

Build Stable Base Areas [Chp. 4]

Young Zhu was sparing in her praise of Jin's great victory over Sui. They were descending the frigid stairway of the battery building, knotting their scarves and pulling on their gloves. By coaxing a self-criticism from Shi, Jin explained, he had smashed the chain that bound her to the secretary. And now that she had admitted to liking his work, she would find it more difficult to sacrifice him.

"She'll do as her master commands," Zhu snorted, "like the dog-leg she is, when the time comes for you to take a rest."

Jin halted. He glared through his clouding breath at the broken window over the stairwell. For an instant he wanted to fling his wife down the stairs. He pictured her staring glassy-eyed from the landing, head awry on her broken neck.

Halting beside him, Zhu pressed his arm. "I'm sorry," she said. "A march of ten thousand li begins with a single step."

Jin nodded without meeting her eyes. Of course, she was right to be skeptical. Young Shi would take probably revenge on him for witnessing her moment of weakness.

A few days later, Jin admitted to Zhu that Young Liang had directed the Heijiu shoot. Zhu looked up at him, her eyes wide with fear, then burst out almost gaily, "All right, for now let's just forget about the housing problem."

"Good," Jin smiled, "and I'll forget about the Moslem boyfriend." Zhu blushed, but did not drop her eyes. Jin put his hands on her waist, thumbs in front, fingers reaching behind.

"You know, Old Jin," she said, "you still have friends at the factory. They will never forget what you have done for them." Jin nodded. When their Sail-brand battery won the National Silver Medal and he read the announcement every night for a week. Zhu said that if his campaign failed, the comrades might welcome him back as a cadre, maybe in their Office of Information. Jin pulled her to him. "The teeth love the lips," she laughed, "and the lips support the teeth!"

Jin replied with mock gravity, "Never forget Premier Zhou's Eight Togethers Concerning Husband-Wife Relations!"

Zhu threw her arms around him and they toppled on to the bed. It was Fifth Day evening, Zhu's hair was clean,

and on television in the other room, Zhuge Liang was plying his qin alone on the ramparts of Xi.

Jin planned his next move over a bowl of porridge with pickled cabbage. Baoding's Second Treasure. He had now talked with Sui, Shi, Tun, Han, Chef Qing (of Moslem stewed chicken fame), and Deputy Secretary Qi Mu at the film factory's Office of Information. It was time to pay a call on Director Zhao. If Shi could be won over, even the old Rightist might prove useful.

On Sunday he knocked on Zhao's door with a box of Tianjin candy under his arm. The sky was windy and clear with blasts of dust scouring the roof tiles. Zhao lived in a gray brick house at the center of the ancient city. The house had once been part of a large compound, but the compound had long since been broken up and its grounds filled in with brick cabins. The old dog should retire, Jin said to himself as he rapped on the faded blue door. The state could pay him to rot on some commission.

When Zhao opened the door, Jin was shocked at his appearance. His scalp was visible through white wisps of hair and his skin looked paper thin, as though a smudge of the thumb could reveal his skull. His hand, when Jin took it, was smooth to the touch, as Jin imagined an ape's hand would feel. Zhao welcomed him in and asked about Zhu and

Xingxing. He took the candy without a word, and when Jin was seated at a table went on watering the plants that occupied every surface in the house, reciting for Jin their medicinal virtues while splashing water on carpets, books, and old newspapers. Inviting Jin to drink some tea-water, he lit the coal-gas stove under a kettle and proceeded to relate his progress in qigong.

Jin tapped his foot inaudibly on the carpet. He lit a cigarette and looked up at the ceiling. The beams of the once elegant house, with their stained and peeling clouds in dried crimson, slime green, and urine gold, had probably not been painted since 1911. He eventually interrupted Zhao's lecture, asking Zhao, as he approached with a covered cup of tea-water, whether Branch Secretary Sui had ever mentioned a report on new equipment at the cannery. At that the ancient ape ceased his chatter. He set the cup on the table and stared at Jin with glistening, discolored eyes. Turning away he took a sip from a small teapot that sat on a shelf. With trembling voice and a silver thread dangling from his lip, he asked if he might test Jin's qi. Did Young Jin suffer from headache, toothache, fever, chilblains, irritability, or colds?

