

The Thirty-Sixth Strategy [Chp. 9]

Jin awoke the next morning feeling feverish and trembly with a sprinkling of harsh grit in his throat. Kill the chicken. After a breakfast of fried dumplings, he napped fitfully, dreaming again of the raid on the old cadre. The cadre's daughter lay on her back with her chin on her chest. She leered at Jin from blackened eyes and a lewd grin cracked her cheeks, which looked as though they were made of plaster. When Jin awoke, Young Zhu was standing over him. He saw Old Ba through the doorway.

"We have tickets for the one o'clock showing of that movie from Pakistan," Zhu said.

"I heard about it," Jin said. Someone at the station had seen it. He closed his eyes. Fate Sees All was the title. About an architect's daughter in love with her blind cousin. Jin opened his eyes. Young Zhu was still there.

"You should go," Zhu said. "Your father thinks they can solve your problems."

"I'm sure that's true," Jin said earnestly, his eyelids falling.

He could not get comfortable in his seat. The theater seemed hot and cold by turns and the pictures and tinny music jangled his nerves. The girl and her cousin, who could see perfectly well, rode around in a Mercedes and went to discos and mountain resorts until her father forbade their marriage. After several years and irritating musical interludes, the girl, now a young widow, found her cousin playing saxophone in a nightclub. He was wearing dark glasses and she realized he was blind. Without revealing her identity, she spoke to him and learned that he had lost his eyes in a car crash.

Jin dozed. When he awoke the father was offering to pay for surgery to restore the poor cousin's sight. In the final number the girl, her father, the cousin, a nurse and the surgeon all sang happily together in the cousin's private room at the hospital. Jin shuddered. It was as though the cousin had returned from Hell but had forgotten everything he had seen.

For supper Zhu served dumplings and shredded cabbage. They had just finished eating when a rap on the door jolted Jin from his chair. He glanced at Zhu, who stood with the stacked bowls in her hands. "Xingxing," Jin murmured. The child was down the hallway. Jin stepped to the door, ready

to burst past the intruders and hurl himself down the corridor.

Jin cracked the door. A boy in dark glasses and a bulging Army tunic stood in the corridor, a black scarf knotted under his chin. It was Young Han, Han Lixin's son. Jin opened the door and invited him to sit down and have some dumplings.

"I have a message," Young Han said, removing his glasses. "My ba asks if he can help you return from exile. If you want to talk with him, he can meet you tomorrow afternoon outside the main gate at the Martyrs' Park."

His pointed face shone with childish courage. He was a studio double of his father at the same age, though without the camera case. Jin smiled stiffly at him. He did not plan to meet Han at the park. Old Han was not a Party member. He had no significant Army or Party connections (indeed the Workers' Command had briefly resisted the 38th Army), and he would probably only hurt himself and Jin by meddling in Party affairs. Xingxing returned and Jin introduced him to Young Han.

"He's too good, your ba," Jin said, grinning and glancing at Zhu as the boys shook hands. "Give him my warmest thanks, but there's no need. I'll see him when this evil wind blows over."

"OK," Young Han said. With a nod he was gone, leaving Jin and Zhu staring at each other over Xingxing's head.

"Well," Jin said, squatting and drawing Xingxing into his arms. "Do you think he was followed? Aiya, my heart is still thumping." He was shaking. Not wanting to frighten Xingxing, he stood up and ruffled his hair. "We're not prisoners or slaves," he said. "We're workers, masters of New China. I'm going to pay a New Year's visit to our director. We can't leave everything to Old Li."

Zhu opened her mouth to speak, but said nothing. Big fish eats small, Jin said to himself. That's synthesis. That's Marxism.

On the second floor landing Jin met Old Shen, who invited him in to share some New Year's leftovers. Jin stopped to chat. Outside, the air smelled of coal. It was dark but there was no wind. When he reached Old Zhao's, he rapped on the blue door. Old Xun appeared wearing an overcoat and stamping her feet like an angry elephant. She called over her shoulder for her husband, then invited Jin inside and seated him at the table, which was covered with magazines. Jin heard a door close. A single bulb burned overhead. Jin heard sharp words in the back room. It must have been Old Xun, because next he heard the director's voice, querulous and plaintive.

"I don't want to see him. His father is a Rightist. Isn't his father a Rightist? I doffed my Rightist cap years ago. Did he doff his Rightist cap? I don't think so."

