her coat, her smooth cheeks flushed from her ride. She was wearing a long plaid skirt and white stockings, very stylish.

"Have you eaten yet?" Jin asked.

"I've eaten. How's your health?"

"Not bad."

She tilted one of the thermoses and filled two cups.

"A cup of tea-water?" she asked.

Jin held up his cup. Young Tun put the cover on hers, then leaned over the bottle to drive in the stopper.

"Hey! Greedy belly!" she cried. "It swallowed it!"

Jin took out another sheet of paper.

"Reporter Jin, come help me, OK? Old Jia will be very angry."

Jin stepped over to the tea-table, where he peered into the mouth of the steaming bottle. The wooden stopper floated on a bright quicksilver sea a finger's length below the narrow opening. The vapor condensed on his glasses. He stepped back and rubbed them with his handkerchief, admiring Tun's clear eyes and blushing, winter-peach complexion. Her filmy sky-blue scarf, loosely knotted, showed off the silkworm pallor of her neck.

"This has happened to me more than once," he grinned, making a scissors motion with his fingers. "You can touch it, but you can't hold on. Pour out the water. In two weeks the wooden stopper will dry up and shrink. Then you can just shake out in your hand."

Young Tun frowned and looked in the bottle. Jin returned to his desk and stared at the door. He tapped his pen on the head of the little Dutch girl.

When Comrade Jia darkened the doorway, the Central Network was trumpeting the output of pork. The office manager's iron-gray hair was cut straight around her neck and clamped in place with a white barrette. Winter and

summer she wore the same gray suit and scuffed leather shoes. Jin was annoyed at being found alone with Young Tun and greeted Old Jia with a smile.

"Comrade Jia, have you eaten yet?"

"Have you eaten yet? Did you sleep well?"

Jin said he was going to the newspaper building to see if there was any news. But fleeing the scene was the same as confessing a crime, so he stopped at the door and went to round up his crew. They were shooting a nine o'clock meeting at the Foreign Affairs Office. As Jin passed the door of the small studio, he saw a technician adjusting the lighting for a white-haired teacher in a baggy blue Western-style suit. Jin lowered his head and hurried down the corridor. The old guy had taught mathematics at Jin's school.

Jin unexpectedly overtook Young Tun returning to the station after the noon meal. The clear day had warmed and Jin was sweating, but Tun looked as cool as the marble goddess at the Lotus Pool.

"Young Tun," Jin panted, "you're a diligent, clever worker."

"Clever? Ai, I'm really too dumb," she answered wistfully. "I only graduated from middle school."

They coasted side by side under the sycamores that lined Youth Road, tinkling their bells at the other cyclists. Jin scrutinized her fine face. Attending middle

school had branded him an educated youth, a dangerous intellectual element. Today's young people felt that the only path to a good life-style was a university degree. And even that was not enough. Worker-peasant-soldier graduates like Shi Kuihua were scorned because they had not had to pass any entrance exams.

"The dumb bird flies first," Jin said pleasantly. "Is that why you go to the station so early? For self-study?" He swerved to dodge an old woman, then spoke again. "Or maybe to meet someone?"

"I often go early, Reporter Jin." They veered around a worker hauling a half-stripped timber on a two-wheeled cart. "I listen to Western music. I also write in my diary." Jin studied her delicate lips, her large eyes.

"Good," Jin said. "You can practice your calligraphy. There's nothing dumb about that. What do you write?"

Young Tun flushed. "Oh, whatever I think about," she said. "Whatever happens."

"That's Two Whatevers," Jin laughed. "Be careful." Young Tun did not smile. How young was she, anyway? They rode half a block in a mass of cyclists. Young Tun Thought. Selected Thoughts of Young Tun. The whole nation should cultivate silken cheeks. The whole nation should mobilize for a vast effort to grab a handsome husband.

"You know, Young Tun, if you want to study more, the democratic parties run a night school. It's no crime to

study with them now. Would you like to study electronics? Computer science? English? There's also self-study."

