

Pay Attention To Economic Work [Chp. 5]

Jin was leaning against the tea-table when Young Shi approached. His head felt like a barrel of nightsoil. Unable to meet her eye after their informal discussion of the night before, he stared at the wisps of steam that rose like snake ghosts from the mirrored lips of a thermos bottle.

"China has made great progress in raising its economic level since Comrade Deng was entrusted with the leadership," Young Shi declared at his elbow.

Jin did not disagree. He carefully replaced the stopper in the mouth of the bottle. Peering into his cup, he told Young Shi that he thanked the Party in his heart for abandoning extreme "Left" policies whenever he walked through a market where peasants were selling their produce and traders were vending light industrial goods from every region within the four seas.

"The boundless enthusiasm of the masses has been brought into play," he concluded, looking up with a strained grin.

Young Shi's Zhongshan jacket was buttoned to the chin. Her muddy, pocked cheeks and graying hair looked no worse than usual, but her eyes probed his face like a doctor feeling for a broken bone.

"Good," she said at last, "I can see we're of one mind. Now, listen," lowering her voice. "Comrade Sui fears that the present turmoil will distract the masses from the Party's great successes and interfere with the tasks of modernization. We thought you could shoot a report on the pork factory in Gold Village as an example of China's prosperity under current policies. Do you agree? I've already called the team leader."

"I know Chief Zhou," Jin said, his grin spreading. "The Gold Village pork factory is one of Baoding's thriving small- to medium-sized enterprises."

"All right, I can see you're pleased with this assignment. I'd like you to shoot today and have the piece ready by the end of the week." Jin nodded and sipped attentively at the mineral nothingness of the tea-water. "What are you doing?" Young Shi cried. "Your crew is waiting!"

Jin followed her to the vestibule and stepped outside, where the sunlight reflecting from the melting snow burst in his face like a grenade. When the red clouds parted on his retina, he saw that Young Liang, Young Chen, and Han Lixin were sitting in a white Nissan van. The sky overhead was deepest blue. Young Liang, sitting in front with the driver, seemed to be thinking about the shoot, but Chen and Han grinned beneath scant mustaches as Jin clambered in, amused at his wincing grimace and at their own lack of preparation for the project.

As the van rolled quietly across the snow that carpeted the courtyard, Young Liang aimed his Sony through the windshield. A few minutes later they were hissing along Bounteous China past the crowded shops and offices of downtown Baoding. Jin took Young Chen's microphone and began improvising a voice-over.

"Baoding TV has often broadcast stories about the city's peasant neighbors," he said with tender fervor. "Their heroic struggles with hail, flood, and drought have long been an inspiration to urban workers."

He switched off the microphone. The peasants. Always in the vanguard of the long march to Communism. Forming the peasant associations. Fighting the dwarf pirates. Smashing the Nationalists. Overthrowing the landlords and rich peasants and redistributing their land, grain, pigs,

silver dollars, beds, fur coats. Spontaneously forming the people's communes. Not to mention voluntary labor. Grain taxes. Collectivization of the means of consumption. Things we didn't see in the cities. And now taking the lead in quadrupling the nation's output by the end of the century. Bounteous China Boulevard.

Jin remembered the peasant neighbors at the Army farm. Sad, shrewd men. Delivering a loyalty pig on a winter's day. The leaders invested almost nothing in agriculture. Big Brother's theory. Maximum extraction from the rural sector. Adding mud to mud. The world is two mud bodhisattvas. The Chairman says.

Jin shook his head, wincing as viscous liquid sloshed in his skull, and switched on the microphone with his thumb.

"We're driving east along Bounteous China Boulevard on the way to Gold Village in the southeastern suburbs. Gold Village is the home of the Red Sow Production Team. For decades, this collection of families scratched out a meager living supplying feed corn to the state at fixed prices. Now they've converted the farm into a pork factory."

The van stopped at an intersection. Young Liang zoomed in on an old woman hobbling along with a stick. Her face was a wooden mask, her bent-over shape was wrapped in black, but the white soles of her shoes shone like the

clogs of an opera hero. When the light changed they swung right on Support Agriculture Road.