Jin felt suddenly hopeless. The director's brain was turning in a circle that had been drawn for it thirty years ago. Jin picked up a clipping from the heap on the table. At first he could not make out the characters. They were running on a slant. Old Xun had cut the clipping diagonally across the page. He looked at the other side. The same. Another clipping showed part of a picture on one side, on the other a white margin and a scrap of text.

Jin's fever flared. He lit a cigarette with shaking hands and walked over to the bookcase. There was nothing the Red Mansion would have had to burn. A steam locomotive shrieked at the station. Ordinarily the locomotives could only be heard late at night, but except for sporadic firecrackers the city was quiet. Back in the bedroom, Zhao barked something at his wife. Jin filled his lungs with smoke and gazed up at the imagery of clouds on the peeling beams. He was certain he had never interrogated Zhao, but the house seemed familiar. Maybe Jin and his comrades had attacked a revisionist here years ago, a social-imperialist spy masquerading as a schoolteacher. His chest tightened. He and his so-called investigation team, running down crooked alleys. Smash the Four Olds!

The house seemed suddenly hot and crowded. Jin flung open the door and stepped into the cold air of the courtyard, where he threw down his cigarette and buttoned his coat. The shadows of the courtyard were alive with

ghosts. Their skin was stained and burned like old paper and they brandished chair legs and scrolls. Jin lit another cigarette and mounted his bicycle.

As he rattled down the alleys, dodging shadows who cursed him as he passed, he remembered something that made him drop his cigarette from his lips. The old cadre in his dream. His lewd daughter had committed suicide. That was what it meant to expel ghosts and monsters from society.

As Jin stepped into the apartment, something dark and fluttering flew at his head like a trapped sparrow. It was a magazine, arrested in mid-flight by its spreading pages. Young Zhu had thrown it from the sofa.

"Turtle's head!" she cried.

"Is something wrong?" Jin asked. "Where is Xingxing?" She looked drunk in the fluorescent light.

"You think I'd let her fill his ears with such filth? I sent him away. He's downstairs with my ma and Old Gui. Now I'm sending you away!" She groped for something else to throw and awkwardly flung the bolster, which struck the base of the wardrobe. Crockery rattled. Zhu collapsed back on the sofa.

"Is something wrong?" Jin asked again. "What happened?"

Zhu looked terrified. "Your first wife came back, that's what happened. Turtle's head! Your first wife! Turtle's egg!"

Jin trembled. So Young Xiang had not gone back to her commune. If she was Young Xiang. "Young Zhu, don't be stupid," Jin said. "You know I have no other wife. That woman who visited before, did she come here again?"

"No, no one came here, turtle's egg. I imagined it. Because I'm stupid. I imagined that your wife came back and I imagined that this time she brought your son. Who's even uglier than she is. Pink like a Russian. Ugly and pink like a baby rat."

Jin's heart fell into his stomach. Young Zhu cackled nastily, baring her teeth in a cruel smile.

"Please, Young Zhu, I don't understand. Calm yourself. Take your time. I'm sure Old Sui is behind this. He must have borrowed one of the foreign teachers at Nong Da."

Zhu cackled again. "Old Sui does everything, doesn't he! Rotten Old Sui, stinking Old Sui! There is no Old Sui. Now I know. Everything is fine. No Sui, no wife, no son. Thank you, Old Jin, for teaching me the truth about these things."

"Young Zhu. Talk sense." He stood over her. She looked up at him wildly. He sat on the sofa and took her hand. She yanked it away.

"Listen, Young Zhu, calm down," Jin said. "We need to figure out how to make her leave. But first, you have to calm down. Did you drink something? Eat some medicine?"

"Your lies," she said. "That was the poison I drank. But I'm not going to die. I'll just be one of those widows people talk about in the street without even lowering their voices."

"Tell me again, Young Zhu. Who came here? Did they give their names?"

Zhu looked at him searchingly. Jin could count the shadowed pores on her nose.

"Ghosts came here. Ghosts like you. It's true, she must be your wife. The ghost family. Does your mother know you're a ghost? She's a ghost too. I don't think your father is a ghost, though. He's too good. But your sister is certainly a ghost."

"Young Zhu, I understand someone came here. Are you sure that Xingxing is all right?"

"He's downstairs. He's no ghost."

"Did a man come here?"

Zhu turned away and looked at nothing. "Your son."

"What was his name?"

"It must be Jin, right?"

"More than one man?"

"One man, one ghost."

"All right. And a woman?"

"Your wife."

"Her name?"