"I know. I'm self-studying accounting."

"My wife is an accountant," Jin said. "At the battery factory."

Tun said nothing. Jin pumped his pedals a few times and coasted ahead so that the breeze would dry the sweat on his face.

"You can work for a factory," Jin said, falling back beside her. "Every unit needs accountants. Even our station. When you finish your program, I'll ask Young Shi to make good use of your talents."

Jin squeezed his brakes so they could slip single-file between a city bus and an open manhole. Tun shot ahead. Jin admired her upright posture, her fluttering scarf, and her slender neck, which, in Kong Zi's words, was as smooth and white as congealed grease.

"Thank you, Reporter Jin," she called over her shoulder. Jin kept his eyes on her narrow back. Then bringing his bicycle alongside her:

"Hey, Young Tun, what kind of person do you think I am?"

Tun paused. "I think you were a little rude to me this morning, Reporter Jin. Before that, I thought you were a good fellow. I know you're a reporter and your father is an Army officer."

Jin blinked the sweat out of his eyes. "Excuse me, Young Tun, if I spoke too sharply. I didn't sleep well."

"Is something wrong? Is Xingxing OK?"

"It's not serious." Jin looked grave. She seemed to be a sympathetic girl. At her age, he would gladly have helped an older woman, a youthful widow, for example, with a son stationed far away on the Soviet frontier. The Chairman had commanded the young Revolutionaries to unite with as many elements as possible. "Really, he's all right. But these are complicated times. Any father worries about his son's morality."

"True," Tun said, facing straight ahead.

"Young Tun, can you keep a secret?"

Young Tun stiffened. "Reporter Jin, I'm a loyal person. If a friend asks me to keep something inside, I keep it inside."

Bounteous China Boulevard. Soon they would be in Journalism Street. Jin gave his pedals a hard pump.

"Let me ask you. Did Comrade Shi call the film factory yesterday, or Comrade Sui, or Old Jia?"

"Excuse me, Reporter Jin, but Deputy Director Shi and Secretary Sui often place telephone calls."

"You don't remember yesterday?"

Tun said nothing. Jin knew he looked overheated.

"Excuse me, Young Tun," Jin said, "but my question is serious. Are you listening?"

"I hear you."

"Good. I want you to tell me if you hear any talk about me. Anything at all. And don't put this conversation in your diary."

Young Tun pedaled briskly without looking at him, her cheeks red, her chest and chin straining forward. She looked like a bold heroine of labor, breasting the wind and rain of the Two-Line Struggle, the Struggle For Production, and the Struggle With Nature. Jin let her pull ahead. When they reached Journalism Street, she veered right while he continued along the boulevard.

"Reporter Jin!" he heard her cry. He swerved to the curb and looked over his shoulder. Other cyclists angrily tinkled their bells. Young Tun had halted just past the corner and was standing half-turned astride her bicycle. In her scarf and long skirt, flooded by the warm autumn sunlight, she was the ideal picture of progressive youth, a Beiping student of the thirties struggling against the Zhang Zuolin clique. She cried out again, waving her hand:

"Reporter Jin! Reporter Jin! No problem!"

Jin was relieved. He thought he had frightened her. He waved his hand in the air and cried out, "Call me Comrade!"

Tun waved again, stood up on her pedals, and scooted off. Jin rode around the block to cool his face before returning to the station. He was grinning uncontrollably,

but he suspected he had made a mistake. Sun Zi said a spy should look like a shabby fool, but in reality must be bold, resourceful, and capable of enduring hunger, cold, and every variety of shame. And Young Tun? Well, Old Jia kept her eye on the young workers to protect them from spiritual pollution. But it was a useless effort. While Jin's generation had risked their lives to smash revisionism and carry the Revolution through to the end, Tun's believed in nothing but learning English, Japanese, and disco. In permanents, coffee and foreign exchange currency. In canned food, jewelry and Swiss watches. That was Deng Xiaoping Thought. Quadruple the national product by the year 2000.