"Under Comrade Zhao Ziyang's second agricultural reform," Jin continued, his voice quickening at the prospect of the Party's recent glories, "the people's communes have withered away. Most rural families now contract directly with the state for use of their land. Red Sow Production Team is typical. Rather than march in lock-step through the alternating drudgery and idleness of raising corn, team members now divide their efforts between corn, pigs—and pork. Some families plow the fields, plant the seed, and pluck the yellow ears in the baking glare of the late summer sun. They also grow tomatoes and cabbage. Other families feed and breed the pigs. Another family butchers them, packs the pork, and ships it to production units throughout Hebei. Pork in all its forms, from fresh-cut chops in the open markets to long-lasting cans in the small shops."

The team had divided into three separate accounting units. The pork operation had been capitalized with an interest-free loan from the city government. It paid no taxes. The families that grew corn paid the greater part of the land contract.

"The families growing corn have followed Comrade Deng's wise instruction, 'The whole nation should attend to

feed production.' The families raising pigs have heeded his brilliant saying, 'Soldiers skilled in raising pigs can readily find jobs.' The family packing pork has taken to heart his profound policy of 'strengthening small- and medium-sized enterprises.' As a result, the entire team has forever left behind what Ma-Ke-Si condemned as 'the idiocy of rural life.'"

Jin flicked off the microphone. "Old Whiskers," he said with a wink to Young Chen.

"Our Jewish friend," Young Chen grinned.

The van left the city and sped through the suburbs, where fields still blanketed in snow flashed between crumbling brick houses. They turned left off Worker-Peasant Road and proceeded slowly down the rutted, slushy track that led to Gold Village.

"Gold Village is mainly a cluster of mud compounds," Jin continued. "A handful of brick dwellings testify to periodic bursts of prosperity, but in time the bricks have faded, their red color draining away in the dry winter air until the bricks have come to resemble the mud from which they were originally formed, like a wife who grows more like her mother every year."

"Eiyo!" Old Han laughed. The driver chuckled, but Young Liang said nothing.

"Eiyo!" Young Chen cried with a sudden grimace, "we're there!" The odor of pig dung surrounded the village like an invisible stockade. The van slowed, crawling tank-like over the humps and troughs of the path. When they entered the village, Young Liang rolled down his window and aimed the videocamera into the little compounds where laundered clothes hung in the sunlight and black, short-legged pigs nuzzled their dung. The cold, pungent stench filled the van. The van drew the attention of the inhabitants, who gathered in doorways and windows and behind low walls. A small dog, its tail curled on its rump, trotted out on springy legs to bark a warning. Jin held the microphone cover to his nose.

"In winter, the ground and the walls are the pale tan of baked earth. In summer, they turn the color of earth drenched with rain." In fact the walls were now streaked with wet as snow-melt ran off the roofs.

Young Chen grunted. "Baked dung," he added, "and earth drenched with urine."

Young Liang rolled up his window. Slowing to the pace of the donkey cart that blocked their way, they inched toward the far end of the village, the driver uselessly tooting his horn. Old Han lit a cigarette for himself and passed one to the driver. Jin inhaled the fragrant blue smoke.

"In the midst of this monochrome of mud," he went on, "stand some new high-walled houses. Built of splendid steel-gray bricks set on rock-solid concrete foundations." The van came to a halt. "Dive in, comrades," Jin said, sliding open the door. "China's countryside, a vast cesspool for her youth."

Jin took his place at the gate of the factory compound. In his unbuttoned charcoal overcoat, his open-collared Western-style shirt, and his goldenrod hopsack bell-bottoms, Jin felt he cut the perfect figure of the New Democratic journalist, and he spoke into the microphone with verve and good cheer despite the glare, the stench, the chill, and the sloshing in his skull.

"The visitor may view these impressive new houses through the false-marble facing of a circular doorway: iron proof that the rural suburbs are thriving under current economic policies. The central government has announced that over the period of the Sixth Five-Year Plan the rural standard of living rose eighty percent, and that some families have multiplied their earnings many times over. Gold Village typifies this Revolution in rural life. Though small, it is not without its ten-thousand yuan households, which the planners have charged with leading the way in socialist modernization. As Comrade Deng has said, 'Socialism must be built on material prosperity and

expansion of the productive forces, not on sham class struggle, universal poverty, and eating from one big pot.'"