"Mrs. Jin."

"What did she look like?"

"Like Mrs. Ghost. Ugly. Fat, old, short. Thin black hair, padded coat. Your ghost wife. Ugly and rough. She looked ugly and rough."

"Have you seen her before?"

"Yes."

"She was the same woman who came here before?"

"The same Mrs. Jin."

"Young Zhu, she lied. She is not my wife. Her son is not my son. You are my wife. Xingxing is my son." He seized her arm. "Young Zhu!"

Zhu gazed at him with a bitter grin. "Who's that?"

"She lied, Young Zhu."

She drew her knees under her on the sofa and looked at him slyly. Jin inwardly recoiled.

"Zhu, you're acting very strange," he said. "How can you believe something so senseless?"

She answered in a low, quiet voice. "What do you think, Jin? Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I'm mad? Of course, I didn't believe her. Not a word. But she forced me to. She knows you, Jin. She knows you."

"So she says."

Zhu dropped her head, then looked at him with thick tears standing in her eyes. "You're not as stupid as a woman, I see."

Jin felt the blood drain from his face.

"It's impossible," Jin said. "Whatever she said, she heard it from someone. I don't have any son but Xingxing."

"She had a stack of letters this thick. All from you."

Jin stared. It could not be. The letters had to be Old Sui's doing.

"Young Zhu. Listen. She had letters? And that makes you think we married? And had a son? Aiya! You unbelievable idiot! I thought— No, it doesn't matter." Jin leaned towards her. Zhu raised her hands in a warding gesture.

"Stay away, Jin. I won't let you near me again. You're too disgusting. Maybe I'm unbelievably stupid but you're unbelievably disgusting. You can't imagine how I feel. No, I won't even say it. Please, go away now. I can't look at you. I can't stand to think about it. Just go."

"Young Zhu, that was many years ago. People did all kinds of things. We thought we were making Revolution."

"I don't want to hear any more about it."

"Think, Young Zhu. Why is this happening? What is our concrete situation? It's the struggle with Old Sui. How could she be my wife? How could I have a son as pink as a Russian?"

"His hair was almost white. Maybe he has Ai Si disease. I don't know, Jin, but this is too much. If I look at you any more I'll have to cut your throat."

"Young Zhu—"

"Don't call me that. Just go, or—"

"I'll go, I'll go," Jin said, struggling up from the sofa. "Look, I'm going." He backed towards the door. He was soaked with sweat. "I'm going. I'll come back later tonight."

"No. Don't come back. Don't ever come back."

"I'll be at my parents' house, then. You can bring Xingxing to stay there if you like." His back was to the door, his hand on the knob.

"Just go, Jin. I can't think. Just go."

"Young Zhu—"

"Go."

At Baoding Station, Jin jostled with holiday travelers, peasants lugging bundles of purchases, soldiers returning to their garrisons, students visiting friends. He felt feverish again and his throat was raw. He bought a hard-seat ticket to Beijing and hugged himself on a bench, dozing and shivering. The next train was the express from Guangzhou.

He dreamt he was running down a mountain road. He seemed to be pursuing a girl but had lost sight of her. Leaving their comrades in town, they had climbed a mountain

to demolish a well-known shrine that overlooked the Yellow River. Now the girl had run away, as if pursued by the ghost of the shrine outraged by their sweat-soaked love-making. The chute of dust at Jin's feet plunged towards the river.

Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Jin blinked up at a young man in a uniform cap. His babyish pink cheeks were creased by a frown. Was he back on the Army farm? No. Blue cap, red badge, he was a railway worker. They had reached Beijing. Jin wanted to rise, but his head was like a melon on a shrunken stem. In the dream they were going to Xi'an. The Journey to the West. The girl had glossy, blue-black hair and fleshy lips. Not at all like Young Xiang.

"Big Brother, how are you?" asked the youth in the cap.

"Not bad, not bad," Jin lied. He grasped the stanchion of the bunk and hauled himself upright. His trunk felt as though it were cased in lead. As weighty as Mount Tai.

"Do you want a doctor?"

Jin shook his head. It swung, it throbbed, it burned. The damp cocoon of his clothing smelled like wool.

"He's drunk," a woman said, eliciting a rattle of laughter from the other passengers. Jin patted his

pockets. Welcome to the capital, comrade. Still gripping the stanchion, he rose to his feet.

A young man came forward, his face aflame with acne, wearing a Western-style jacket and a striped jersey.

"Comrade Jin, I'll help you," he said.

