

We Do Not Engage In Petty Games [Chp. 8]

It was the time of Small Chill. The secretary had still not made his move. Young Zhu seemed ominously quiet, even brooding. Two weeks had passed since Jin had taken his troubles to his father, but he had still not heard a word from Jia or Li. And somehow he had lost his Army-issue watch, which had been his father's.

Students in large numbers were arrested in Shanghai and Beijing. The Central Television Network, condemning the repeated disruptions of public order, declared it was time for the students to return to their books. The station comrades debated how to convey the Party's message without driving Baoding's students into the streets. Into Journalism Street, for example.

On the economic side, rumors of shortages and New Year's price increases caused a run on shops in Shanghai. It fell to Jin to fashion a warning against hoarding without lending credence to the rumors. He spent a morning

discussing the matter with Yin and an afternoon shooting crates of noodles and toilet paper in city storerooms.

Returning home that night, Jin felt more at ease than he had in weeks. He was building socialism. It was already too dark to kick the ball with Xingxing, but maybe they could work on his stamp collection. Xingxing had seemed nervous and furtive lately, possibly influenced by Young Zhu. The clatter of cookware fell on Jin's ear as he crossed the courtyard and the scent of coal smoke stung his nostrils. He entered the vestibule. Two boys tumbled noisily past him and out the door. When they were gone a low voice addressed him from under the stairs.

"Comrade Jin." It was a woman's voice, slightly hoarse. His mother. He was petrified. He stood immobile, his outstretched hand on the concrete stair post.

"Comrade Jin," the voice said again. Jin shuddered. No, it was Young Xiang, his ruined love. The madwoman at the market. Returning like a vengeful ghost after twenty years on the commune. She emerged from behind the breastwork of coal briquets that guarded the porter's apartment and stood in the light of the naked thirty-watt bulb.

"Young Xiang?" Jin realized with surprise that the shape in the weak light was Young Tun. He caught a whiff of Spring Thunder perfume mixed with the sulfurous odor of a fresh permanent. Of course. His mother would never call

him "comrade." His blood was pounding in his head. He looked around. For the moment the vestibule was deserted.

"Have you eaten yet?" he asked quietly. "What are you doing here?"

"I must talk with you."

Jin stepped down and pushed Tun back behind the wall of coal. The porter's door was closed. "OK, out with it," he said, his voice quivering. Young Tun's eyes were wide and bright. Her white face, red lips and penetrating scent struck him with strange force amidst the coal and dried mud.

"Wuming, I'm sorry, but Old Jia made me tell her about our meeting. The one at the market. There was no way out. But I still want to help you. I don't like the way Old Sui has treated you."

"Hush." Jin pushed her under the stairs and against the wall. A frigid draft from the doorway lapped at his neck. Someone had entered the building. He heard women's voices pass overhead up the stairs and thought he heard his name. He feared the women would halt to sniff out the odor. When their steps faded, he disentangled himself from Tun.

"Sorry," he said, "I understand. Just don't agree to anything that's not true. Thank you for your help. You should go now." He retreated to the foot of the stairs.

"Comrade Jin, I didn't tell them anything important. What you said about Sui."

Jin halted, his hand on the concrete railing. Tun stood two meters away at the wall of coal. She still looked alarmed, though perhaps that was the way she had painted her eyes.

"Look, Young Tun, we can't talk here," Jin said. Glancing past her he saw a crack in the porter's door. "I'll see you tomorrow. At Baoding TV. Where you work."

"No, Wuming," Tun said, coming to the railing and stopping under his chin. Her rising perfume stung his eyes. The porter's door opened and the porter's daughter, a gray-faced woman in her thirties, came out and began to berate Young Tun.

"Sorry, Young Wen," Jin said when she stopped for breath. "This is Baoding Television business. We're almost finished."

"Good, OK." Her face flushed, her chest heaving, the porter's daughter held her ground behind the wall of briquets. Jin decided to walk Young Tun to the street.