Young Chen was breathing through his handkerchief, his eyes red and wet, as they marched through the gate. Jin had lived near swine at the Army farm and knew that unconditional surrender was the only way reasonable response. The odor here was not so bad, diluted by the sweetness of burning coal. Young Liang trained his camera on Chief Zhou and his son who were approaching from a low brick building. Jin shook hands with Zhou and apologized for the lack of notice. A small, careful man in his fifties, Zhou wore a new Zhongshan jacket and black-framed glasses, and his thinning hair was combed straight back. He had served as team leader through many difficult years and the team members loved him dearly.

"It doesn't matter," Zhou said, smiling into the camera as he gripped Jin's hand and forearm. "It's free advertising for our Wolf's Tooth brand of canned pork." Zhou led him by the hand to his office, where Young Liang shot Jin and the two team leaders drinking tea-water. The factory, they said, was now operating year round and was buying pigs from peasants outside the original production team. After an informal discussion, the crew followed Zhou's son (a veteran recently graduated from the agricultural university) into the one-room library, where

he talked about an article on shrinkage. A large, misshapen shadow lurked behind him, but Liang refused to let Young Chen set up a second floodlight.

When the crew reassembled outside, the leaders took them to inspect the farrowing pens. The pens were vacant at this time of year, but a musty scent lingered in the walls. Chief Zhou then led them to the feeding pens, a row of brick stalls partly covered by sloping iron roofs. Black, short-legged pigs with lop ears and bat-like faces were milling around in the sunlight. They seemed dull and dumb, not even grunting. Jin leaned over the wall to pat a black back. He could see the grains of dust among the bristles. Young Zhou who was standing beside him slapped the pig's rump, sending him trotting stiffly into the crowd. "If the fat's not hard," he laughed, "the meat won't keep its shape."

The delegation approached the last pen. Here the pigs were fewer, but more alert. They sniffed the air with mashed snouts and backed away from the muzzle of Liang's camera. Chief Zhou explained that the pork tasted purer if the pigs were given nothing but water during their last twenty-four hours. And why waste food, he asked. When a worker wearing a white cotton mask arrived with a wooden dolly, Zhou asked Jin to pick a pig, which he did. The worker and Zhou's son leaped into the pen, and detaching

the pig from his comrades, within moments had cornered him, flipped him to his side, and lashed his trotters with a thong. As the pig squealed, Young Liang zoomed in for a close-up. Jin glimpsed the white of a rolling eye. Chief Zhou beckoned to the crew and started across an expanse of wet snow.

Jin fell in beside him. With the screaming animal behind them, he felt as though he were taking part in a traditional procession, like a punitive expedition in Yin times, or an execution, or a wedding. The shrill outcry was as deafening as traditional pipes and gongs and clarinets. Chief Zhou pointed to the boar pen at the edge of the empty fields. "The boar is half the herd," Zhou shouted over the din. Jin nodded and cried back, "But the sow holds up half the sky." He saw that Han Lixin had moved out on their flank and was rapidly snapping still photos.

They paused on the threshold of the butchery. A fulsome reek enveloped Jin's senses, as pungent as the smell of dung. Chief Zhou said something that was lost in the animal's raucous cries. At the far end of the room a row of carcasses hung from the ceiling. They gleamed darkly, scraped of their hair, like naked prisoners crowded into a shed, Tibetans, maybe, or Vietnamese. In ancient times, God Himself had commanded the Han people to

eradicate the Three Miao, the Nine Li, and Zhe You's twenty-four brothers with animal bodies and copper heads.