Who was he, one of Jin's viewers? Or a dog-leg from the public security bureau? He searched the young man's eyes, but found nothing familiar in them.

"Not bad, not bad," Jin muttered vaguely, looking down at the floor. Suddenly he lunged past the fiery face and staggered to the vestibule of the car, where he leapt to the platform. Rising to his feet, he dodged travelers and uniformed workers and sacks of mail piled like corpses on a battlefield, darting and cutting like an Olympic center forward towards the bright goal mouth of the waiting area. He rushed past the ticket inspector and plunged into a vault as high and vast as a hangar for an East Wind rocket. Surpass England in fifteen years!

Everything in the capital was so big! The cloud-painted roof beams were hidden in the smoke of ten thousand cigarettes. His eye skipped like a hand-held camera over bands of peasants perched on their bundles, clumps of paint-spotted workers sprawled on the floor, garment traders guarding their striped cases. He was panting as though a stone monkey sat on his chest. The Five Revolutionary Comrades had passed through Beijing Station

several times on their state-paid travels. Here the boys and girls of the Beijing factions, who were the nobles of the Cultural Revolution, had kept a special tribunal of the masses in session day and night for a year. Welcome to the capital.

Jin escaped the main hall and crossed the ticket lobby into the night air. A minivan driver tried to enlist him for a ride and some long-haired pedicab drivers taunted him as he launched into the night on foot. Soon he was winding his way through a maze of alleys and brick cabins until he reached Revere Literature Gate Avenue, at this hour lined with shuttered restaurants and hardware stores. Angling north and west until he spied the lights of Long Peace Boulevard, he halted across from the hive of the Beijing Hotel.

His blood boomed in his head like Empress Wu's drums. The stone monkey pressed on his chest. He looked at his bare wrist and drew slow breaths, filling his lungs with the frozen, coal-scented air. He watched the taxis dart like deep-sea fish from the hedge that guarded the hotel. To the east lay the old legation quarter, fearlessly besieged by bulletproof patriots nearly a century ago. Boldly opposing the timid Weapons-Only-ism of bourgeois capitulationists like Li Hongzhang. To the west— Jin squinted down the boulevard, but could make out only a

converging chain of streetlamps keeping watch over the empty boulevard.

He could not see the square, but he felt an invisible current tug at his legs. Like a mighty river, no, a kind of magnetism, a magnetic force pulling him by virtue of the iron in his veins. Wasn't he Young Zhu's Iron Ox? As she was his Fire Monkey. He left-faced and quick-marched down the sidewalk, which was lit by old-fashioned globes hanging like luminous melons from their ornate stands. The couples and lone strollers he met kept to the right side of the walk and avoided his eye. They seemed to be wearing white pancake and the sycamores lining the sidewalk threw vague nets of shadow over their faces.

As Jin drew near the square the sycamores gave way to pines. He and his Red Mansion comrades had walked here one morning, adding an olive-green molecule to the olive-green sea that flooded the square. All day they cheered for Revolution under the guidance of Army education cadres. Senior staff members of the Cultural Revolution Group harangued them from the rostrum. Jin now knew that their words were mainly intended to intimidate the Chairman's rivals. But at the time, with the current of Revolutionary feeling running high, the invective burst over their upturned faces like rockets, like lightning, like shining pearls tossed by frolicking dragons. Wang Li spoke and Yao Wen Yuan. Jiang Qing and Marshal Lin. Finally the Chairman

himself, like a tiny deity, materialized on the rostrum and briefly greeted his adherents.

A month later, Jin and his comrades again passed through the capital. The youth education cadres issued them the newest edition of the Selections. When the multitude filling the square raised the little books over their heads, the red covers bloomed like a forest of peonies. Jin recalled his comrades' rigid arms and streaming cheeks. Disgust suddenly halted him where he stood. He about-faced and hurried along the boulevard, then crossed and turned left at the hotel down Palace Well Street. He wanted to lose himself in the late-night crowd and find some cigarettes. After scorching his throat on a Spring City, he stepped to an open half-door and bought a bottle of yogurt from a girl in a cylindrical white hat. She told him to drink it quickly because she was closing.

Jin stood under a streetlight, sucking the cool fluid through a straw. The sweat on his forehead turned chill. Without warning he found himself surrounded by four men in tan raincoats, not very tall. He stopped sucking and slowly lowered his bottle. Their dark faces were stamped with smiles. Jin turned and set the bottle on a ledge. He could sweep one or two of them off their feet, but he could never escape all four. Small as they were, they were probably armed with pistols and truncheons to be employed

as their orders required. Questioning, hearing, barracks.
The End.