The room felt suddenly damp and chill, as if a shadow had drifted across the sun. Jin looked around him and shivered. Shelves crowded with shrubs, herbs, reeds, and fierce-looking cacti blocked every window, vines covered

the bookshelves and tables, and trees leaned from vases in the corners. Jin felt as though he were lost in a forest. Recalling what he had heard of Zhao's past, well known in Baoding because of certain unusual circumstances, he understood why Zhao had yielded to the secretary. Although Baoding was not Tianjin or even Shijiazhuang, Zhao regarded his post as a gift of Heaven. His forest was his fortress, created to defend him from invaders.

Zhao had been the first director of Tianjin TV. During the anti-Rightist campaign, he had received a five-year sentence for broadcasting a report on economic crime. Early in his term, the Chairman happened to be re-reading Lu Xun and someone mentioned that a convicted Rightist named Zhao knew all about herbs and Chinese medicine. The following day, in an informal speech to ideological workers, the Chairman excoriated Zhao from Tianjin for anti-Party superstition-mongering and exploitation of the toiling masses. "Let him work for his supper," the Chairman concluded wryly. The audience, vastly amused, gave the Chairman a standing ovation.

When the prison authorities learned of the Chairman's remarks, they treated Zhao from Tianjin as a diehard counterrevolutionary, assigning him the dirtiest tasks and the leanest rations. Somehow he survived and was released to a mountain village in southern Hebei. But his troubles were not over. The Chairman's speech appeared in Volume V

of the Selected Works. The village was only two hours from Handan, so all through the long decade of the Cultural Revolution, a steady trickle of militants found their way there, each of whom felt bound to punish Zhao from Tianjin for his crimes. Fortunately Jin had never made that pilgrimage.

Jin closed his eyes. He could feel Zhao's palms carving generous circles in the air, weaving invisible trails around his head. He seemed to doze. When Zhao was finished, Jin opened his eyes and stared. Instead of feeling calm and clear of mind, it was as though his brain had been plastered over with mud. Zhao from Tianjin had neutralized the invader.

"How do you feel?" Zhao asked with a kind smile.

"Not too good," Jin said.

"Mm," Zhao mused. "Interesting. Yes, I felt some kind of blockage. Maybe you should come back later. We'll try again, OK?"

Zhao's wife, Teacher Xun, was standing in the doorway. She now displayed for Jin her "library of clippings." A tall, heavy woman with an honest face, she reminded Jin of Ba-Ke-Si, the faithful, hard-working horse in 1984. Her eyes, magnified by thick glasses, floated in watery pockets of purple skin. The clippings went back ten years and were organized in binders labeled archeology, health, music,

children's games, and so on. Of course, there was nothing about politics. Xun laid a binder on the table.

"It's useful if a person can't go to the city library," she explained. "If he's ill, or afraid, or tired. Our neighbors often ask me for recipes."

Jin shivered as she raised a pair of chrome-plated shears.

"Maybe I should come back later," he said. Xun nodded absently and began cutting an article from a newspaper. Zhao had already returned to his herbs. Neither looked up when Jin opened the door.

Jin arrived at the station the next morning to find Young Shi standing at his desk with her clipboard folded to her chest. Jin's throat tightened. He feared Old Zhao had reported his visit to Old Sui.

"How are you, Comrade Jin?" Young Shi asked, searching his face. "Have you eaten yet?"

"What is it?" he asked. He was reaching for his chair when he saw it was missing. He looked at Young Shi. Her lips were pursed, her hair hung in a loose, untidy queue, and her eyes were ready to leap from their sockets.

"Comrade Jin, there's been a report," she said quietly. "A few days ago some students at Hefei Science University displayed a poster calling for so-called

democratic reforms. The Ministry of Education considers it a serious matter. I think we should find out what happened. Can you give Comrade Liao some names?"