"OK, we're going," he said. "We'll talk more tomorrow at the station," he repeated. As they reached the doorway, Old Shen entered carrying a shopping bag and a Baoding Daily.

"Have you eaten?" Jin asked.

Old Shen squinted at him. "Young Jin? No, not yet. Have you?"

"Not yet."

Shen squinted at Young Tun. "Is this your friend?"

"No. Yes. She works at Baoding TV. We're discussing station business."

"Good, good," Shen nodded.

Jin gripped Tun's elbow and with a last glance over his shoulder at the porter's daughter, led her into the yard. The sharp chill seized his hands and cheeks and he dug his fingers into Tun's arm. The pink streetlight overhead lit up the powder on her face and shone on the cushion of glossy ringlets that rode on her head like a bear-skin turban.

"Don't come here again, not ever," Jin said, still pinching her arm, "but I thank you again for your help."

"You're not coming with me?" she asked. "Secretary Sui is meeting tonight with some big potatoes from other units. At the Ancient City Guest House. Old Jia made the appointment. Something about an investigation. I thought you might be interested."

Jin felt fatigue fall on him like the beams of a collapsing building.

"So you want me to go to the hotel? With you? Why, so Old Sui can see us there together?"

Young Tun flushed at her hairline and yanked free her arm.

"No, Mr. Jin, but I have a friend who works there. She can put us in a room next to the meeting. You can listen in."

"Interesting," Jin said, shivering. "But I think it's too dangerous." The main danger, of course, being Young Tun's stupidity. Old Jia was convinced they were having an affair. She had set Young Tun to trap him for Sui. It was possible that Tun really wanted to help to make up for the harm she had already done. Poor thing. She did not understand the risks of factional fighting. She needed him to protect her. On the other hand, he could not sit on his hands while the secretary plotted his demise.

"Maybe this will work," he said. "Just introduce me to your friend. Then go home. I'll keep an eye on Old Sui."

"OK, good, but we should go. I think the meeting started at five-thirty." Jin checked his bare wrist. "It's already 6:15," Tun said.

Jin ran upstairs and told Zhu not to hold up supper for him. He and Tun rode their bicycles downtown, then dismounted and approached the Ancient City Guest House on foot. It was a squat black block cut out of the sky, with nothing ancient about it, but viewed from a cold alley even a few scattered, yellow-lighted windows looked inviting.

They entered the dim lobby, where Young Tun asked for her friend. Jin himself knew most of the staff, including the branch secretary and the manager, but hoped to accomplish his errand without being seen. He and Tun sat smoking. The minutes passed. Two men in Western-style jackets, one youngish the other not, sat scanning the columns of the Beijing Daily. They glanced contemptuously over their papers at Jin and Young Tun and continued reading.

Tun's friend, a mousy young woman, glared at Jin with undisguised suspicion. Without a word she led them down a corridor where the cocoa-colored carpet, crushed to the thickness of felt and stained with food, had probably not been changed since the early sixties. They turned and mounted a stairway, then proceeded down another corridor. Jin smelled burnt oil and heard a low rattle of crockery from an open door. He slowed his step. He thought he heard Old Sui. The girl was leading them past the open door. She kept walking, then stopped and turned, Young Tun at her side.

"What is it?" she called. Jin frantically waved at Tun and stabbed at the air. "Come on, no problem," the girl said. Young Tun shrugged. They passed the doorway, which was covered by a thin blue curtain. Someone else was talking, not Sui, but the voice seemed familiar.

Tun's friend opened the door to the next room. The fluorescent tube on the ceiling blinked and buzzed. The

whitewashed room was mostly filled by a plastic-topped table surrounded by folding metal chairs. A brown sofa ran along the left side of the room and a saucer-colored curtain covered the far wall. Jin crossed and shoved the curtain aside. In the dim light he looked down on a brick wall topped with broken glass. He let the curtain fall and felt the radiator, which was cold. He looked around at the framed color prints of famous places that hung on the walls: the White Pagoda on Qionghua Island; the Eastern Chamber, from which the Empress Dowager ruled the dissolving empire; the Seven Stones that supposedly fell from Heaven.