"Big Brother, how are you?" one of them asked with a suppressed giggle. Jin stared into a broad, somber face, valleyed and ridged like the sculpted mask of a devil. A menacing face even when it smiled. The others, who looked more like human beings, echoed the greeting. Jin smiled. They were not from the Baoding Public Security Bureau, but were tourists of some kind with thick accents. Maybe they were Korean or Japanese.

"Not bad, not bad," Jin said. "How are you?"

The senior devil tendered a scrap of paper on his palm and jabbed at it with his finger. Jin made out an address.

"You want to know where this is?" he asked loudly.

"Right, right, Big Brother," the senior devil nodded, imitated by his comrades.

Jin held the scrap of paper under the streetlight. The others looked over his shoulder. He could see in the light how swarthy they all were, how un-Chinese. The address was nearby. He waved his arm northwards.

"Go about three blocks up, then turn right, then it's a small street to the left," Jin said as eight eyes stared. Jin pointed a finger and spoke in his sharpest reportorial manner. "You proceed approximately three blocks in that direction, then ask someone else."

The devil muttered something to his apprentices, then beamed expectantly at Jin.

"Please go with us, Big Brother," he asked, taking Jin's hand, the others nodding and grinning behind him. "If you don't, we'll be lost. Beijing talk is hard to understand."

"No problem," Jin said. He promptly set out at the head of the little gang, struggling against the shadowy crowd as if he were wading a shallow river. "The department stores must have closed and the theaters all let out at the same time," he called over his shoulder. The devil asked if he was from Beijing.

"No, from Baoding, in Hebei."

"Ah, Baoding. The big prison. Baoding iron balls. The military college where Chiang Kaishek studied."

"Chiang? Ah, Jiang Jieshi. Only for one year," Jin said. "It was also the capital of Hebei province. Before it was demoted. And before Liberation, the capital of Zhili province. You know Li Hongzhang? He was governor. You've heard of the Four Treasures?"

As they pushed their way up the street, the apprentice devils tried to listen in. Their leader told Jin his name was Han, he was from Guangzhou and his friends were from Guangzhou and Xiang Gang. They were in Beijing to get approval for a joint venture with an Italian shoe company.

Jin halted on the sidewalk. "I wish you good luck," he said. "Earn much foreign exchange for the fatherland. Help quadruple the national income in fifteen years." He added with a smile. "You know, your publicity is already done. Both Caesar and Spartacus wore Italian shoes. And Marco Polo."

"So does the pope," Han laughed. He turned to repeat Jin's remarks to the others. "Red silk slippers," he said, facing Jin. "Our Italian friends told me. He even has a car shaped like a slipper."

When they came to the next cross-street, Jin saw Uighurs perched like crows on the opposite guardrail. Despite the cold they wore only small cylindrical caps and Western-style jackets. Jin guessed they probably changed money. He protectively held Han's arm, but Han approached the railing and searched among the dark whiskered faces. A young Army officer of Chinese origin stood talking to a middle-aged Uighur. The officer had a pock-marked face and his hair was closely shaved above his low-set ears. Jin turned away.

"Old Ismail is here?" Han asked in his tortured Mandarin. "Old Ismail? Ismail Kawha?"

A lean young Uighur with curly hair grunted in the negative. Han asked him to tell Ismail he would be back in two hours. Jin said nothing. He led his charges to the next cross-street and after stopping a few pedestrians for

directions came to a door in an unlit alley. Han knocked. His comrades were discussing Aomen, the old Portuguese enclave near Xiang Gang. One of them repeated dreamily, "I've never been to Aomen. I've never been to Aomen." Jin had never been south of Wuhan.

The door opened a handbreadth. A long-haired personage in sunglasses peered out, saying nothing. Han muttered to Jin, "Ask if this is this the Five Seas Club. Tell him Old Wu from the Golden Flower sent us." The personage stepped aside.

"OK, I'll go now," Jin said to Han, proffering his hand. "Good winds and smooth sailing. Remember, Comrade Deng says it's all right if some people get rich before others. Some regions should lead the way for the rest of the country."

"Big Brother, Big Brother, come with us, come in," Han's comrades clamored, seizing Jin's arms and hands. Jin grinned, shaking his head, and followed them into the vestibule.

