

Beat Back Bourgeois Rightist Attacks [Chp. 3]

Jin decided to visit Han Lixin. He mounted his Phoenix one evening after dinner and pedaled into a cold gale. The trees swayed and their shadows flailed the oases of pink light like young rebels punishing a revisionist. Buffeted by cold gusts and the backwash of passing trucks, Jin toiled along Five-Seven Road to the railway workers' compound, where Old Han lived with his wife and children.

Young Han opened the door, wearing mirrored glasses and an Army tunic. Han was training him in photography and track. Young Han greeted Jin with a rapid handshake, and throwing a black scarf around his neck slipped into the corridor, slamming the door and rattling the crockery in the open wardrobe. Jin removed his fogged-over glasses. He was breathless and heated from his ride and his climb up the stairs. Old Xi, who was stacking dishes in the wardrobe, greeted him with a grin.

"A good kid," Jin said, smiling broadly. He remembered how the onset of winter used to thrill him as a

boy. Galloping with his comrades over sunlit furrows. Harrying crows and sparrows from their strongholds in the boundless blue sky. Racing home, hands red and numb, to a bowl of his sister's mushroom noodles.

"Not bad," Old Xi said.

Old Han sat at the table smoking with Young Song of the Culture Section. "We were discussing ghosts and monsters," Han said. He spoke from amidst a curling blue cloud of cigarette smoke. Jin pulled out a shirttail to wipe his glasses.

"There are ghosts and monsters in society," he said with a grin. Young Song extended a plump hand. He was in his mid-twenties and worked as an assistant producer on opera and concert broadcasts and reports on painting and calligraphy. Sparse, artistic whiskers fringed his chin, luxuriant hair shaded his eyes, and a low-bridged nose, which veered to the left as though it had been broken, divided his globular cheeks.

"So there are," Song said, tossing back his hair.

Jin drew three sweating bottles of Meixue beer from his worn book bag. A product of Baoding, it was called Meixue on account of the flaky sediment that swirled in flurries when disturbed. The beer had Two Advantages. It was cheap in a time of rising prices, and it never overflowed, even when shaken. There was already an empty standing on the table, around which Young Xi, Old Xi's

daughter from a first marriage, was wiping the checkered oilcloth with a rag. Tall and lean like Han, but with her mother's round face, she wore her hair cut straight around the neck and tucked behind one ear.

"So, cold night and strange tales," Jin said to Young Xi, making an opening motion with his hand.

"Young Song is going in for movies," Old Han said. "A horror show. A monster that eats people. But it's invisible. People can't see it. The more it eats, the hungrier it gets. You should explain," he said to Song, sliding a pack of Golden Flowers to Jin. Young Xi set down an opener and a glass. Dimples marked her swelling, peach-like cheeks. Maybe Young Song intrigued her, with his Western shirt buttoned to the neck, his abundant hair, his premonition of a beard.

"The leaders won't admit it exists," Young Song said. "It's the early sixties, in the neighborhood of Baoding." Jin glanced at Old Han. The time of the Socialist Education Campaign.

Song held an invisible camera to his shoulder. "It opens with some girls in a shallow boat," he said, pointing the camera at Young Xi, "they're gathering lotus seeds in Baiyang Marsh. They rock the boat, they crack the pods, they bend the limber stems. They're laughing and playing, it's all good fun. The atmosphere is green and warm, and the warm air shimmers over the green lotus sea." He

dropped his hands. "A girl shrieks," he said softly.

"Afterwards, you hear weeping, but see only green stems and green leaves vibrating in the heat."

"What is it?" Jin asked. "A giant squid? A snake monster? 'The Man from Atlantis'?"

"He asked me if the camera can exaggerate the heat waves," Old Han said, his cigarette bobbing on his lip. "You've seen that. I guess I'd shoot from as far away as possible and zoom in. But it's you culture types," he said to Young Song, "who can 'exchange revolutionary experiences' with other work units." He pried the cap from one of Jin's bottles and filled three glasses.

"There's an Italian movie about a monster octopus," Song said to Jin, as he watched the cloudy fluid climb the glass, "it eats a baby on the beach, it eats a boy on a boat, it eats the boat, it terrorizes the village. You see it?"

"No, maybe I heard about it," Jin said, lifting his glass. "I wish you success. Ganbei."

"This is absolutely not the same," Young Song said, winking at Young Xi, who was leaning against the wall behind Old Han. "OK. Next sequence. A squad of young soldiers on maneuvers with their sergeant and young leader. The sound of a heavy truck grinding its gears. A pause. All's quiet. They follow a stream. Again, silence, heat. The soldiers sweat. Suddenly, alarm, gunfire, shouting.