Jin peered into Shi's swelling orbs. A shadowy opacity flickered within. He understood. She and Sui were cutting him out of the story. He replied with eager enthusiasm.

"No problem, Comrade Shi. I'll put Liao in touch with some comrades in Shijiazhuang. Then I'll stroll over to the Daily to see if they have any leads."

A smile pinched the corners of Shi's mouth. She was taller than Zhu and she seemed to be wearing a bulky sweater or vest beneath her indigo Zhongshan jacket.

"OK, good, be quick about it. I have another project in mind for you. Researching winter industries in the countryside. That's perfect for you, right? 'Let's mobilize to resolve the Three Contradictions!'" She looked through the window at the rich blue sky. "I often wish I still lived in the countryside," she sighed.

Jin lingered, counting the creases in her neck. He sensed an invitation and recalled his vow. She was four or five years younger than he, but she was already as dry as a dead leaf.

"Yes, it is a good assignment for me," he said quietly. "For you, too. China's countryside, 'a vast schoolhouse for her youth.' We should go together." He

glanced around the newsroom where the other reporters pretended to work. "We'll need your help," he added eagerly. "Peasant women always welcome our women comrades." Young Shi studied her clipboard. "Besides, you need a rest. Just come along to supervise."

"Not today," she said with a frown as she raised her eyes from the clipboard, "today is extremely busy."

"Oh, it wouldn't be today," Jin said, hazarding a smile. "I'll have to run a gauntlet of district cadres before we can even get a look at a villager." Shi's cheeks darkened. "How about Third Day next week? Until then I'll scout the locations and interview our lucky subjects."

"OK," Young Shi said. "I'll order a car."

"Good," Jin grinned. "It's always good for leaders to participate in voluntary labor." Shi laughed and swatted him towards the doorway.

Jin crossed the gravel courtyard to the newspaper. If there had been a big demonstration, it would pose the usual problem for the secretary: to report or not to report. Old Sui would turn to Beijing, but where could he be sure of finding the correct line? At the General Secretary's office, or the State Council? At the Ministry of Information, or of Education? At the Military Affairs Commission? And could a local editor really trust the New China News Service or People's Daily? The so-called

Center. One divides into two. That's dialectics. That's Marxism.

When Jin entered the newsroom of the Baoding Daily, the manager intercepted him and invited him to his office for a cup of tea-water. Jin said he needed a political editor, but the manager insisted. While Jin waited alone in the small office, he savored the aroma of ink, alcohol, and grease that wafted from the antiquated presses, silent at this hour of the morning. He was suddenly pierced with longing for the early days of his career, when combed by wind and washed by rain, he criss-crossed the district on his bicycle, riding from unit to unit to gather news. He had just joined the paper after a year at the battery factory and he and Young Zhu were newly married. In truth, it was not a happy time. Baoding was poor. The political situation was confused. Publication was erratic, and Jin was shunned for his Red Mansion activities. He slept with Zhu on the narrow bed against the wall.

Two young editors in Western jackets, neckties, and knit vests stepped into the office. Jin recognized them as Zhang and Li. Both were Party members who had graduated from He Da. Zhang had the pugnacious look of a middle-aged peasant cadre, but Li might have passed for a young professor.

"I'm conducting an investigation," Jin said, standing to shake hands.

"The student movement in Hefei?" Zhang asked as he straddled a chair. Jin nodded. "So you think there's a movement? I say it's an anti-Party rumor propagated by Taiwanese spies. You should be ashamed. And you a Party member." His lightly oiled hair was combed straight back from his corrugated brow.

"On the contrary," Li said, leaning against the door with his arms crossed on his chest. He wore a thin mustache and his dry hair fell over a pale forehead. "The Party's great tradition of mass action embraces student protest. Denying the existence of the student movement, in which many Party members have taken part, is a slander on the Party and on our Revolutionary educational practices."