The worker dumped the beast on a concrete pad, where a steaming pool of dark blood was freezing at its edges to brick red. He took a long knife from the counter and stepped astride the gasping animal. Young Liang was moving in with his Sony, its record light aglow, when Jin called out, "Young Liang, enough!" He asked Chief Zhou to describe the preparation of the carcasses. A white-masked worker was washing a carcass when they approached. Young Liang taped the operation as high shadows conspired on the walls beyond the reach of Young Chen's floodlights. A plastic tub of entrails sat on the floor by the doorway, bound for the big pharmaceutical plant in Shijiazhuang.

They entered the next room, where heads were removed and carcasses cut up. Jin counted seven workers at these tasks, armed with long knives and handsaws, but averted his eyes and by-passed the dressing of the heads, despite Young Liang's protest that the meat would end up in cans. Following in the wake of a dolly heaped with fresh pork ("There goes lunch," Zhou said), they stepped into the chilly brightness, assailed anew by the stench of dung. Next came the cannery, a brick building with a boiler room attached, over which a chimney towered like a monument. A

plume of smoke floated from its crown. Han snapped a picture.

Chief Zhou asked if they would like to rest, but Jin said he wanted to finish by noon. When they entered the canning room, where at least a dozen workers toiled in close quarters, his glasses steamed over and he felt as though he were drowning in pork broth. The sound of cleavers chopping and choppers buzzing was irritating, but Jin felt a sense of relief when the door closing behind Young Chen shut out the screaming from the yard. After all, the cannery was only a big kitchen and the suffocating vapor was coal smoke blended with essence of pork.

Chief Zhou exhibited the various work-stations. When they came to the steam oven, which radiated a wall of heat, he tapped the pressure gauge to unstick the needle. Jin guessed that the cylindrical oven, of cast-iron recently painted black, was close to thirty years old.

"It's not new," Zhou bellowed over the oppressive racket, Young Chen's black foam-rubber sword at his chin, "but it has enabled to more than double last year's output of pork!" For half a minute Young Liang taped a woman gluing Wolf's Tooth labels on the cans, then Zhou led the crew to his house, where his wife had prepared a small banquet.

When Jin stepped outside after the banquet, the sun had sunk behind a strip of gold-rimmed clouds on the western horizon. Digging a shred of pork from between his teeth, he noticed Young Liang about two hundred meters away standing in the middle of a snowy field. Jin began plodding towards him on legs weighed down by many toasts. Soon he made out the Sony on the wooden tripod. Young Liang was shooting a panorama of the twilight North China Plain, striated black and blue under the darkening blue dome. The field seemed to surround him with the emptiness of the Taklamakan desert. Jin halted, swaying on his feet. Young Liang had trained the camera on a flock of crows. The crows bobbed up and down the furrows like a gang of ants crawling on a bone.

Jin heard a soft rattling behind him. A figure was approaching on the foot track between two fields. Young Liang rotated the camera and watched the figure through the monitor. As it drew nearer, Jin saw that its face, hidden by a helmet of matted hair, was black with grime, and that its clothing, a collection of blackened rags, was covered with small and large badges in overlapping rows, like fish scales or a pangolin's armor. Revolutionary badges, no doubt, depicting such events as the Eight-Eight Sixteen Point Decision, the Five-Seven Directive, and the One-One Revolution in Shanghai; places such as Jinggang Mountain,

Zunyi, the rostrum at Tian'anmen, and the Chairman's birthplace in Shaoshan; and such images as the familiar, far from porcine "Left" profile.

"Chairman Su!" the figure cried in the reedy, trailing voice of a street vendor, "Chairman Su!" With its black skin and clothing, the figure looked as though it had been burned, rather than tempered, in the roaring furnace of Revolution. "Chairman Su!" the figure cried again.

"Who?" Young Liang called from behind his monitor. The figure did not respond, but began slashing the air with an invisible stick. "Beat down the bourgeois empiricist Li Xiushen!" striking with short, awkward strokes, "smash the Nine Black Classes! Beat down stinking Old Nine Li!"

"Comrade Li!" Young Liang called as the figure passed about ten meters away, "Comrade Li, have you eaten yet?" While they waited for an answer, the sun sank beneath the band of clouds on the horizon, pouring its light on the stripes of snow so that the landscape blazed with red-gold streaks. Jin shivered. Young Liang repeated his question, but the charred revolutionary walked on, oblivious to the flaming sun, to Young Liang and his tripod, and to the hovering odor of dung. Young Liang cried after him, "Old Nine, don't go! We can't do without Old Nine!"