Only the young leader survives. A dawn patrol finds him in ditch, whimpering pitifully. Back at the base, their one-eyed commander is fierce. He says, 'Only diehard counterrevolutionaries, Nationalist spies, or social-imperialist dog-legs would dare to challenge our veterans of the Save Korea War!'"

"What happened to the girl?" Old Xi asked from an armchair, where she was hemming a pair of black jeans. Pictures flashed on the television screen beside her head, but the sound was turned down and her eyes were fixed on her needle.

"The same thing that happened to the officer," Young Song said. "We still don't know."

"I think a gang kidnapped her to sell her as a wife," she said, "maybe down in Henan or Jiangxi."

"There's a Soviet movie about a giant shark that chomps up several boats," Jin said. "It's supposed to be good."

"It is good," Song conceded, "I've seen it. But it doesn't reflect social reality. The fisherman, who represents the workers, is eaten alive. The intellectual takes cover at the bottom of the sea. That's funny. In the end, only the policeman can restore order."

Jin returned Han's tense grin with a nervous chuckle. "No doubt because the Soviet state monopoly capitalist-bureaucrat clique denies the reality of class struggle

during the historical period of socialism," Jin said. "I just thought of something. There's a famous story about the Chairman hiding in a ditch when he escaped after the Autumn Harvest Rebellion. We used to act it out when we were kids. Well, at some point it became a crime to mention the story. An inspiring historical event turned into a reactionary lie. Maybe you didn't know. But you don't want someone to think of that when they see your soldier curled up in a ditch." Young Song looked at him doubtfully. "Go ahead," Jin said, "I won't interrupt again."

"OK, the commander is in his office and hears gunfire. He orders his motorized infantry into the countryside to round up the revisionist traitors."

"You'll need Army cooperation," Jin said, "but the Army never admits defeat." He turned to Han. "It's our official religion. The Liberation Army's invincible power. In Korea. On the Indian border. On the Wusuli River. At Liang Shan." He raised his glass. "To the People's Liberation Army! Ganbei!"

Old Han scrutinized his beer. "Old Jin, maybe you could introduce Song to some logistics people."

"Easily done," Jin nodded. "He has already met my father at calligraphy exhibitions."

"A fine old soldier," Song said. He paced the room, his hand in a fist. "Truckloads of grim-faced heroes roll

out the city gates to confront the counterrevolutionaries. But every night in the city, more people are attacked and devoured, leaving only bloody scraps of clothing. Houses stand empty, the factories are idle. When the soldiers return, unable to locate the enemy in the field, the commander has their squad leaders shot. He calls in units from neighboring districts, artillery, armor, jet fighters, in vain. He finally calls on the whole people to unite in defense of the fatherland. He equips block committees with shovels and arms the remnants of the Youth League with old Mausers. Food and water grow scarce. Maddened with rage, he sends the weakened citizens out to toil on breastworks in the hot summer sun. The reactionaries must be stopped! Elderly scholars collapse in tears, wrinkled small-foot women plead for mercy. Dispatching teams to round up spies and traitors, he soon has half the surviving population interrogating the other half. The demoralized troops loot shops and take liberties with women. When a loyal staff officer advises the commander to send for the nation's scientists, the commander empties a pistol into his chest. At last the commander sends out the city's remaining children, armed with nothing but red-tasseled spears."

Young Song lowered his voice. "Final sequence. The gate closes behind the last of the children. It's a clear spring morning. The city is quiet. No sound but whirring cicadas and chirping birds, hidden in the tender new

leaves. While gazing from the battlements at the devastated plain, the commander collapses in convulsions. With his teeth he tears bloody strips from his arms and hands. He shudders and lies still. Long shots down empty streets, across the parched fields. Close-ups of cicadas in the trees. A dog approaches and sniffs the corpse. Close-up, licking the eye, tugging the hand. Long shot of the city across a shimmering foreground of reeds. The dog trots by with a severed hand. The street is empty. No sound but buzzing and chirring, and the far-off sobs of a child."

Young Song lowered his eyes, now filled with tears. His cheeks were puffy and red. "The end," he said.

Young Xi applauded. "Bravo!" she cried. "Yes, bravo," her mother added. "It's very interesting," Old Han said. He took a long pull from his cigarette and blew smoke at the ceiling.

"Yes, very good," Jin said. He waited a moment for someone else to speak, then asked, "Is there a political meaning? Or is it just entertainment?"