"But neither Beijing Daily nor People's Daily has reported it," Zhang said. "And Hefei Daily says that only four hundred gathered. That's not a movement. The report doesn't say that the students demanded so-called reforms, and it doesn't say that teachers and cadres joined in or that the students carried banners declaring their support for Comrade Deng. Since it says none of these things, it's probably wrong about everything else."

"Are you reporting it?" Jin asked. He took a Front Gate from the pack proffered by Li and leaned towards Li's butane lighter.

"In fact, five thousand gathered," Li said, watching the cigarette take fire, "according to reports circulating

among the masses, who under the Party's guidance have learned to tell black from white. And that was Fifth Day. Since then several thousand have gathered daily."

"I see," Jin said. He felt the day's first smoke bite into his lungs. Finally he could relax from his encounter with Comrade Shi. "But the people's press does not spread rumors. If we say there's a big movement, we might stir up anti-socialist feelings and give comfort to counterrevolutionaries."

"You should report this, then," Li said. "From the foreign ministry digest. Our beloved friend and close comrade-in-arms Po-Er Po-Te, Great Helmsman of our beloved Cambodian allies, is ill. And someone has tried to assassinate the Teacher, Father, and Leader of the Korean people, Comrade Jing Yisong."

Zhang chuckled. "Hush," he said. "Are you trying to spiritually disarm the Revolutionary peoples of the world?"

"OK," Li said with a laugh, "how's this. The foreign papers say that students in Paris are rioting. It's a new Paris Commune, a nascent worker's state, in an advanced capitalist country! It's classic Marxism!"

"No way!" Zhang cried. They laughed until Jin had to wipe his eyes. Point nine of the Sixteen-Point Decision. The Shanghai Commune.

Jin recrossed the compound to the radio station, where the comrades told the same story. Four hundred reported,

several thousand estimated by witnesses. Large crowds and speeches throughout the weekend. A vice-president of the university, a scientist and Party member, had spoken warmly of the "free trade in ideas." As Jin returned to Baoding TV, he felt a kindling of interest in these students, who evidently had more on their minds than learning disco and Japanese. He reported his findings to Shi. No story was aired.

Jin spent the next day at a workshop on pig-breeding sponsored by the district agricultural bureau. The following day he heard an American expert talk about preventing head smut in corn. The foreigner was a large, pink-faced man who spoke horrible Chinese. He was spending a few weeks at the agricultural university to help the Chinese people achieve the Four Modernizations. Afterwards Jin praised his linguistic skills and asked if he had ever met Ni-Ke-Song or Ji-Xin-Ge.

Meanwhile tension mounted for Old Sui. The central organs ignored the Hefei demonstrations for five days, but when thousands of students burst through the campus gates and poured down Long River Road to surround the Anhui provincial government building, neither the Central Television Network nor People's Daily could dam up the story any longer. To Jin's surprise, they repeated the students' demands with indulgent approval, noting the absence of beating, smashing, and looting and laying great

stress on the date. It was the anniversary of the Twelve-Nine Movement, in which Beijing students under the leadership of the Party had called on the Nationalist government to resist Japan. Old Sui had what he needed. He authorized Yin to give a brief account of the demonstrations in which the students' respect for public order was linked to the Party's tradition of mass action.

By the end of the week, the tide of the movement had ebbed. Sui and Liao mopped their brows. Too soon. The following morning, Bei Da cadres awakened to find the entire campus papered over with big- and small-character posters. A Youth League member from Baoding telephoned the station and read Liao the text of a poster that was draped over the statue of Sai-Wai-Ti-Si in front of the foreign languages building. Jin read the message over Liao's shoulder. "Comrades! A single spark can start a prairie fire! We can be that spark!" It was signed "Warriors of Democracy."

"Want me to write that up for Comrade Yin?" Jin asked.

"It's not so simple," Liao said, his eyes on the scrap of paper and a catch in his voice. "We have to follow the mass line." Like dogs chasing mice, Jin said to himself. He sauntered back to his desk.