The long-haired person asked Jin in a sharp Beijing accent whether Wu had informed them of the cover charge. Jin translated. Han pulled a roll of foreign banknotes from his pocket. "American kuai," he explained. The long-haired person, wearing close-fitting jeans and a landlord-style jacket of black silk, took four crisp bills from the roll and led them down a deserted corridor. They crossed a

dark courtyard, where frozen sheets hung in the air like the tents of Prince Gui's army, and reached the door of an old Beijing-style house. From inside Jin could hear the machine-gun tooting of a synthesizer.

Thanks to Han's foreign currency, a waiter in a stained jacket led them to a table beside the low stage. The smoky room, loud with taped music, was dark but for blue beams of stage lights, which made Jin think of a Western-style wine bar. A mixture of intellectuals and medium- to high-level cadres filled the tables along with a liberal sprinkling of foreigners, Army officers and stylishly-dressed young women. Jin stiffened under their scrutiny and remained silent after he took his seat. Han scanned the crowd and lit a cigarette. Peter, as the Xiang Gang man was known, offered Jin a packet of Marlboros.

The waiter returned with menus printed in Chinese and foreign script, apparently borrowed from the Golden Flower. Jin had never tasted any of the "rooster feather wines" listed on the menu and did not follow Peter's explanations to Ah-Jeff, one of the Guangzhou comrades. They designated Jin to give the orders, so in his driest standard accent he asked for a Mexican Dawn, a Black-Haired White Russian, a Pineapple Illicit Affair, a Vermilion Concubine, and for himself a Scorpion's Tail. The sound of his own raised voice amidst the Western-style music seemed acutely unreal.

His throat was a tunnel of burning sand and the stone monkey still weighed on his chest.

A fellow in a Western-style suit, red shirt and silver-gray tie, his wavy hair in fashionable disorder, stepped on to the little stage and welcomed "our friends, foreign friends and saviors of the fatherland" to the Five Seas' holiday program. He announced future events, then clapping his raised hands asked the crowd to welcome "everyone's favorite Soviets, Comrades Si-La-Bing and Mi-Te-Si-Ke-Bing!"

White beams criss-crossed the smoky stage and the audience applauded, including the soldiers. Han leaned over and told Jin that the two comedians were well-known in Guangzhou. While Jin applauded, wondering why he had never heard of them, two men appeared on stage. Both were Chinese. One, an elongated bony man was draped a sauce-brown robe, while the other, a stocky dark fellow, wore homespun trousers, a woolly sheepskin vest and a knotted towel on his head. The stocky one greeted the bony one with a cordial Beijing growl.

"Teacher Si, how are you, how's your health, did you sleep well, have you eaten yet?"

"Thank you, Young Mi Mi, I've eaten," the thin one answered in a clipped, patronizing accent. Apparently a scholar, not a landlord. "Have you eaten yet?"

Mi Mi, the heavy one, rubbed his hands, then gave a little hop and assumed a martial posture. "Why?" he asked, straightening to face the scholar. "Do you have some food for me? Are you inviting me to dinner?" The audience laughed, but the scholar backed away in alarm.

"Excuse me, Young Mi, but—"

Mi Mi frowned. "No dinner? Not even an apple? Not even a bun?" he asked, advancing on the scholar, who backed away.

"No, but—"

"Not even a bowl of millet to eat in a tunnel? Not even the foot of a chicken?"

"Sorry, but—"

"Teacher Si, I'm hungry! And you ask me if I've eaten! As if you had some food to give me! But you give me nothing, nothing to eat! Not even a chicken foot! Not even a bun!" He bawled and the audience laughed and jeered. "No dinner for Mi Mi!" he sobbed, "nothing for Young Mi, not even a bun!"

The waiter brought drinks to Jin and his comrades. Han paid with a gray foreign note. Jin's Scorpion's Tail tasted like insecticide. He sucked at it greedily. Maybe it would wipe out the germs in his throat. Exterminate the Five Million Pests!

"Not bad, not bad," Han said. "Not as good as Guangzhou," lifting his glass, "but not bad for the North."

"Mi Mi! Mi Mi!" said Teacher Si with his hand on Mi's shoulder. "Don't cry, Mi Mi. Excuse me, I'm sorry, it's only an expression. Something we say. To be polite. Don't cry. Ei, Mi Mi, come now. A true Communist fears nothing and no one. Your problems are not so bad. You're a peasant—I'm sure you've got some food stored away somewhere. Think of our soldiers starving in the treacherous grasslands!"