"Well, good," Jin said, rubbing his hands as he turned to Tun's friend. "Could we have some tea-water?" The girl looked at Tun and scowled. "Sorry," Jin grinned, "let's have a bottle of white liquor." He pulled out his change purse and offered the girl two ten-yuan bills.

"No foreign exchange?"

Jin shook his head. "Sorry, it's people's money."

She snatched the bills with a look of disgust and hurried out of the room.

Jin knelt on the sofa and pressed his ear to the wall. He watched Young Tun who stood beside the table, gently tugging at her gloves. They were Tibetan blue and looked like real leather. It was useless. Although they had boldly concealed themselves only a few meters from the

secretary, Jin could hear only a faint drone. He would have to post himself at the open door.

He rose from the sofa and faced Young Tun. She gazed at him solemnly as she unbuttoned her long coat and let it fall to the chair behind her. Anxious as he was not to be caught, Jin could see that she had dressed for the occasion. A spray of lace from the Baoding Ornamental Cloth Factory played at her open collar and lace cuffs ringed her small slender hands. Her short jacket, fitting closely at the waist and generously padded at the shoulders, was of a heavy polyknit synthetic in a large-patterned maroon and silver herringbone, a product of the Baoding Chemical Fiber Factory. Her tight black jeans, which were not a product of Baoding, accentuated her boyish hips and thighs, while her low plastic boots, though scuffed and losing their shape, spoke of the growing prosperity of their southern homeland. Her powder surrounded the scarlet peony of her lips like a dusting of late snow and gave her face the simplicity of a mask. She reminded Jin of a certain Taiwanese singer. And of Vice-Premier Tian's call to Party leaders to "shape up and dress more fashionably."

"Why are you still here?" Jin asked. Was she going to press his hand to her breast? "You should go," he said.

"Though now you might be seen."

"I can't leave you here alone," Tun said. "What kind of friend would I be, what kind of comrade?"

"OK, stay where you are," Jin said. "Please excuse me." He slipped into the corridor where he heard a harsh voice complaining of the absence of facts. No one was in sight. Jin edged along the wall and positioned himself beside the neighboring doorway. An underling's voice spoke next. "Mr. Ding is right, but we're as close to the leaders as mud to a pig." As Jin listened, a waiter backed out from under the curtain. Startled at the sight of Jin pressed into the wallpaper, he tipped a cascade of rattling crockery from his tray. "Excuse me," Jin murmured as the cursing waiter gathered the debris. When the tray's rattle faded down the corridor, Jin caught the phrase "correctly distinguish enemies from friends."

Another waiter came from the direction of the kitchen, jauntily bouncing a bottle against his thigh and holding two glasses with his fingers. Jin avoided his eye but the unkempt bony young man, whose white jacket was adorned with symmetrical stains, headed straight for him. When he stopped at the door of Tun's room Jin sprang away from the wall and opening the door, steered him bodily inside. "Ei! ei!" the waiter cried indignantly. Jin closed the door, his heart thumping. Tun was still leaning against the table, her blue coat draped over her like a cape. Her chin pointed at Jin with an air of certainty.

"Here, OK, good," Jin said. Tun pushed off from the table, which was streaked with dried sauces and oil. The waiter twisted the cap off the bottle and set it on the table beside the glasses.

"Any change?" Jin asked. The waiter frowned. He said he would have to ask the cashier.

When he left, Tun smiled contemptuously and opened her compact. "That's money you'll never see again," she said.

Jin shook his head, glancing at the glasses on the table. "What will I say to my wife?" he asked. "Well, I'd better go back." Tun shrugged, peering into her tiny mirror.