Song's cheeks darkened, as though he had just recalled that Jin was a Party member. Jin wanted to explain that he only asked as a comrade, not as a vigilant Marxist-Leninist. He did not remember whether Young Song had applied to join the Party, but he planned to suggest it, if only to placate Sui. Song and Chen.

"In class society, there is no supra-class art," Song replied solemnly, turning to wink at Young Xi.

"It's very interesting," Han said. "I can see the monster invading the city. Tanks ripping up the narrow streets. Soldiers fleeing like wild pigs down the crooked lanes. Woman comrades fighting at a public faucet from which a muddy trickle drips."

"Wait, my ba," Young Xi said, "the monster makes people disappear."

"Is that right?" Han asked. "Well, we're still here, aren't we? I'm not criticizing, but Old Jin is right, the Liberation Army never loses."

"The Army is the fish, and the people are the sea the Army swims in," Young Xi said. She nodded good-night and slipped through the beaded curtain into the bedroom. The men watched the beads sway and grow still. Jin smiled at Han. How happy he must be to have a daughter, even if she was not officially his.

"There's another problem, maybe," Jin said, turning to Song. "Commander One-Eye looks suspiciously like the great Marshal Liu Bocheng, who criss-crossed the Jin-Zhi-Lu-Yu Border Area during the Third Revolutionary Civil War like Wu Yi of Yin playing chess with the King of Heaven. Even the Nationalists admire him. No one wants to see him played as a madman. And all those troops and weapons will be very expensive, right? At least for our station. Maybe

you should make the commander a Nationalist. His rage could be the rage of the reactionary bureaucrat-capitalist clique, blind to the power of the Revolutionary people."

"Mm, no good," Han frowned. "So the monster is the workers, peasants, and soldiers? Is it a good monster?"

"It would still be expensive," Young Song said to Jin. "But I thought of making the commander Japanese."

"Good," Han said with a grin, "good idea, right?"

"But still more expensive," Young Song said. "And the leaders might think I was anti-Japanese."

"True," Han nodded. "Remember those students in Beijing? I heard they went to prison just for saying we buy too many Toyotas."

"Not to mention videocameras," Jin said. They sipped their beer. Old Xi bit off her thread and put aside the jeans.

"Now they even own factories," she said. "Just like before Liberation."

Jin pictured Japanese soldiers menacing peasants with bayonets. Near-sighted dwarf pirates crying Banzai! as their victims tumbled into a pit.

"It's a problem," Han said, shaking his head. The beer had darkened his hollow face. With his sharp chin and mustache and coarse hair pointing skywards, he looked like a minor demon. Grade 23.

"Set it in late Ming times," Jin suggested, crushing the stub of his cigarette while smoke trickled from his lips. "When the Manchus sacked Baoding. You won't need any tanks, trucks, or airplanes. Some arrows and spears, a handful of actors on horseback. The camera can multiply them into an army. For the commander's headquarters, use the Lotus Pool Academy. For city walls, use Handan Castle. The General Chemical Industry Plant's Five-Seven Factory can provide costumes. 'Their stylish design and graceful colors have often won the praise of literary and artistic circles.'"

"It's not an opera, Comrade Jin," Song said gloomily, emptying the bottle into their glasses. "For that matter, why not set it among cavemen? Then we'd need only sticks and bones for weapons, and we could just paint the actor's bodies." He paused and sipped his beer. "The Party says that labor created the hand, and the hand turned apes into men," he continued, "so we won't need any weapons or costumes at all. Fur coats are expensive." Jin and Han chuckled. "Speaking of fur coats, we could set it among animals, cats for example. A giant pig could be the monster. No one would suspect we were talking about New China."

"Another 1984?" Jin cried. "No way!" Han and Song laughed sharply, but Jin shook his head and sighed. "Sometimes I have the feeling of a giant figure hovering

over us, casting a vast shadow over the fatherland." Han and Song studied Jin's face but said nothing. "Well," Jin chuckled, "it could be a pig." He paused, smiling broadly, but Han and Song did not respond. "The Chairman believed that humans descended from seaweed," Jin added. "Maybe he was right."

All three laughed, then sipped in silence.

"Maybe the monster is Ai Si disease," Young Song mused. "Something destructive inherent in human relations. But the Party would not approve of an Army leader dying of Ai Si."

"People say the leaders are all infected," Han said. "They get it from foreigners."