Jin stood at Young Liang's side. "You know him?" he asked. Young Liang shook his head. "Maybe an old

Rightist," Jin said with a grin, "atoning for his anti-socialist crimes. Old Nine!" he cried, "give us back our airplanes!"

"He's a living thing," Young Liang said.

"Are you a Buddhist?" Jin asked.

Young Liang bent to follow the retreating figure through the monitor, the record light glowing in the dusk. "Not yet," he said. They watched the figure fade into the fields.

The political study meeting had already begun when Jin and his crew entered the classroom hugging armloads of cans and paper parcels of fresh pork. Secretary Sui was reading a document and did not raise his head when they entered the room. Jin gathered that the document had been issued by the ministry with the aim of quashing sympathy for the demonstrations, now rumored to have spread to nine cities. Old Sui paused when the door slammed behind Young Chen, who prolonged the interruption by fumbling his cans to the floor, then crawling among the wooden chairs to retrieve them. Heavy-headed and pensive, a toothpick between his lips, Jin flashed Churchill's famous V-sign to Comrade Shi and found an empty desk among the reporters. Han Lixin sat beside him.

The workers, Young Tun among them, sat tightly packed and attentive in the forward rows with Old Jia watching over them. Some of the culture people sat in a group to one side, but Old Wu and Young Song were missing. When Jin and the others had settled into their chairs, Old Sui filled the room with his monotonous voice, which the comrades had resigned themselves to hearing for two hours a week until the Party withered away. He wore his usual black Zhongshan jacket with his matching visored cap pushed back on his forehead. Unwilling to disfigure his face with eyeglasses, he squinted at the pages he held to his chin. Jin rolled the toothpick across his tongue.

The document ended by urging information workers not to follow the path of a handful of ill-informed youth, deceived by the foreign press and the enemies of socialism, but to resist spiritual corrosion by decadent foreign ideas and to oppose the spread of the bourgeois way of life in China. Old Sui put the document aside and glared like Jin Gang.

"Comrades!" he cried. "Under Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, China drifted like an empty boat, lost between heaven and earth. Adopting extreme 'Left' policies and abandoning democratic centralism, Lin Biao and the Gang of Four promoted factional fighting and sectarianism and dragged the masses into all-out civil war. They halted socialist

construction, crippled the Liberation Army, and nearly destroyed the Party. Finally the Party spit them out. Ten years later, our socialist fatherland is following the path our beloved Premier Zhou laid down for us with his dying breath. 'Comrades!' he gasped, 'achieve the Four Modernizations!' So the Party established unity and stability, upholding the Four Cardinal Principles and taking socialist modernization as the key link. We opposed factionalism and sectarianism. We severely punished anti-socialist acts. We supported popular arts and sports. We reformed the rural sector and unleashed the enthusiasm of the masses. We opened China to the outside world, cracked down on criminal offenders, and resolutely opposed spiritual pollution. Indeed, we have been very busy." He smirked at Young Shi.

Jin glanced at Han Lixin beside him. His eyes had glazed over and his hands were splayed like frozen leaves on his thighs. Jin then noted Young Tun's Western-style sweater, white with purple dots and a sky-blue yoke. She too sat immobile. From a theoretical perspective, political study meetings were works of art, reflecting productive relations in their typical, ideal form. But the people endured. Maybe they recognized that the Party, unlike the feudal and imperial governments, and unlike the reactionary Nationalists, at least sought to justify its

policies. It treated them like people, not like straw dogs.

"After the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, the Party followed the great, glorious, and correct Marxist line of uniting the eternal truth of Marxism with China's material conditions. In terms of dialectical materialism, the Party applied the vigor and idealism of theoretical work to the materialism of the productive forces. How can we understand this? Theory applied to earth creates grain. Theory applied to grain creates industry. Theory applied to industry creates finance. In the primary stage of socialism, China's state-owned enterprises as well as small and medium enterprises have absorbed the idealism of state finance, invigorating the commodity economy and increasing the material welfare of all the sons and daughters of the Yellow Emperor!"