A few days later, Jin and Shi set out for Mancheng in the midst of the season's first snowstorm. As the van crossed the open country west of Baoding, Young Shi gazed

quietly at the snowy furrows that spun past the window like the spokes of a wheel. She seemed deaf to Chen's and Liang's boyish chatter coming from the back of the van. Jin wondered if this was her way of greeting the change in the winter landscape. Or was she recalling her years in the countryside? Ahead on the near horizon, jagged ridgelines hovered in the snowy air like ghostly dragons guarding the Taihang Mountains.

The local production team cadre had put Jin in touch with the Xia family, who made brooms and brushes to sell in Baoding during times when there was nothing to do in the fields. The road was rising slightly when they reached the Xias' hamlet near Big Horse Mill. Jin knocked and entered the overheated room, followed by Young Shi. The crew hustled in their equipment, snow blowing in through the doorway, while the driver shooed away curious neighbors, including a boy whom the cadre had pointed out as Old Xia's illegitimate son.

Jin wiped his glasses and greeted Xia, a lean, sunburnt man somewhere between forty and sixty years old. Xia's wife and daughters crowded around Young Shi. They called her "Aunt" and led her to an armchair beside the coal stove, where they served her a cup of steaming tea-water. Xia showed Jin the baskets of switches and bristles and straw his wife and daughters had gathered and the

handles he had roughed out at the shop of a small construction company.

While Jin planned the shoot with Young Liang, Young Chen daubed Xia's cheeks with pancake. Young Shi patted the girls' faces with powder and rouge and painted their lips a lavish vermilion. Stirring lampblack into surgical jelly, she drew heroic caterpillar eyebrows on Old Xia and delicate willow brows on his daughters. The daughters grew quiet, even solemn. Jin felt he witnessing an ancient ritual. His sisters had always been military in outlook, and as far as he knew had never even thought of wearing lipstick. His mother wore it.

Chen set up the floodlights and Liang shouldered the big Sony videorecorder. Old Xia explained again how he manufactured the handles and his wife and daughters demonstrated the assembly and finishing of the products. Despite the intrusive presence of the lens, the daughters worked and spoke quite naturally. Jin realized that the Xias did not own a television.

Jin halted the shoot at noon, declining Xia's offer to serve them a meal. He had instructed the cadre not to let Xia feed them under any circumstances, adding that peasants in general should stop treating Party members as gods. It was bad enough that Xia had burned a week's worth of coal to heat the house. They lunched on gluey, meatless dumplings in a dusty shop at the crossroads. When Jin

awoke from his Article 43, Young Shi was pacing the concrete floor. A short but slippery trip in the van took them back to the hamlet, by now half-buried in snow. The family was just stirring on the kang.

With the wind moaning in the chimney, Jin questioned Old Xia about the bitterness his family had suffered because of the people's commune movement, so-called voluntary labor programs, deep plowing, close planting, and the Cut Off The Tail of Capitalism Campaign. They sat side by side on the edge of the kang.

"Aiya," Xia uttered mournfully, shaking his head. Cracks appeared in the dark pancake on his cheeks.

"Many suffered, many died," Jin said quietly, "isn't that right?"

"Right, many people, many people," Xia replied, still shaking his head.

"All because of the Party's wrong policies, isn't that right?" Jin said.

Xia stopped shaking his head and studied Jin from under his wrinkled eyelids. "I don't know," he said.

"You know," Jin said mildly, laying his hand on Xia's thigh, "you know and you should admit it. How can the Party improve its work if no one pays attention to wrong policies? The Party made serious mistakes."

Xia looked away. Liang was shooting his daughters as they gave Young Shi a lesson in broom-making. Young Shi

sat on a low wooden stool in the glare of Chen's floodlight, gripping a hank of straw between her knees. The girls laughed happily when the straw scattered on the floor, and laughed as they gathered it up and bound it with twine. Young Shi laughed until tears ran down her cheeks. Jin asked if she could read the straws, but his voice was lost in the laughter and the roar of the wind.

Xia looked up and faced Jin grimly, tears shining in his eyes. "The Communist Party is good," he said.

"Yes, it's good, it's very good, but it makes mistakes," Jin insisted. "We Party members, we're only human, after all." He seized Old Xia's upper arm. "Say it, Old Xia! The Party makes mistakes!"