Returning to the journalism compound, Jin went immediately to the motor pool. He thought he might find Han Lixin sitting and chatting with the drivers. Like them Old Han was a native of Baoding workers' circles. Jin had not seen Han all day and wanted to tell him that the Heijiu shoot was postponed.

Jin stepped into an office off the garage. No Han. Old Zhao and another driver sat and smoked. Jin accepted a Golden Flower from Zhao and asked if they had seen Old Han. Zhao yawned and called to his supervisor in the next office. The middle-aged man with a crew-cut and Western-style jacket pulled some tickets off a spike.

"Old Jin, you eaten yet? Haven't seen him. But let's see, radio, paper. TV, Shi Kuihua. Your deputy director ordered a van for six this morning. He go with her?"

Jin's chest tightened. He had not seen Comrade Shi all morning, and that was unusual. Her duties rarely permitted her to leave the station. "Maybe so," he said. "Where did they —?"

"What does this. Baoding Film, the film factory."

Jin crunched blindly across the gravel courtyard to the empty newsroom and picked up the telephone. After talking to three different operators, he finally tracked down the crew from Baoding TV. He heard water running in the background, a clanking of pans, loud laughter, and someone shouting commands.

"Hello? Who's there?" Jin froze. It was Comrade Shi.

"Hello?" Jin cried, "Comrade Shi, is that you? Hello? It's Jin, Jin Wuming!"

"OK! This is Shi!"

Jin glanced around the room and lowered his voice. No doubt the operators were listening.

"Comrade Shi, what are you doing?"

More banging of pans.

"Hello? Speak up, Old Jin! The telephone's in the kitchen, I can't hear you!"

"Are you shooting the Heijiu ad?"

"We finished shooting!"

Jin lowered his voice again. "Their information cadre told me it was postponed." A shouted curse.

"Hello? You say something? It's very noisy here!"

"They said the shoot was off!" Jin cried. He looked up. A reporter and a technician had come into the newsroom, yawning.

"They didn't, that's clear!" Comrade Shi cried.

"Look, Old Jin, I have to go, OK? We'll talk later, OK?"

The receiver clicked. Avoiding the eyes of the other reporter, Jin went to his desk. His face was hot and his heart was thumping in his chest. Young Zhu was right. They were smashing him. But he was a journalist, not a soft-drink vendor. Advertisements were not news. Heijiu tasted as delicious this week as last, and would no doubt continue to rejuvenate the black-haired people until the final realization of Communism, when each would drink Heijiu Cola according to his needs. "It's isotonic, if you know what that means."

Three hours later, Jin was back at his desk after a meeting at the city's agricultural bureau. Old Yin, the chief announcer, was perched on the corner of the desk. With his bristling eyebrows, rigid back, and square chin displayed in profile against the window, he looked like a bold lieutenant of the Yellow Turbans rallying his troops against the Eastern Han, or like Premier Zhou rebuking

Khrushchev for his mad attack on "our beloved Albania." As he waited for Jin to scratch out his report, he fingered the little Dutch couple. The newsroom was filled with a busy murmur.

Jin heard a vehicle halt in the courtyard and a door slide open. He sprang from his chair. In the vestibule he met Young Shi, who was lugging a wooden tripod. Her muddy, pop-eyed face looked damp and swollen, and her graying hair and wilted jersey smelled of sweat and cigarettes. Through the window Sui Mingfu was fiddling with the lock at the rear of the van. Jin stiffened. Even the secretary had gone on the shoot.

"Comrade Shi, wait," Jin called as he followed her into the newsroom. She let him relieve her of the tripod. Jin said nothing until they reached the corridor. He spoke quietly and quickly. "Comrade Shi. Excuse me. I thought I was directing the Heijiu shoot."

Comrade Shi spoke without turning her head. "Old Jin, what's the problem? I needed you in town. Did you go to that meeting at the ag bureau?"