"Ss, enough," Old Xi said from her armchair. She pointed at the bedroom. Jin thought of the pink-faced girls with hair like raw silk that taugth at the agricultural college. American girls. He had seen them on their bicycles. Floating like balloons along Vanguard Road. Did they have Ai Si disease? Western girls were supposed to be very eager. Han's cheeks collapsed as he took a long pull at his cigarette. He tilted back his head and pumped blue rings into the air. Jin offered Song a Spring City.

"If the leader were Japanese," Jin said, "the monster could be some germ that escaped from one of their germ warfare labs in the Northeast." Song looked away. Jin

felt he had said enough. "Look, Young Song," he explained, "Old Han and I, we're journalists, not artists, not 'engineers of the soul,' as Comrade Deng says. We just inform the masses of what happens. Seeking truth from fact. But you artists inspire the masses to unite in Revolutionary struggle and propel history forward. You're an indispensable cog in the Revolutionary machine. 'A hundred million people with one mind.' As to how to do your work, you have to decide that for yourself. In artistic matters, Old Han and I are the masses. We just like what other people like. In war movies, comradeship and courage. Heroes like Rambo. But in horror movies, I don't know. They're not popular here. Show your script to Old Wu. If he doesn't like it, get in touch with Hebei TV. Or maybe a film company, a big studio like Xi'an. Write a letter to Xie Fei. You have talent. Your success is certain."

Jin's voice droned in his ears. He felt like some long-robed teacher in an old movie, urging his soon-to-be-disillusioned pupils to persevere in the face of adversity. Or like some meddler urging a friend to report a grievance to the Central Committee. The friend loses his job. Goes to prison. His wife divorces him.

Young Song rose to his feet, heaved back his hair and offered his plump hand to Han.

"The dorm closes at ten. I'm going."

"Wait," Han said. "A last toast, OK?"

Jin grinned into his comrades' dark, swollen faces, like the faces of boxers after a match. His probably looked the same. Emptying the last bottle, Han filled the glasses to the brim.

"Ganbei!" they cried, gulping the beer and the chalky dregs.

"I'm going too," Jin said, suppressing a quip about the wrath of Old Half. Song shared a room with three other young workers, and as the great and correct Party instructed the youth, "Proletarians do not have love affairs." Besides, he earned only sixty kuai a month.

Jin and Song buttoned their coats. Song's was Army-style with a synthetic fur collar. Jin's was Western-style, of charcoal wool. Song waved away a Golden Flower.

"You know," he said, looking from Han to Jin, "Sha-Shi-Bi-Ya often depicted evil leaders. No one sent him to prison, even though he fought the feudal aristocracy on behalf of the Revolutionary bourgeoisie."

He opened the door and vanished down the unlit corridor. When Jin also declined a cigarette, Han zipped his windbreaker and together they moved to the head of the stairs. They leaned against the balustrade, elbow to elbow in the darkness. A frigid draft spiraled up from below, carrying the tap of Song's shoes.

"How did you like it?" Han asked when they heard the door close behind Young Song. His cheekbones blazed suddenly in the lighter flame and disappeared.

"What, the horror movie?" Jin shivered. "Young Song is very talented. I wish him luck. But I don't understand his theory. It seems like warmed-over feudalism. When the leader is good, life is fine. When the leader is evil, Heaven punishes the whole people. It's the One Personality Theory in reverse."

"Right," Han said. "When the leader has the guns, the people obey. But in reality people are not always so respectful. Remember when we were fighting in Baoding? We didn't fear guns or death. Or the leaders."

"True," Jin said, shivering. After a pause Han spoke again.

"But the man-eating monster, I think that's real."

Jin nodded invisibly.

"Yes, interesting," Han said. "There's something real there. But not the whole reality. Only the yin side, maybe."

Jin laughed. "Right. There's something there. But the leaders criticize unnecessary attention to past mistakes."

"Right. They don't know that the mistakes of the past are also the mistakes of the present." Jin sensed that Han was tapping his own chest.

"Yes. So how can we avoid paying attention to them?" Jin asked. "But I wish Young Song great success. Maybe our generation has grown timid."

Han started down the stairs. His cigarette bobbed and brightened like a firefly. Jin followed.

"Did the shoot come off OK?" Jin asked.

"A pity you missed it," Han said. "The banquet was not bad. We ate our fill." They felt their way around a corner and descended the next flight in silence.

"Yes, not bad," Han said. "Young Liang's not bad. In and out zooms of the film workers drinking Heijiu, the machinery, the National Silver Medal. Add in a disco sound track, pa pa pa, synthesizers, pew pew pew. Very lively."

"Young Liang directed."

"For the most part."