The secretary looked around with a crooked smile, as if waiting for a round of applause. If he were Chairman, Jin said to himself, we would have to read his poems. Like the Qian Long emperor. Or the Taiping Heavenly King. One thing you could say for Comrade Deng. He did not publish his poetry.

During a cigarette break, Young Zhou had turned to Jin with a mischievous smile. "Did you know that under certain conditions, a sow will eat her own young?" He apparently

took Jin for a tender-hearted city intellectual.

"Fortunately," he continued, crushing out his Marlboro, "it's not a serious problem." Nor was disease a problem. Diseased pigs could be cooked and fed to their comrades. Unless they had cholera. "Maybe you intellectuals don't grasp the challenge of raising pigs. They start producing sex hormones when they're only twenty-six days old."

Jin looked down at his goldenrod trousers. His parcel of pork had dripped blood on his thigh, and the red stain had spread to the size of a dumpling. He set the parcel on the floor.

"In conclusion," Sui intoned, "our problem is to chart the correct ideological course when enemies of the state are speaking out on every side. What is it, Young Chen?"

Young Chen sat with his head to one side, a can of pork pressed to his ear.

"Sorry, Comrade Secretary. I was listening for the squeal. The team leader said this pork was so fresh you could hear the squeal."

When the scattered laughter died away, Jin heard himself speak before he knew what he was saying. Young Shi watched him from beside Old Sui.

"Comrade Secretary," Jin observed, "why do we not regard the masses' demonstrations as a proper expression of democratic centralism? Can't the masses' theoretical work

contribute to the expansion of productive forces? I worry that some leaders have succumbed to 'Left' thinking about the relationship between the Party and the masses and have wrapped themselves in the red flag to protect their privileges. 'A Sea Voyage Depends On The Helmsman.'"

Secretary Sui glanced down at Shi and smiled grandly.

"Comrade Jin raises an important theoretical question touching on the nature of intra-Party debate and Party discipline. Since this is not a branch meeting, I will not address it. However, some thoughts come to mind. First, as the Chairman once said, 'The big fish eats the small. That's dialectics.' The twenty million members of our Party make up a more numerous, more comprehensive, more ruthless, more united ruling group than any other ruling group in history. By comparison with our Party, the bourgeoisie of the capitalist countries is a pile of loose sand. The top leaders are a group within a group, crystallizing many decades of theoretical and practical Revolutionary experience. It is not mere 'Left' dogmatism to attribute superior understanding to them. Second, history shows that important political questions can only be addressed by exhaustive analysis and persuasion, not by stirring up mass movements and promoting all-out civil war. Comrade Jin should know this as well as anyone. Finally, perhaps Comrade Jin should hesitate before he raises the

question of misusing privileges, especially at a general session."

"I don't understand your meaning, Comrade Secretary," Jin said, his eyes avoiding Young Shi, "unless you mean that having direct experience of such misuse, I should bypass the branch and go directly to the city committee's discipline commission."

Sui maintained his indulgent smile. "You're drunk," he chided, wagging a brown finger to the tittering amusement of the workers. "It seems the Red Sow Production Team has warmly welcomed Baoding TV. Comrade Jin, as you know, the Party supports and welcomes the masses' activism. It simply wants to guide their activism in the proper channels to create a stable, united, and prosperous New China. You seem to have become quite active yourself, 'Beloved Wuming.'"

A volley of laughter burst from around the classroom. Old Sui, sternly compressing his bony brow, squinted for a long moment at Young Tun. The audience laughed mechanically, as if they had just watched Jin fall off his bicycle. Jin said nothing. His cheeks, eyes and neck were hot with blood. He did not know how much Sui really knew, but he gathered that Shi had told him about Tun's diary. Or maybe Jia had told him about Xiang's letter. His eyes dropped to the spreading stain on his trousers.