Again Jin edged along the wall. He could not hear a sound. Were they having a quiet smoke after demolishing a carp? Had they fallen asleep? Jin reached the doorway and pressed himself against the wall. He heard a voice from inside. "Good, Secretary Ding, thank you for your help and concern, and as I said, you'll have a report in one week." Not a second passed before an arm thrust through the curtain, followed by a man in his mid-thirties. He was tallish but an inch shorter than Jin, and was dressed in a black overcoat with the inexpensive elegance of a provincial cadre. He wore a steel-blue Western-style suit and leather shoes, not recently polished.

He was immediately followed by a stockier, older man, perhaps his superior, whom Jin recognized as the Party

secretary of the provincial education department. The secretary's hands were hidden in the pockets of his charcoal overcoat and a printed silk scarf covered his throat. When they spotted Jin, they eyed him with suspicion and the younger one brusquely asked what he wanted. Jin was mumbling an explanation when Secretary Sui appeared in his black Zhongshan suit and visored cap, raising his eyebrows when he caught sight of Jin. Comrade Shi followed, staring at Jin with bulging eyes as if horns were growing out of his head.

"Sorry, I was waiting for Secretary Sui," Jin said to the provincial cadres.

"What are you doing here?" Sui asked. "What a busy family! Are you here to file a report for Baoding TV?"

"No," Jin said, glancing anxiously from face to face.

"Is there a problem at the station?"

"No."

"Is there something we have to discuss right now?"

"No." Jin shook his head. "I just wanted to tell you—"

"Excuse me," Old Sui said. "You have some, what is it, pancake or powder on your ear." He reached his hand and rubbed and pinched Jin's ear until it burned. "OK, good, not bad." He added softly: "If you really want to play the clown, you should join the opera." Old Sui turned to the provincial cadres. "It's nothing," he explained.

"He's one of our reporters. Totally reliable." The cadres nodded and started down the corridor. A small crowd of local cadres pushed out of the dining room, most of whom Jin recognized as belonging to the public security bureau, Hebei University, the agricultural university, the radio station, and the newspaper.

"So we can talk tomorrow, OK?" Sui said loudly. Jin nodded. "Good, let's go then," Sui said to Young Shi. He trotted off and caught up with the provincial secretary.

Jin followed at a distance. While the cadres waited in the lobby for their drivers to arrive from the workers' dining room, he hurried into the courtyard.

Pedaling home he raged at the empty streets. He had exposed himself to well-deserved ridicule and had paid twenty yuan for a bottle of liquor he had not even tasted. The only mitigating feature of the evening was that Old Sui had not seen him with Tun. He reached the battery building in a fury. As he hauled himself up the pestilential stairway, he heard television sets blaring on every floor. The opium of the masses. How disgusting!

Jin could see his breath in front of his face. Outside, the sky drooped gloomy and cold, concealing Heaven and threatening a snow storm. Inside, reporters and editors spoke tersely with each other and the workers

performed their tasks in stolid silence. Everyone wanted to go home. There were floors to mop, woodwork to scrub, gifts to prepare and dishes to cook for the holiday. The Year of the Tiger lay panting on its side.

Jin could not remember a more joyless New Year's Eve since the day he left the Army farm. He had spent the night in a worker's brick cabin, drinking home-made liquor with the worker's friends. Five years in the countryside and he still blamed his parents for Young Xiang's exile. Ai, what a time. Before the Gang of Four was smashed. Before he met Zhu. Before Xingxing. But after Liberation.

Those days were returning. After two weeks of rumors, the Central Television Network had confirmed the dismissal of Hu Yaobang from his post as general secretary. Kill one to scare a hundred. Kill a chicken to scare a monkey. The announcer, whom Jin had seen at a conference in Beijing, lent all the authority of his manly, sympathetic face and trained voice to slandering China's most beloved leader. Maybe not as beloved as Premier Zhou, but closer to the sufferings of the people. At least in recent years.