"And it was not bad?"

"Not bad at all."

"I guess he had it all planned. He probably even visited the plant."

"Maybe. But sometimes ideas just come to you on the spot."

They reached the ground floor and pushed through the unlocked door. The wind had died, but the chill was sharper by ten degrees. Jin unlocked his bicycle. That Young Liang. With the secretary's help, he would soon shoulder Jin aside on the station's two-rung ladder of

opportunity. Jin would be reduced to collating figures on the production of Baoding's Fourth Treasure.

"Don't catch cold," he said as he swung his leg over the bicycle.

"Cold is not the enemy," Han said. He took a last pull at his cigarette and flicked it away in a trail of sparks. "Cold is not the enemy. I mentioned the yin side."

"Well?"

"Oh, it's nothing definite. Something about you and a woman comrade. Someone looking for a job. Young Liang asked me about it. We were alone."

Jin said nothing. The crumbling drive, bounded by a low black hedge, shone like worn whitewash in the livid starlight. The Silver River. Where the Weaver Girl met the Cowherd once a year. Her lonely husband. Punished for making love instead of working. "Proletarians do not have marriages."

"I said I knew nothing about it," Han said. "Which I don't."

"All right, thanks," Jin said, staring down the driveway. "Aiya," he erupted, "it's like fighting shadows." He pushed off, steering cautiously to avoid potholes. Halfway down the drive he stopped and turned his head in time to catch a glimpse of Old Han. Old Comrade.

His angular form, faintly visible against the building, glided towards the door like a shadowy crane.

The next morning, the chill in the bedroom and the whistling vibration in the windowpanes told Jin that the season had changed. Cold air cascading down from Siberia, pillaging tons of dust across Mongolia and dumping it on the North China Plain. It was the Wind Lord's yearly fumigation campaign. As Jin raced south on Youth Road, the wind pummeling his back, he passed northbound pedestrians in white cotton masks squinting miserably into the blast and masked, half-blind cyclists struggling not to fall under the wheels of city buses and trucks.

At streetcorners sunburnt peasants, like enterprising devils, peddled yams and chestnuts from smoking drums. Plumes of smoke scarred the brilliant sky. Porters all across Baoding had fired up their boilers, sending steam clattering through antique scrolled radiators and tons of soot billowing up the chimneys to blend with the wind-borne dust. Already the wind was rubbing a gunpowder-like mixture into Jin's exposed neck and wrists. Washing his face tonight would turn the basin into a sea of ink.

The station comrades complained, even Han Lixin, who had suffered far worse discomforts than a poisonous dustbath, and Shi Kuihua, who generally made a virtue of

silent endurance. A good little student of Comrade Lei Feng's spirit of self-denial. But Jin found their complaints insincere. It was exhilarating to see a whirlwind of leaves leap suddenly into the air. It was intoxicating to hear the wind's roar drown the city's loudspeakers, sweeping their chatter like so much stubble down the North China Plain. It was sweet to close a door with a steaming parcel of Muslim chicken in hand, or a sack of scorched chestnuts, and recover the quiet laughter of the human world in the shelter offered by a shop or a house from the savage, unremitting assault of the heavens. Jin sensed a renewal of unity, as though each person's private faults were dissolved in the universal persecution.

After his conversation with Han, Jin knew that he had to strike back at Secretary Sui. He mulled over possible strategies. Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao. Steal a goat as you pass. Be reborn in a corpse. He decided to visit Shi Kuihua.

As Jin pedaled through the gusty darkness of Five-Four Road, he reviewed the reasons why Young Shi should support him. First, they both served truth and the Party — a union more elusive than the apemen who haunted Guangxi. Second, they both had married workers in response to the Chairman's directive, "Intellectuals should unite with the toiling classes." Which was another elusive union. Third, they had answered the call to go to the countryside — that vast

schoolhouse for China's youth. While Jin "climbed the mountain" to exhume stones on a Army farm, Young Shi "went down to the village" to carve irrigation ditches in the saline wastes of eastern Hebei. They had spent their youth among strangers, experiencing first-hand the wind and rain of the Three Great Revolutionary Struggles.

Jin turned left at Vanguard Road and scooted past the black walls of the prison. Over the highway, the stars swarmed like flies chipped from ice. He turned down a side street and moments later lifted his bicycle over the curb and crossed a stretch of ground to the low rowhouse Young Shi shared with Old Yuan. Holding the gate open with one hand, he guided his bicycle into the tiny courtyard. Here, during winter Shi and Yuan stored coal and cabbage; during summer they grew tomatoes and beans. Some blackened stalks still stood in a clay pot, left over from last year's crop.