They reached the storeroom. A desiccated man with wispy hair received the tripod into his treasury. He stamped a yellow and a white ticket and jotted the date on them. One day before the seventy-fifth anniversary of the national bourgeois revolution.

"Old Jin, I'm very tired," Comrade Shi said as they reached her office.

"I guess it was quite a banquet," Jin said. "How many dishes? Who was there?"

"There were big fish from the film factory and the grain products company," Young Shi said, her hand on the doorknob. "And vice-mayors from Baoding and Shijiazhuang."

"OK, good," Jin said, staring at Shi's brown stumpy fingers. His chest tightened. Baoding's vice-mayor was a relative of Secretary Sui's. On his wife's side. "But I'm still not clear about something." Next door was the secretary's office. No light shone under his door, but he might pop up at any moment. "It's this. Yesterday they said it was canceled. At the film factory. The deputy secretary at their Office of Information."

Young Shi pushed open the door. She switched on the desk lamp and scooped out the contents of her mail tray as she collapsed on her chair. Jin leaned in shadow against the wall, from which the whitewash had long been worn away. If the vice-mayor — If Sui had mentioned Jin's "unnecessary preoccupation" —

Jin watched Young Shi open her mail. The lamplight rebounding from her desk filled the hollows of her neck and cheeks, as though the liquor she consumed at the banquet had collected in pouches under her skin.

"Why did you send me?" Jin asked.

"You still here? Sorry, Old Jin. I still didn't know. The grain company postponed, then called again to give the go-ahead. Some question about the vice-mayor. We weren't going for sure until last night."

"I see," Jin said grimly. "It's simple."

"Of course it's simple." Shi's bulging eyes poked at his face. Jin said nothing. She resumed her reading.

"Shoot go OK?" he asked.

"Not too badly," looking up with a small grin as she set aside a letter from a Party subcommittee. "The factory workers were very good, and the actors were also good, gulping down the Heijiu like whales. Han Lixin and Young Liang shot drinking scenes in the main shops, the labs, the loading areas, and the offices. They even shot the Army guards drinking Heijiu under the palm trees at the gate. Plenty of tape for a two-minute spot. Old Sui tailed Young Liang through the factory non-stop." She laughed.

Jin smiled, but fear gripped his chest. Young Zhu was right again. Young Liang was a new cameraman, another relative of Sui's. He had been at the station for six months.

"And how was the banquet?"

Young Shi studied him. "Sorry you missed it. As I said, the vice-mayor came, as well as a city deputy secretary. Everyone gave a speech. The vice-mayor, you

know, is a cousin of Old Sui's. Young Chen also gave a speech. Good fun."

"Did you see Old Wei, the secretary of their information office? I should have gone just to report on the banquet. A meeting of Zhuge Liangs."

He lingered, digging his fingernails into the wall. Young Shi opened and closed a desk drawer. What would Sun Wuking do? Turn himself into an insect, fly into her mouth and kill her. Suddenly the fluorescent tube on the ceiling blinked on and off several times and flooded the room with gray light. Jin blinked, and Shi's face withered. Another fifteen years at the flick of a switch.

"A meeting of Zhuge Liangs, I see," a voice rumbled.

It was Secretary Sui. He was squinting slyly at Jin's elbow, his black cap pushed back on his head, his tobacco-stained fingers still on the switch. His bulky jaw, the jaw of an ox or a horse, hung in the air with a toothy, satisfied smile. Yes, he was satisfied. A banquet with high cadres was his idea of heaven. He could scatter scraps of poetry with gems from the treasure house of Marxism-Leninism. Flattering ignorant bosses. Impressing Young Shi. And he had introduced Young Liang to the vice-mayor of Shijiazhuang.

"No, Zhuge Liang has just arrived," Jin said with a grin, offering Sui a Spring City. "How was the factory?"

"Too busy, too long a day," waving away the pack as he stepped over Jin's feet to a chair. "Comrade Shi had to waken the boys in the dormitory. 'Like silkworms in their cocoons,' she said."