Mi Mi surveyed the crowd, his face red and swollen. "'A figure of speech!'" he hissed, pointing his finger at Si. "'Something we say'! Aiya, Teacher Si, you typical intellectual element!" He slowly swept his finger across the audience. Jin froze in his seat. With the stage lights blazing on Mi's trousers, vest and turban, he shone in the darkness like a vision. Jin shivered. When Mi erupted again, spitting with hatred, he was pointing his finger straight at Jin: "You rotten intellectual! You stinking Old Nine! You say you have united with the toiling classes! But you sit in your offices and classrooms, sharpen your pencils and drink tea! You drink and joke with women and eat in restaurants and fill your apartments with scrolls and books! You say you serve the people heart and soul, but in fact you only serve Lord Zhao! You talk of liberation and raising the material standard, while we work sixteen hour days and starve in times of famine to pay our grain taxes! Now you ask me if

I've eaten, but you give me nothing! Me the cultivator, me the laborer! Is food an expression? Are China's peasants an expression? Maybe you're an expression, maybe Marxism-Leninism is an expression, maybe Liberation is an expression!"

The crowd laughed. Si-La-Bing nervously smoothed his silken robe. Han asked what Mi had said. Jin said that Mi Mi distrusted intellectuals. Han smiled. "It's true," he said. "They don't earn much foreign exchange for the fatherland. What work do you do?"

"Young Mi," Si said gently, "Young Mi, Young Mi, slow down. You can't mean what you say. These are reactionary ideas expressing the typical middle-peasant, small-producer resistance to collective action and the division of labor. You're not a class enemy, are you? Don't you remember when the Chairman said that 'ninety percent of intellectuals are on our side'? And when he sang to a gathering of ideological workers, 'We can't do without Old Nine'? You don't think the Chairman was wrong, do you? You don't think the Party made a mistake? Are you seeking a reversal of correct verdicts? What is it, Young Mi? Is it true that you still haven't found a wife?"

Mi Mi sobbed again and collapsed at center stage, bawling loudly. The audience laughed.

"Aiya, aiya, I knew there was something. What is it, Young Mi? Why haven't you found a wife? You're more than

thirty years old, old enough to marry without excessive indulgence. It's not natural to live alone. You have a job, right?"

Mi Mi sat on his heels and wiped his eyes. "Yes."

"You bring home money?"

"Yes."

"You don't gamble?"

"Only when I drink. Which is only on holidays, at weddings, with friends and so on."

"Mm, so what's the problem?" Si asked, pacing the stage with his eyes on the floor, hands clasped behind him. He turned to the audience. "What's wrong with this man?" he asked, pointing at Mi Mi. "Why can't he find a wife?"

"Too ugly!" a woman's voice called from the darkness.

Si-La-Bing smiled. "Does anyone know a woman comrade who would like to help him? A girl from peasant circles? Not too beautiful, maybe? Tall and fat, with big hands and feet and dark skin? Aiya, I think I know the problem! Aiya, Mi Mi! Young Mi! You work hard, right? But you're not an assistant librarian, are you?"

Mi Mi raised his tear-streaked face and scowled.

"No."

"And you're not a rich peasant."

"No, I'm no class enemy."

"You didn't pray to Guan Yin in your youth or make a pilgrimage to Heng Mountain?"

Mi climbed to his feet. "What if I did? Would I confess to harboring superstitions?"

"You didn't climb Mount Tai and visit Kong Zi's grave?"

"No, but I hear that's back in fashion."

"And you never subscribed to Kantian idealism?"

"Isn't that some kind of mental disease?"

"And you never believed in anarchism?"

"Of course I did. I still do. It breaks out every seven years, then lasts for seven years more. Some people call it 'Revolution.'"

"You didn't serve in the army of the Hunan warlord, did you?"

"I'm a Northerner."

"And you didn't attend law school, commercial school, normal school, middle school, police school or soap-making school?"

"To learn brainwashing? You're the intellectual."

"You didn't study Kong Zi, Han Fei Zi, Sun Zi, the Zuo Commentary, the Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic, The Three Kingdoms, The Water Margin and Journey to the West?"

"Hey, I didn't even finish middle school. I've been working in the fields since I could crawl. Look at these hands!"

"You didn't cut off your queue?"

"Do you still beat your donkey?"

"You didn't attack Changsha with the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army?"

"I've never even crossed the Yellow River."

"And you weren't stripped of all your Party posts?"