"Meeting adjourned!" Sui cried, holding his clasped hands before him. The audience stood to leave. Young Chen made his way to the front and offered cans of pork to Sui and Jia. Jin stared from his seat, his head on fire. Did he dare accuse Old Sui here and now? Comrades, wait. Let's just ask Young Liang about the misuse of privilege at our station. Or Comrade Shi. Old Back Door. But it would be useless. Sui's humorous hints at rumored misdeeds were more than a warning. In the eyes of everyone but his friends, Jin was now an unreliable element. He could have embezzled ten thousand yuan, sold a young worker into slavery, or plotted to split the Party and assume supreme power in the state. He could have fallen into any of the Twenty-Four Isms. The particulars counted for nothing. Even if no one believed the charges, Old Sui's tobacco-stained finger had branded an indelible question mark on his forehead.

Jin reached home fatigued and chilled. Young Zhu, Old Ba, and Xingxing were watching a basketball game on television. Jin thought of asking Xingxing to kick the ball with him, but it was already dark outside and the courtyard was slick with mud. As Jin unbuttoned his coat, Young Zhu got up to re-light the stove. Jin drew the damp parcel and four cans of pork from his pockets. Zhu bent towards him to sniff his coat.

"We shot a report at a pig farm," Jin explained.

"Good. What happened to your pants?"

"The pork dripped on me at political study. Here, take these cans. The pig was butchered today, it's so fresh you can still hear the squeal." Young Zhu smiled.

"Maybe your boyfriend would like some," Jin added.

"You—you thing!" she cried, swinging at him with a pair of chopsticks. She turned to stir the sizzling cabbage. She was wearing the snug maroon sweater that showed the lines of her figure, now beginning to thicken in the hips and waist. Comrade Shi was an ugly hag by comparison. Young Tun, though slender and fresh, was an idiotic adventuress.

After Xingxing had unfolded his cot and Old Ba had spread her quilt on the sofa, Jin spoke to Young Zhu in bed. The room was dark except for a line of light along the windowshade.

"I mentioned that we had political study today," Jin said in a low murmur. "I don't know why, but Old Sui was quite harsh with me."

"With you alone?" Zhu asked.

Jin's chest tightened as if he were back in the classroom at the station. He lay on his back and looked at the ceiling.

"It was absurd," he said. "Accusing me of abusing privilege. If anyone does that, it's our secretary. As when he hired Young Liang." He pictured Sui abusing privilege with Shi. The Two Yellow Skeletons. Clever hare digs three burrows.

"You can't blame him for helping Young Liang," Zhu said. "Why did you provoke him? He seems to give you enough work."

"Now he says I'm too busy. He cut me out of reporting on the demonstrations, even though I'm a senior reporter with plenty of experience of mass movements."

"You have your own specialty," Zhu pursued. "Do you think he'll suppress the report on the pig farm?"

"No, there's no 'useless preoccupation with past mistakes' in this one," Jin said. He thought of Old Zhou tapping the pressure gauge. So many cans per hour, per day, per year. The perspiring, white-coated girls. He felt a sudden excitement. "Young Zhu," he said softly, "I think I know why Sui shelved my piece on the cannery." He told her his idea. Zhu said nothing. "I wonder what they paid him," Jin said.

"If they did or didn't, it's the same," Young Zhu said, looking up at the ceiling. He felt her roll on her side and face him without touching him. "Excuse me, Old Jin, but I think you like to stir up trouble. Do you hate

me and Xingxing so much? I know we are only the toiling masses. But we need you to help us, not make trouble. I thought you were struggling to keep your post, not throw it away."

"No, how can you say that?" Jin said, his heart shrinking in his chest. "I won't investigate this. It won't go into the report. But I have to warn Chief Zhou. He should at least repair the gauge on the steam oven."

Young Zhu gripped his arm. Jin lay still. Without a doubt, Old Sui was corrupt. He had suppressed the cannery story as a favor. To whoever had sold the oven to Red Sow. Probably no cash changed hands. The free market in favors flourished without currency or ledgers. One country, two systems. He lay still, then felt a jolt like an electric shock. Plus and minus. Had he been asleep? "Without contradiction there would be no world." The Chairman says. Old Beloved.