Jin hesitated to knock. Old Yuan was often away, so Jin he feared he might run into Old Sui. Somehow they made him ill at ease. Her famished cheeks and glinting, popped-out eyes. His calculating squint and jutting chin. When together they seemed to mock his Party spirit. But Young Shi was not a bad egg. As a young girl alone in the Revolutionary countryside, she must have had good reason to learn from Lei Feng.

Jin knocked and Young Shi, not Secretary Sui, opened the door. Her hair lay uncombed on the shoulders of a blue

quilted jacket and her bulging eyes stared as if she were dreaming. A book dangled at her side, closed around one finger.

"Comrade Shi, how are you?" Jin asked, a tremor in his voice. "You're not asleep? You're not too busy?"

A smile creased her cheeks. "Comrade Jin, have you eaten yet? How is Xingxing? How is Comrade Zhu?"

It was the first time Jin had come to her house in many years, but she seemed unsurprised to see him. She edged aside as Jin stepped through the low door. Fog condensed on his glasses, which he removed and rubbed with his handkerchief. An electric heater glowed beside an upholstered armchair, and a sofa stretched along the wall. A lamp on an end-table supplied the only light. Jin unbuttoned his coat and took a seat on the sofa.

"What a sofa!" he exclaimed, bouncing up and down to test the springs. He looked around the room. "And what a television!" It was a giant Guangmang, Chinese-made in Tianjin at a Japanese factory. "Your place is like a high cadre's."

"Old Yuan follows the path of raising the material standard," Young Shi said with a rueful smile. "I try to go along, but I prefer the simplicity of Yan'an."

"I know, I know," Jin shrugged, shaking his head. "'Marry a monkey, go with a monkey; marry a pig, go with a pig.' How is Old Yuan?"

Jin pictured him bursting into the newsroom on New Year's Eve. Always tousled, always unshaven. Handing out hams, liquor, candy, and cigarettes collected on his travels. He called everyone by name and never asked for anything in return. And always had something special for Old Sui.

"He should be on his way back from Wuhan," Shi said.

Jin looked around the dimly lit room. Lace curtains on the windows. Ceramic horses and camels in a glass case. A forest of ink paintings. Birds. Horses. Lord Guan. Zhong Yi the Ghost Killer. Beside the new television, an enormous black cassette player trimmed in chrome. No doubt there was a refrigerator in the kitchen and a washing machine running off the sink. Chief Yuan was a rich man, indeed. Not that Jin disapproved. He helped workers and peasants and various enterprises distribute their products. Jin and Shi distributed a product too, but it was often less fragrant than Yunnan ham.

Young Shi offered Jin a cup of tea. When she left the room he peeked at the book she was reading. The Chairman's essays on philosophy. She's mad, he said to himself, an ultra-"Left" fanatic. Lei Feng would have been reading Liu Shaoqi on "How To Be A Good Communist," recently reprinted.

Young Shi reappeared with a tray that she set on the tea-table. Jin reached for a cup and lifted the lid, filling his nostrils with swampy steam. Dragon Well, the

finest tea in China. Compliments of Old Yuan, of course. Jin set down the cup and lit a Spring City. He leaned forward, rubbing his thighs. Young Shi stared at him with an expectant, frog-eyed grin.

"Welcome, Comrade Jin. Did you bring me some names?"

It was Jin's turn to stare. Names? What had he. Her eyes pressed him. "Excuse me, Comrade Shi, I'm trying to think." Seconds passed. He ransacked his brain. "Sorry, it's no use. What names?"

"Our young comrades," she said. "Young persons we'd like to have in our branch. Have you invited Young Chen?"

"Oh, right, right. Young Chen. I'm working on that. I have some ideas but I haven't finished talking it over with them."

"All right, good. Can you tell me their names, though? I have some ideas myself."

"Oh, maybe it's better if I wait until I've finished discussing it with them," Jin said. "They might decide this isn't the best time."

"Is that what they told you? You know, Old Jin, our Party needs brave, honest people at all times."

"No, they haven't said that, I was just, no, I'm sure they'd be honored."

"OK, that's good. You know, Old Jin, I don't see why you're making a big secret of it. Comrades must cooperate. I don't want to plow where you've already sown."

"Certainly. Yes, OK. Well, you mentioned Young Chen. Him."

"Yes. Anyone else?"

"Young Song, maybe."

"Young Song, good, very good. I've often noticed him and I don't know why I haven't followed up. Any others?"