"At a sensitive moment in China's national development," the announcer said, his voice vibrant with regret, "Hu failed to distinguish enemies from friends, permitting counterrevolutionaries to foment turmoil. He gave away Party secrets, took credit for the accomplishments of others and sheltered an anti-Party

clique within the Party." The announcer then moved on to the Central Committee's observation that over the past twelve months, production costs had risen faster than profits. State and local cadres and managers at every level were advised to give up their stubborn opposition to reform.

Jin had met Comrade Hu when he received a delegation from Baoding. A small man, alert and energetic, he was constantly smoking and sipping tea as he sat at his desk in a mohair cardigan. Unlike most of the old Party leaders, who were generally of landlord or rich peasant origin, Hu by birth was a poor peasant. His biography was one that Jin's generation could only dream of, fleeing his poor peasant home at fourteen, enrolling in the Chairman's forces on Jinggang Mountain, surviving the First, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Extermination Campaigns and the glorious Long March to serve as a political officer in the Resist Japan War and the Third Revolutionary Civil War.

A hero's life, very nearly cut short. When young revolutionaries attacked the Youth League as a bourgeois headquarters, Hu Yaobang was arrested and kept in isolation for several years. He survived and when Jin met him, did not seem permanently injured by the criticism he had endured. He did not address Jin directly but he understood conditions in Baoding even better than the city's own

cadres, which strengthened Jin's impression of Hu's leadership in implementing reforms.

Jin had liked having a man of poor peasant origin among the Party's ruling group. He thought a poor peasant might be less inclined than a rich peasant, for example, to devastate the people with experiments copied from the Soviets. Especially if the poor peasant did not fancy himself a great philosopher.

Jin was polishing a story on the Baoding Iron Ball Factory. It was part of an annual effort to boost the reputation of local wares. He wanted to hurry home and help Young Zhu. A slab of carp wrapped in newspaper sat on his desk atop a box of Qing Family chicken. The chicken was a gift of Chief Qing, but Liao had taken up a collection for the fish. "Big fish eats small," Jin murmured when Liao delivered his slice. "That's dialectics." The Chairman's words. Liao frowned.

The iron ball piece would last about three minutes. The factory had announced a new deluxe edition, with dragon and phoenix etched by hand in an electroplated finish. The balls would soon be shipped to Shanghai, Berlin, Hong Kong, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Des Moines, the American sister-city of Shijiazhuang. Jin had interviewed cadres at the factory and had borrowed doctors from the city hospital. "Manipulating the balls, does it really help?" he asked the doctors as he revolved the ringing spheres on

his palm. "It can't hurt," they assured him, grinning broadly for Young Liang's camera. The piece would be read by Old Yin, who refused to let anyone else read the evening news, even on a holiday. "Five centuries ago, they were offered in tribute to the Ming emperor. Three centuries later, the Qian Long emperor and his favorite eunuch Ji Xiaolan found them highly restorative." Supposedly the Chairman himself had used iron balls for many years, but Jin was seeking truth from fact, not rumor. Besides, Old Beloved had other means of prolonging his mortality.

Jin was staring at the door when he had an idea. On New Year's Day, all the sons and daughters of the Yellow Emperor would be watching the Central Network's holiday program. No one would be tuned to the provincial stations, let alone to local stations like Baoding TV. Young Shi needed to fill holiday air time — why not show his old report on the cannery? No one would see it, satisfying Sui's wish to suppress it, yet it reflected well on the leaders' efforts to modernize China's industry. Jin was reviewing in his mind which scenes to cut when Young Shi approached his desk.

Jin greeted her with a tentative smile. It was not returned. Shi's bulging eyes were ringed in shadow and shadows nested in the pockmarks in her cheeks. She proffered an envelope. Baoding TV stationery. Was it a

New Year's commendation? A bonus? A promotion to Hebei TV?

"I have a suggestion for you," Jin said with a grin as he took the envelope. "For tomorrow night's programming."

"You should read this," Young Shi said.