Tears spilled down Old Xia's cracked cheeks. He dropped his head. "I can't," he murmured.

"You can! You can!" Jin said, pulling out his handkerchief, "it's important! We have to understand the bad times to understand the good times we live in now! That's materialism! That's Marxism! You believe in Marxism, don't you?"

"Yes," Xia said, looking down at his dried, callused hands.

"So say it," Jin said softly.

Xia looked down. "The Party made some mistakes," he muttered. Jin handed him the handkerchief and beckoned Young Liang to bring the camera.

"Right," Jin said. "Under the command of ultra-'Left' ideas, the Party rejected the responsibility system of President Liu Shaoqi and took sham class struggle as the key link. It superimposed productive relations on the rural sector that did not correspond with the existing productive forces — the people, the land, and the low level of agricultural mechanization. Repeat after me."

Xia did so, flatly and reluctantly, with Jin's prompting. Liang knelt in front of him aiming the lens at his face.

"Because the Party regarded the rural small-producer economy as a hotbed of capitalism," Jin continued, the camera still on Xia, "the cadres took away our pigs and chickens, and we were not allowed to grow tomatoes or cabbage for our own use. Even our nightsoil belonged to the so-called commune. Please repeat."

Xia repeated. Liang shifted his weight to his other knee.

"The cadres took all our grain," Jin said. "People died, new mothers could give no milk. We lived on bark and herbs we gathered in the mountains. Until the Army brought us grain. But still we lived like slaves and not like masters of New China. Our land, our tools, our bodies, even our minds were instruments of production that belonged to the State. Finally the Gang of Four was smashed and the Party broke the fetters of so-called extreme 'Leftism' and

instituted agricultural reforms. Thanks to Comrade Deng Xiaoping, we were allowed to farm our own plots in our own way, to sell our produce in the city markets, and to engage in rural light industrial production. As Comrade Deng has said, 'Our future is bright.'"

The sweat poured from Old Xia's face. By the time they were finished the house was as hot as a furnace. Jin and Liang relaxed while Young Chen fooled with the microphone's black foam shield for the benefit of the neighbors at the windows. Yes, the branch could use a good clown. Chen also pelted an unidentified "Aunt" with handfuls of paper confetti he had brought along to simulate snow.

Young Shi was attempting another whisk and the girls vied to teach her the technique. Liang took up the recorder and shot close-ups of the girls' painted faces, which grew damp in the heat. Young Shi favored the moon-faced seven year-old who was repeatedly squeezed out by her elder sisters. Seeing Young Shi close her arm around the girl's tiny waist, Jin thought of Xingxing. In a few hours he would be sniffing his hair. Counting his ribs. Listening to his voice like a temple bell.

Jin turned to Old Xia, who sat immobile beside him, and asked about the unknown aunt. She was giggling and tussling with Young Chen, confetti dotting her graying hair. Xia scowled and muttered something unintelligible.

"What did you say?" Jin asked.

"Second wife!" Xia said.

Chen unplugged the floodlights. The sun had set. The wind had died in the chimney and the driver thought they could make it back to Baoding. As they rolled along the deserted highway, Young Shi spoke warmly of agricultural reform and the need to provide opportunities for rural youth. Jin was tired and hungry but was pleased with the day's work. As they unloaded the equipment back at the station, Young Shi asked if she could talk with him later in the evening. Jin's contentment vanished. Her revenge. So soon.

"You're not too tired?" Jin asked, unable to see Young Shi's face in the van's shadow. "All right, we can walk along the moat. The restaurant is too loud."

"It's too cold to talk outside. We'll meet at the restaurant. In fact I've already reserved a room. It's a pity Old Yuan is in Qinhuangdao. I'm afraid you'll find it dull."

Dull. Right. With no mad-eyed husband armed with a pistol. Jin agreed and followed Shi on her bicycle. The snow-covered streets, nearly empty, were bright pink in the sodium-vapor streetlights. The public security bureau had asked people to stay home unless they had important business. Otherwise they would have gone for a walk or a ride on the beautiful silent streets.