Young Shi frowned. "I also had to watch Comrade Heijiu do his morning exercises," she said. "One, two, three. I could hear his gross belly sloshing."

Old Sui chuckled. "A sacrifice for socialist modernization," he said, "but you have to admit the banquet was not bad."

Jin glanced at Shi, then addressed the secretary's cap. "Secretary Sui," he began.

"Old Jin," Young Shi said quickly, "did you know this?" She read from a brochure. "'Baoding Film Factory's monochrome remote-sensor film is often launched into space on Long March rockets.'"

"I know," Jin said.

Old Sui twisted in his chair and studied Jin with an appreciative smile. "The factory was very interesting," he said. "But Old Wei, the factory secretary, toasted at length the Two Participations, the Three Major Distinctions, and the Four Modernizations. Old Vice praised the film factory, declaring that its color-reversal film was Baoding's Fifth Treasure. Ridiculous. But our Young Chen raised his glass to the Six In Spite Ofs."

"A pity I missed it," Jin said, "evidently I was needed in town. My agricultural specialty. But industry is also my specialty. I wonder why their deputy secretary —"

"What were the six?" Young Shi asked. "I'm afraid the Four Principles tranquilized me heart and soul."

"I think it was the Five Glasses of Maotai," Old Sui said. Young Shi grinned and clasped her hands before her eyes. "Yes, Old Jin, a pity you missed it. 'In spite of the actors' semi-colonial, semi-feudal primping; in spite of Young Liang's unintelligible Tianjin accent; in spite of Old Han's love-talking every woman comrade in the factory —' Mm, I don't remember the rest."

Young Shi took up the recitation. "'In spite of Secretary Sui's failure to offer the benefit of his expert cinematographic advice schooled in the tradition of Ai-Sen-Si-Tai and Da-Li,'" she laughed. "Very clever."

"Right," Old Sui said. "Now I remember. 'In spite of Comrade Shi's ice-clean, jade-pure indifference to the younger comrades —' Well, Old Jin, I'm sure you think this is all frivolous nonsense, but the comrades worked very hard today. Young Chen is clever and he speaks frankly and clearly." He turned to Young Shi. "Has Young Chen submitted an application?" Young Shi shook her head. The secretary twisted to face Jin and eyed him shrewdly. "Middle-aged comrades should urge talented young people to

enter the Party. They should invite young people to apply, then sponsor them."

"A good idea," Young Shi said.

"You should think about it," Old Sui continued. "This is an important role for middle-aged comrades. Tell us if you have any ideas."

"Right, just urge them a little, then give us their names," Young Shi said. "We'll urge them too." She leaned back in her chair and flicked a lank tress over her shoulder. Old Sui peered at Jin expectantly. In the hallway Jin heard a technician call for Young Liang.

"I have some ideas," Jin said, "we should talk sometime. But right now there's another problem." He shot a glance at Young Shi, who pursed her lips and shook her head. "Hey, it's nothing important," Jin said, "and maybe it's not convenient. Anyway, I'll go ahead and ask, OK? It's all right if you don't answer. I've been thinking about our apartment. Young Zhu has lived all her life in the battery factory residence. The concrete stairs are rotting and the windows in the stairwells are broken. The corridors are dark and jammed with broken furniture, and stacks of coal and cabbage and they reek of urine. Could you find out who's keeping the assignment list for the information workers' residence, and just add my name? I stress that it's not important."

The secretary turned in his chair and faced Jin squarely. "A Party member must expect to make sacrifices," he said sharply. "Not everyone can live at the foot of Coal Mountain. On the other hand," his voice softening, "the city wants to reward its information workers." He lowered his eyelids in contentment. Although he came from a family of railway workers in Handan, the Party had taught him the pleasure of leavening sternness with mercy. "I've often thought I should talk to you about this," he said. "Please pardon my neglect. You're right, we should give you a place. On the list, I mean."

Jin smiled and nodded. "OK," he said, pushing off from the wall. "If that's all, I'll be going."