Jin glanced up through the window at the overburdened sky. With trembling hands he unstuck the flap of the envelope, still pungent with wet rubber cement, and slipped out a crisp folded paper. He glanced up at Shi. It was a stenciled copy, still damp, of a letter addressed to the branch committee. Jin's face burned and hot tears filled his eyes. His blurred sight seized on scattered phrases. ". . . unnecessary attention to past mistakes . . . difficulty in cooperating . . . factionalist spirit . . . ultra-'Left' views . . . the decadent bourgeoisie . . ." Jin lowered his head and wiped his cheeks. Again he stared at the page. The words "Stern Warning" leaped out at him. Finally the secretary notified the committee that Director Zhao had suspended Jin from his duties.

"I did what I could," Young Shi said. "He has the diary, the letters and the note."

"What letters?"

"'From your loving Xiang.'"

Jin was stricken. He did not dare ask how many.

"What note?" he said dismally.

"'One.'"

"One note?"

"Just 'One.' Instead of 'One divides into two,' maybe."

Jin stared at the paper. Young Shi left the room. After a time Jin folded the thin paper and secured it in the inside pocket of his coat. His hands were shaking. He stared at his report on the iron ball factory for several minutes and walked it over to Old Yin's desk. Out in the air, the damp cold seized his face and hands. He inserted the tiny key in the lock on his bicycle and winced as the shackle snapped open. He bounced down the drive into Journalism Street and injected himself into the eastbound traffic of Bounteous China Boulevard.

Jin pedaled feebly. The boulevard was crowded with cyclists gritting their teeth against the chill as they ferried home parcels of provisions, knickknacks and firecrackers. Jin followed the traffic to the perimeter road and turned right. He felt no need, in his present state, to ride past Number One Provincial Prison. He turned right again and pedaled in the direction of People's Park. The single hill that overlooked the city, once fortified by the Japanese, loomed over the roadway, a black mound against a gray sky. He pedaled past, turned right at the deserted stadium and worked his way through the traffic jam at the train station. Despite his physical exertions, he felt shrunken and cold in his winter clothes.

Already the city looked poorer to him than it had in years. The Soviet-style buildings were dingy with soot. The houses were no more than heaps of brick. The dry ground around them, without plants or ornament of any kind, was a waste not even four hundred modernizations would ever bring to life. The people pushing their way towards the train station had a mean and desperate look, as if they despised themselves for living in Baoding. But Jin knew in his mind that the city lived, transforming the agricultural production of the countryside into industrial goods that were shipped all over China and the world. Baoding Iron Balls, for example. What was the fate of Jin Wuming beside the welfare of this medium-sized city? He was a sparrow, a rat, a bedbug, a fly, a mosquito. Exterminate the Five, the Four Pests! The Three, the Two, the One, Jin Wuming!

He rode north along the empty moat. Dry grass and skeletons of trees lined the banks. He turned east with the perimeter road into the lighter traffic across the top of the ancient city. If he could just keep circling until his incorrect verdict was reversed. He would not have to explain it to Young Zhu.

Stray bursts of firecrackers snapped in an unseen courtyard. Aiya, he had forgotten the firecrackers! And he had left the fish and chicken on his desk! He turned down Eternal China Road and reached the station in fifteen minutes. The newsroom was empty. The fish and chicken

were gone. He opened his desk drawers. No. The inhuman jackals had stolen the New Year's meal right out of his family's mouths! He looked around wildly. If they found him here, they might arrest him for sabotage.

He stood in line for forty minutes at the Qing Family chicken shop and bought the last of the stewed chickens. While he waited pressed against the counter, Chief Qing called to him with a puzzled expression. Jin explained he was preparing a gift for his father. He refused to go with Qing back to his office, where Qing would have tried to give him three more chickens. He visited several shops before he found any firecrackers.