Wasn't that enough? Finally another name popped into Jin's head. "Young Tun," he said.

"Young Tun." Young Shi narrowed her brows.

"The switchboard worker," Jin explained.

"I know. Young Tun. Interesting. Do you plan to sponsor her yourself?"

"No, not at all. I mean, not unless you. Do you think I should?" Jin realized he was perspiring.

Young Shi shrugged.

"OK, good," Jin said. "Look, Comrade Shi, that's not what I came to talk about. Let's be open and aboveboard. I need your help. Please point out my shortcomings. I want to raise my level to better serve the people of Baoding."

"I'm happy you've come, Comrade Jin," Young Shi said, her eyes swelling towards him. "We'll have an informal discussion together, all right? Good. First, I want to say you're a good journalist. Indeed, I can tell you that Branch Secretary Sui shares my opinion."

Jin modestly inclined his head. "Comrade Shi, my talents are quite average," he said. "Please let me express my warm respect for your work as a Party official and journalist."

"What little I accomplish is entirely owing to the guidance of our secretary and the efforts of the comrades," Young Shi said. "Including you. You work hard, you participate in meetings, and you don't stir up trouble."

"Thank you, Comrade Shi. You're kind to overlook my many failings. But there is still a small concern I have, which I feel is related to your opinion of my work. It's this." He smiled. "Last month you sent me to shoot a story on the Qing Family Muslim Chicken Shop. I came, I ate, I waited. Later I heard you took my crew to greet a women's volleyball squad at the train station."

Young Shi chuckled. "Comrade Jin, is this the cause of your midnight visit? Who knows what happened? Am I Karl Marx? What's the matter, were you lonely? Didn't you get enough chicken?"

Jin leaned back on the sofa and sucked on his cigarette. His fingers shook. He set the cigarette in and ashtray and slid his hand under his thigh.

"Well, there's also this," he said with a smile. "I overheard when you told Comrade Sui I had to wait. He said, 'It doesn't matter.' Remember? Is that any way to treat a comrade?"

"Comrade Jin, what's the problem? He just meant that if something unexpected came up, you'd understand. I thought so too. The school's Party secretary called at the last minute and asked us to welcome the girls. What could we do?"

There was not a flicker of remorse in Young Shi's protuberant eyes. A tingly feeling crept along Jin's spine. He felt a need to pierce, or at least dent, the armor of her loyalty to the secretary. She had probably been waiting for Old Sui to arrive while she studied her essays. Jin leaned forward and listened for a moment, in case he was lurking in the bedroom.

"Young Shi, OK, let's open the door and look at the mountain. I feel Old Sui doesn't like me and is trying to shove me aside. I'm afraid he'll never reschedule the chicken shop story, just as he never aired my report on the cannery."

"Ah, the cannery. I think I understand what's bothering you. Don't worry. Your research won't be obsolete in one or two years. Socialist modernization occupies an indefinite historical period. The report is important, but it can't be swallowed in one gulp. It's complicated."

"So you say, honored Comrade. But is it complicated when Comrade Sui invites Young Liang to direct the Heijiu ad? I think it's all too simple."

Young Shi studied Jin gravely. Jin lifted the lid of his teacup with trembling fingers. A crescent of leaves turned slowly on the surface.

"Modernization does not mean exaggerating past mistakes," Young Shi murmured.

Jin looked up from his tea. "It's true, Comrade Shi," he said eagerly, "but it doesn't mean depriving comrades of the right to work. Push down one melon, another bobs up." He stirred the crescent of leaves with one finger. Young Shi raised her cup and blew on the surface. She replaced the lid and addressed Jin with an expression of earnest concern.

"Comrade Jin, I fear you believe my goal is to protect Secretary Sui, not to serve the people heart and soul. I say again, I admire your work. You're both red and expert, fighting in the vanguard of socialist modernization. My work, though, is to resolve the contradiction between the administrative and editorial aspects, taking unity and stability as the key link and the Four Cardinal Principles as the foundation. Maybe some comrades feel you've taken the road of careerism and bourgeois liberalism, or worse, but I disagree. I defend you when these questions come up, both at committee meetings and in the course of production. If you think I don't do enough, or I don't understand something, please say so and help me correct my work style."