When the door clicked shut behind him, he heard Old Sui make a terse remark, which was followed by a quick chuckle. He felt a knot in his chest. If they feared he was planning make trouble, they could easily find an excuse to suppress him. Comrade Deng has said. "No one who has engaged in beating, smashing, and looting shall be promoted. Not a single one." Deng Xiaoping Thought. The essence.

Back in the newsroom, he found Old Yin standing with Young Rui as he edited her report with a chewed-on pencil. Jin hung in the background until Old Yin raised his eyes.

"OK," Jin said, "I'm going." Yin nodded.

A cool breeze met him as he stepped outside. The air was a tonic, though his clothes weighed on him like sodden armor. He was unlocking his bicycle when he heard Old Hun cry his name. Hun was trotting across the gravel in his ragged coat. The Lobster By Moonlight. By Mercury Vapor, rather.

"It's a letter, Mr. Jin," Hun panted, holding out a small envelope. "Someone brought it this afternoon. A woman."

"Good-looking?" Jin grinned. "Any pictures?" The station comrades often received letters from persons interested in forming friendships with them. Frequently the writers sent photographs and reported wounds suffered in the search for love. When no one answered their letters, they responded with clumsy sarcasm, blaming Yin and the other announcers and reporters for the rising tide of crime that menaced New China.

Old Hun frowned in deep disgust. "So-so," he said. "Maybe in her forties. She didn't include a picture."

"Then keep it," Jin said, waving his hand. Hun proffered the envelope insistently. Jin took it. Already opened, of course. Old Jia. He slipped it into his pocket. Hun frowned.

"All right, I'll read it," Jin said. He took out the single sheet and held it up to the dead glare of the streetlight. "'Baoding City Women's Association Writing

Paper,'" he began aloud, reading the red characters printed across the top of the page. "'Beloved Wuming: It has been fifteen years since I waved good-bye from the back of the Army truck that took me to Shanxi.'" "

Jin stopped. He felt cold. It was from Young Xiang. He read on silently to himself: "'These have been hard years, but I have had some happiness in my life. I have a son.'" He lowered the letter.

"What does she say?" Hun asked.

"Sorry," Jin said distantly. "It's from a peasant woman." The letter continued: "'We came to Baoding for my parents' funeral. My son never met them. We do not want to go back to Shanxi. My husband is not a good man. We are staying at the Women's Center for now, but we need help to find a place to live and to find work. We still have some relatives and other connections.'" "

"Well?"

"She wants to find a job in Baoding."

"Do you know her?"

"No. I don't know. Maybe I met her a long time ago."

The letter went on: "'When I saw you at the Five-Four market yesterday, I was so surprised I could not say a word. Then I felt happy. I thought, At least one of the comrades has survived! Then I saw you on television that night. You said some words about a city cadres' meeting. I thought, he has done well! He has succeeded! I hope you

can help us. I will look for you near the gate of the Revolutionary Martyrs' Memorial Park every night from six until eight o'clock.'"

Jin felt as though a building had collapsed on top of him and a roofbeam were lying on his chest. He could scarcely breathe. The Martyrs' Memorial Park. Where they had often walked. "'You did not recognize me even though I stood right beside you. It is true, I have changed in many respects. I also see things differently now. Maybe I will become a Buddhist. Though I would have to spend many more years in Hell for burning down the Pavilion of Great Mercy, ha ha!'"

Jin slowly crushed the letter into a ball. "She wants us to use her as an actress," he said to Hun. "She thinks she can sing."

"Aiya," Hun sighed. "These women. I'm telling you, Young Jin, she was no goddess of beauty."

Halfway down the block, Jin threw the wadded paper into the gutter. When he reached home it was much too dark to play in the courtyard with Xingxing. Besides, he did not want to be seen. They watched television while eating supper and watched until they went to bed. Jin reported to Zhu that Old Sui had not rejected out of hand his request for a new apartment. He did not mention the letter, but lay beside Young Zhu with his fist on his chest. Aiya!