It was dark and fiercely cold by the time he reached the corner of Youth Road and the north perimeter road. An aging peasant stood under a streetlight selling sweet potatoes from a smoking drum. Happy New Year. Jin had seen him on the streets over the years, but had never spoken with him. Broad-browed and black as an African, he looked like one of the Heavenly Kings who guarded the Western Paradise. Jin had a sudden craving for a sweet potato and halted beside the drum. The peasant eyed him indifferently. A silver stubble crowned his head and soot darkened his corrugated face.

A sulfurous cloud of heat hovered over the drum. The four remaining specimens were arrayed like roasting piglets on the grate, their wrinkled skins streaked with burnt

syrup. Jin pointed to the largest of the four. The peasant rescued it from the grate with a bare hand so hardened and thick that Jin thought again of a temple guardian. Jin tossed the sweet potato from hand to hand, searing his chilled fingers. He passed a small bill to the peasant, who added it to a sheaf of red and gray notes that opened lotus-like on his palm. Peeling back the skin to expose the pulp, Jin savored the warmth in his hands and the sweet fragrance. He bit into the steaming interior and for a time was conscious only of chewing the hot pulp and stirring it forward and backward with his tongue. Eventually he paused and looked at the peasant.

"You do a good business," he said.

"Not too good," the peasant growled.

"Do you sell them all?"

"Sometimes."

"Good," Jin said. He finished the sweet potato and dropped the skin in a pail. The skins would go to feed the pigs the peasant raised to supplement his income from grain, sweet potatoes, tomatoes. Could Jin sell sweet potatoes on the street? No. He would have to buy them from peasants.

As Jin coasted into the yard of the battery building, the warmth of the sweet potato faded. A firecracker popped in a nearby courtyard. The holiday had begun. He entered the vestibule, chicken and firecrackers in hand, and

climbed into the darkness, holding the right-hand rail to avoid broken stairs. No "Spring Thunder" masked the smells of burnt oil and urine but the darkness was alive with broadcast voices. When he reached the fifth floor, he sidled between the stacks of briquets and cabbage. He pushed open the door.

"Ah, he's here," Young Zhu sang sharply as Jin shut the door behind him, "the cleaning is done, the food is ready, he's here!" A wisp of steam rose from the kettle and dozens of dumplings lay curled on reed trays.

"Sorry," Jin grinned as he proffered his parcels, "after I left I stopped to buy some things." Xingxing gleefully reached for the firecrackers. The auspicious red paper showed faintly through the white plastic bag.

"Not now, Young Xing," Jin said, raising the bag. "Tomorrow sunrise, to scare off the ghosts and monsters and bring in a prosperous New Year." Xingxing laughed and jumped at the bag until Jin surrendered it. "Don't open the packets," he said, "We'll inspect them after dinner." Xingxing hopped on the sofa and emptied the bag. The labels were printed in red, blue and yellow and bore the image of a rat. Jin handed Young Zhu the fancy orange box with gold lettering.

"A gift from Chief Qing," he said modestly.

"Too good, too good!" Young Zhu cried harshly, shaking an identical box under Jin's chin. "We can eat all the

chicken we want!" She glared at him furiously, her face red. "Our beloved leader and friend, Comrade Deputy Secretary Shi, brought this box over this afternoon, more than two hours ago, not to mention an expensive piece of fish!"

"That's very kind of her," Jin said, his throat tightening with emotion, "I left them on my desk. I thought someone stole them."

Young Zhu's eyes were wet. "Funny, that's what she said. Your stories match, but your timing is rotten. She was disappointed not to find you. I guess you didn't tell her where you were going."

Jin held Zhu's arm and studied her eyes. His face grew hot. "I'll explain later," he said. Young Zhu, caught short by his tone, pulled her arm away.

"Well, I don't think I can serve this food," she said, waving her hand at the fish and the boxes of chicken. "I know I can't eat it."

"You can and you will," Jin said quietly, "there's nothing wrong with it."