Jin shook his head and looked away. His chest felt tight and a drop of sweat was trickling down his back. He was confused. His brain stopped. Young Shi was telling him of the self-doubt she had suffered in her early years at the station. She had just graduated from Hebei University in the first class of workers, peasants and soldiers. The Gang of Four was still in power. Despite the apparent total victory of the socialist roaders, the Two-Line Struggle still raged in the public organs. Productive relations at Baoding TV were poor and productivity low. After the Chairman ascended and the Gang of Four was smashed she did not know where to turn, but she kept her mind on Party discipline and on serving the people heart and soul. She refused to make excuses for the branch secretary when he was criticized by cadres from Beijing and thus kept apart from factional fighting, steering a course away from the ultra-“Left” thinking of the Gang, who had attempted to destroy the Party and socialism by plunging China into poverty and sham class struggle. Keeping the Party’s great traditions in her heart and her eyes on the radiance of the great truth of Marxism, she followed the line of seeking truth from fact and took unity and stability as the key link. When Secretary Sui was appointed, he appreciated her efforts and eventually promoted her to deputy director over the heads of more seasoned colleagues. Now as deputy secretary she also took

the lead in Party work. She was extremely busy but she knew she was a person of meager talent and could only succeed by cooperating with her comrades.

She spoke with unusual emotion, her voice resonating with a plaintive drone between the low ceiling and the concrete floor. She seemed to have hypnotized herself with the sound, but then she would pause as if listening for errors in her recitation. Jin felt like a stone in a shallow stream as her voice flowed over and around him, at once caressing and chilling, and he thought of the poisonous trickle that slithered along the bed of the ancient moat. Creeping beneath the streets of the old city, nourished by effluents of the paper mill, the film plant, the chemical plant and the synthetic fiber factory, the stream flowed east into Government River, then into Baiyang Marsh, then into the Green River, so called, and finally into the treacherous Bo Sea. It was viscous, purple and strewn with newspapers and styrofoam trays, but in the end it reached the Great Eastern Ocean and washed the shores of the lost islands where boys and girls had died searching for the elixir of immortality.

As Young Shi's voice lapped at his knees, Jin recalled for the first time in years the power that lay in the term "self-criticism." It was the dynamite, the plutonium of Revolution. He felt a sense of contentment, a taste of the sweetness of lost friendship. He vowed on the spot, with

tears springing to his eyes, not to despise friendship with Young Shi if friendship between them should arise. The lamplight fell on her gray-streaked hair, but her ranine eyes and sere pocked cheeks were veiled in shadow. He felt a pang of doubt. Was she playing with him? Trying to draw him into making a similar confession? He dismissed the thought. There were always small suspicions between friends, even between wife and husband. The emotions Young Shi spoke of were too powerful to feign. Jin remembered the day the Chairman ascended. It was as if the world had come to an end.

A terrifying shriek jolted him from the sofa, and the walls and floors shook. He broke into a sweat as cold as the dew on a marble statue. A heavy truck had halted in the street, the lighted cab visible through the lace curtains, its big diesel engine rumbling loudly. The engine stopped. Someone was rattling the gate. Old Yuan pushed open the door and stepped inside. He said nothing. Glaring blearily at Jin, he set his keys and an old Type 59 pistol on the sideboard and slowly unzipped his knee-length sheepskin coat. His eyes were hidden by the flaps of a dog-skin cap, but his chin showed a week's growth of beard. He slouched like a circus bear forced by kicks and blows to walk on two legs, like the hulking figure of Zhong Yi the Ghost-Killer on the wall behind him. He seemed drunk. Comrade Shi stood up and stepped towards him. She invited

him to join them if he liked, or to wash his face and go to bed.

"Old Half," he said hoarsely, after a pause, gesturing at Young Shi with a mittened paw. Young Shi froze where she stood. Jin could not tell whether Yuan was greeting her, accusing her, or hinting at some obscure distress of his own.

"Old Yuan —" Jin said, his voice barely audible. He glanced at the pistol. He was shaking. He offered Yuan his packet of Spring Cities, but Yuan turned away. He probably smoked only Marlboros. Young Shi stood like a statue.

"Old Yuan, you must be very tired," she said. "Will you drink something? You look very tired."

"Not tired," Yuan said, lumbering into the corridor. "I'm extremely, absolutely, not tired." He left the two Party members to finish their tea. They listened as he stumbled around the bedroom. The bed creaked. Jin lit another cigarette. Apparently Old Sui was not hiding in the bedroom after all.

"Comrade Jin," Yuan called, "Is your health good?"

"Very good," Jin called down the corridor.

"'Very good, very good,'" Yuan mimicked, then slammed a door. Young Shi looked shaken. Jin excused himself, his eyes on the worn finish of Yuan's pistol. He mounted his dependable Phoenix and rattled home.