Baoding Restaurant was a two-storey block near the center of town on Bounteous China Boulevard. The manager knew Jin and Shi and let them up to their room on the second floor. As far as Jin could see, he and Shi were the only customers. Waiters and waitresses were chatting at the tables when they came in. The manager opened a small room and motioned Jin and Shi to take their seats at the table which already set with various appetizers. Jin noted an opera-style banner on one wall and a few framed photographs of opera singers. An electric heater glowed in the corner. The manager lit a candle in a red glass jar and switched off the fluorescent ceiling light. The room was suddenly very dark. The manager closed the door behind him.

Jin waited for his eyes to grow accustomed to the candlelight. "Very romantic," he said with a quick laugh.

"Welcome," Young Shi said. "I knew you were sorry to miss the banquet at the film factory. I thought we should celebrate today's achievements. I think we resolved the Three Contradictions: between city and country, between intellectual and manual work, between industry and agriculture. Have something to eat, OK?"

In the faint light Jin could make out small plates of malted peanuts, bamboo hearts, shredded jellyfish, haw jelly and a large plate of what smelled like Qing Family Moslem stewed chicken. There was also a plate of preserved

eggs and an open can of processed pork. A waiter entered with two thumb-sized glasses and a bottle of liquor. He filled the glasses then departed without a word. Wriggling in the draft, the candle flame dug hollows around Shi's eyes, but it gave her cheeks an almost healthy glow.

"Comrade Shi, this all looks delicious," Jin said.

"A toast," Shi said with a tight smile. "To warm relations with the toiling classes. Ganbei!" Jin took his glass and held it ceremoniously before him. "Ganbei!" he replied. The liquor burned a trail down his gullet. Young Shi took a tiny sip. As she refilled the glasses, Jin felt the alcohol rise into his brain. Like a rocket. Young Shi refilled his glass — "Ganbei!" she said again — and again he emptied it. "Now eat," she commanded, quickly serving him from each dish. Jin obeyed.

Jin glanced around the room between bites. He could not divine what his hostess had in mind. Young Shi only picked at the dishes. After a time Jin put down his chopsticks and lit a Front Gate.

"Very delicious," he said, blowing smoke at the ceiling. "You know, it's important for intellectual workers to exchange Revolutionary experiences." He held out his tiny glass for Shi to refill. As he tossed back his head, the flame dipped, and a shadow swam across her face. "'Surpass England in fifteen years!'" he said. "Remember that? A cartoon boy in a fishbowl helmet,

straddling an East Wind 1? Which we copied from the Soviets." Zhu's boyfriend would know all about it.

Young Shi did not answer. Jin helped himself to a slice of chicken chopped from the leg. The cross-section of marrow stared at him like a purple eye. "Our One-Eyed Dragon," he said, dancing it in the air for Young Shi's pleasure. She had set her chopsticks aside and was leaning back on her chair. Her quilted jacket was unbuttoned revealing a new ruffled blouse. Jin was spitting out a piece of bone when he realized that Young Shi was speaking to him.

". . . easy to confide in their deputy secretary," she said. "But I know you are not satisfied about something."

Jin stared at her face. Tiny orange flames burned in her eyes. He laid down his chopsticks.

"Comrade Shi, Young Shi," he began. "Our Great Teacher and Secretary, Comrade Sui —"

"Always the secretary! I'm telling you, Jin, you're looking for fish in a tree. But you're nervous about something. What is it?"

"I'm not nervous," Jin said with a grin. He pictured Old Yuan pressing shells into the magazine of his pistol. Four public security men in tan raincoats bursting through the door.

"Old Jin," Young Shi said, taking a seat in the chair beside him. "You know, the Party is concerned about the

welfare of each of its members. The Party is our mother and our father. Let me ask you. How is your family life?"