While the water heated, Jin allowed Xingxing to look at the firecrackers. Old Ba and Zhu stood by. "These are explosives," Jin explained, "like cartridges for a rifle, like little grenades or sticks of dynamite. They can blow your hand off or put out your eyes. You must be extremely careful." He laid the five strings of red cylinders on the

table, each string about a meter long. Xingxing gazed at the long red columns, so elegant and expressive in their unprinted semi-matte paper. Old Ba also admired them, her eyes wet with emotion ("They're beautiful," she murmured), and even Young Zhu grunted in approval. Jin felt as though a ghost had entered the room.

When they sat down to the dumplings, Zhu announced that the first batch had been made by Xingxing. Jin exclaimed how well sculpted and crimped they were as he sprinkled hot oil and vinegar on a plate. He held the bowl to his nose and deeply inhaled the floury fragrance, perfumed with a hint of pork. How he would miss Old Ba's dumplings. Why did he think that? Where was he going?

"Nothing beats dumplings," Jin intoned. His father's words.

In bed Jin caressed Zhu's shoulder and told her that Comrade Shi had not come to feed a romantic interest. She had just suspended him. He did not know why she had brought the fish and chicken; maybe she was curious about their life-style. In any case, Zhu could serve and eat the food without harm. Jin did not know whether he would continue to receive his ration tickets or whether his rations would be reduced, but they should not waste food. As she lay at his side Jin felt Young Zhu strike the mattress with her fist, but he had crossed the frontier of sleep before he could offer any comfort.

The next day at noon Jin, Zhu and Xingxing mounted their bicycles and headed for West Horse Pool. Old Ba had walked to the train station at dawn, after Jin and Xingxing had set off firecrackers, to catch an early train to Jinan. The air was even colder than the day before, though windless, and the sky was gray and dense. As he pedaled through the frigid landscape, Jin was comforted by the pressure of Xingxing's hands on his hips. Otherwise, fatigue weighed heavily on him. Firecrackers yapping through the night had filled his sleep with uneasy dreams. A house-to-house battle with the Workers' Command had lasted several hours, culminating at dawn in a raid on the home of a city official. At various points in the dream he thought he saw the other four of the Five Revolutionary Comrades, though they wore the faces of comrades at Baoding TV. The official himself looked familiar, elderly and alert, though stunned by the fury of the attack. He had a pretty plump daughter or granddaughter, quite young, who was dressed in an Army tunic. Jin and his comrades were beating the official with the legs of a table when their attention turned to the girl. Jin remembered her dark liquid eyes, a round face, a glossy helmet of hair. But the "vile spawn of a revisionist snake monster" must be punished. Jin's eye strayed to a torn scroll lying at the foot of the wall. When he looked again, the girl had become a sow.

Jin shuddered again at the image even while coasting down the highway with Xingxing's arm around his waist. Not a black, hairy sow with a folded face, but a golden youthful sow with two neat rows of teats, a piglet all his own to squeeze and kiss. He awoke in the midst of a copious emission which he concealed from Young Zhu (susceptible as she was to fits of jealousy) only by letting it dry, clammy, in his underwear.

Soon after Jin awoke from his dream, Xingxing ran in and bounced on the bed to roust him for the dawn festivities. Jin pulled on his trousers. Old Ba was already dressed. They joined the other early risers, mostly boys and men with wild hair, and gathered around a tree in the icy gloom. Some wore Army coats and bedroom slippers, others underwear and leather shoes, but all were sleepily intent as they hung the strings of crackers from a branch. They stood back and waited for the first spark of the newborn year to flare over the roof of the neighboring building, shivering as they listened to premature explosions all over town. Jin's bone essence dripped behind his knee. He did not know whether the signal was finally given at clock time for sunrise or on someone's actually spying a limb of glare beneath the pall of cloud, but the compact, rattling blast reminded him, as it did every year, of the combat he had seen in the Red Mansion's war with the Workers' Command. The Battle of the Lotus

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Pool Academy. The Battle of the Western Suburbs. The
Burning of the Pavilion of Great Mercy.