"It's hard to say," Jin said. "I think it's not bad. I deeply love my family. I would be very sorry if anything happened." He thought of nothing for a long moment, then looked up to see Young Shi sitting near and studying him intently. "But their understanding of current affairs — Party matters, ideological matters, station matters — is not deep." He stopped. Young Shi's eyes were shining. "A human being has many needs," he said thickly.

"I think I understand," Young Shi said warmly. "Most people are not Revolutionary idealists. My experience with Yuan is similar."

"Please tell me," Jin said.

Shi's tears ran down her cheeks. "You and I are members of the same branch, Old Jin, and we have worked together for many years. I tell you this in confidence. I suspect that Yuan has little faith in the Party."

"Party affairs are not his concern," Jin said, looking at the tray and thinking, Now he will kill me.

"Old Jin, you know what I mean. For people like you and me, the 'radiance of the great truth of Marxism' is not a hollow phrase. No, you smile, but I know it's not. But for Old Yuan any phrase is hollow if it's not about money or what money can buy."

"It's true," Jin said, blowing smoke at the ceiling. Why was she telling him this? The conversation was making him dizzy. "People distrust us," he added. "We say, 'Seek truth from facts.' But we don't do it. For various reasons."

Jin stood up and unsteadily circled the table. The heater threw an orange fan across the floor. He offered Young Shi a Front Gate — she shook her head — and lit another for himself.

"It appears there are chemicals in the skin that affect the feelings," Young Shi said, her voice faltering, her eyes downcast. "There is a chemical aspect to a successful marriage." She paused and wiped her eyes.

Jin returned to his chair and perched on the back. "I don't know anything about it," he said calmly. "I suppose the Soviet revisionists have had more time to think about these things than we have."

Young Shi stared at him from teary, red-rimmed eyes. Jin felt tears sting his own eyes and felt a tightening in his throat. It was rumored that Yuan had dealings with "road hens" at the truckers' taverns. He might have picked up Ai Si disease. And passed it on to Young Shi. Maybe that was why they had no children.

Young Shi seized his hand. She held it for a moment with trembling fingers, her tears spilling down her cheeks, then pressed it firmly to her chest. Jin's hand was

trembling too, but he could feel her brassiere and her hard breast under the heel of his palm, and through the starchy ruffle of her blouse he could feel her heart beating under his fingers. It was interesting to touch the breast of a woman other than Zhu after many years, but it was also somewhat disgusting. He thought of Old Sui and snatched back his hand as if he had been burned.

Young Shi took a handkerchief from her pocket. As she blew her nose, Jin thought he heard the thump out in the hallway. Was someone listening at the door? Big Brother is watching.

"Young Shi," Jin said quickly, "I'm sorry, but I should go. It's very late. Young Zhu will worry I was stopped by public security." Young Shi wiped her eyes and looked around the room.

"I understand, Old Jin," she said without looking up. "You're right, you should go. Those students of yours are stirring up trouble again. Now we can worry all the time, just like back in the days of the Gang of Four." She wiped her eyes again and blew her nose, then picked up the tray. "Thank you for taking part in this discussion. I hope we will again sit down to exchange Revolutionary experiences. But you should go. We don't want to be objects of gossip. What I've already heard is bad enough."

Jin dropped his cigarette and crushed it with his toe.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Whatever it is, it's not true. I've done nothing."

"What about meeting Young Tun at the station in the early mornings?" Young Shi said. Jin hastily lit another cigarette. "She keeps a diary, you know. Obviously, you never buried your own child."

"Young Tun said that?"

"Or deserted your wife."

"Who, Young Zhu?"

"Before Young Zhu." Young Shi fixed him with her protruding, glassy eyes and rigid smile. "I'm sure you never gave her Ai Si disease, either. It's all only idle chatter, of course. Who knows what people say about me and Old Sui?"

"Don't listen to them," Jin said with a forced grin. "Thank you for taking part in the shoot. I wish you great success." He buttoned his coat and hurried downstairs. The Gang of Four. And a mad Jiang Qing in the making. "Jiang Qing is rotten through and through." He pedaled home swiftly, the clatter of his bicycle muffled by the carpet of snow.