"Do I look naked?"

"You didn't create an independent kingdom of smugglers, prostitutes and runaway slaves?"

"Not that I recall."

"And you were never on the Central Committee of the Nationalist Party?"

"Are you crazy?"

"And you haven't made millions of tax-free yuan by publishing your Selected Works in seventeen languages?"

"I'll have to look into my total sales to date."

"Do you brush your teeth?"

"What?"

"Wash your body?"

"Every week."

"Take cold showers?"

"I'm not suicidal."

"No sunbathing, rainbathing, windbathing or frostbathing?"

"God made feathers and fur for animals, trousers and jackets for human beings."

"Do you play with Baoding iron balls?"

"No, do I look so old?"

"Are you addicted to sleeping pills?"

"Yes, and my whole life is just a thirty-year nightmare."

"You don't smoke sixty cigarettes a day, do you?"

"I'm too poor. And too busy. I smoke only while eating supper."

"When the whole nation was attending to food production, you didn't content yourself with a plot of tobacco?"

"I grow corn, cabbage and tomatoes."

"You didn't reject your first wife without even touching her?"

"My first wife? No, I touch her five or six times a day."

"You didn't abandon your second to be murdered by Nationalist reactionaries?"

"Do you think I'm an animal?"

"But your third didn't die in an asylum in a Moscow suburb?"

"You're mad, Teacher Si, you're mad!"

"You didn't make your fourth a widow while you still lived, so she set herself up as a second Ci Xi?"

"Look, Old Si, I think I need to get my hands on my first."

"You didn't absorb the essence of ten women a night for twenty years?"

"Teacher Si! Not even one! Not even one in twenty years!" Mi Mi wept extravagantly. Si offered him a handkerchief.

"Does Heaven spill its ocean when you stand up? Can you dry the land by bending your knees?"

"I'm a small fish," Mi sniffled.

"Did you cross a thousand passes and ford ten thousand mountain streams?" Si demanded sternly.

"I'm too weak."

"Can you mount a horse while shooting and change the color of the clouds with your angry roar?"

"The bigger the horse, the smoother the ride, they say."

"My point exactly."

"Aiya, Teacher Si, you're torturing me. Look, it's supper time. Don't you have a plate of dumplings for me? A stuffed bun?"

"Or a bowl of red pepper soup? Young Mi, do you want a wife or not?"

"A wife will cook food for me, right? And sweep the floor? And maybe sprout two or three kids?"

"One only, Mi Mi. But she'll hold up half the sky."

"Of course."

"Ai, you're so stupid, Mi Mi! Do I have to present a memorial? Aiya! It's like this. If you worship Guan Yin and make a pilgrimage, read the classics and cut off your

pigtail, join a warlord army, pursue physical culture and believe in idealism and anarchism, if you study police work, soapmaking and law, work in a library, consort with whores and smugglers, join the Communist party, join the Nationalist party, grow tobacco, take sleeping pills, attack Changsha and ride ten thousand li on a big white horse, you'll have more wives than you'll ever need!"

Si-La-Bing bowed to the audience, raising his clasped hands. The audience vigorously applauded, except for Han and Ah-Jeff. Jin tried to explain but gave up when Mi Mi began to wail. He noticed that Peter from Xiang Gang had joined two girls at another table.

"Aiya! Teacher Si, I don't understand! Am I too stupid to be married?"

"Don't give up, Young Mi. True, a level of intelligence is needed. Too find the right wife is not easy. But there's also luck. Let's read the omens. Relax and clear your mind, Young Mi. Are you OK now? No reactionary thoughts?"

Mi Mi wiped his nose on his palm and his palm on his trousers. "OK."

"Good. Now listen. Were you conceived when a star entered the moon?"

Mi Mi glared. "What do you mean?"

"Did phoenixes like clouds, clouds like rainbows and rainbows like long worms appear in the sky?"

"What?"

"Did green dragons crawl out of the river and fight at the city gate?"

"I don't know, Teacher Si. I think was born in the countryside but I really don't remember."

"Did a red dragon impregnate your mother?"

"You dirty bastard!"

"Did she carry you for twenty-five months?"

"Stop talking filth!"

"Did her back open in due time?"

Mi Mi clenched his fists. "How would you like to be subjected to dictatorship?"

"It's all right, Young Mi. Calm down. Did you master human speech with your first breath?"

Mi Mi turned to face the crowd. "I'm sure you did."

"Were you born with a double row of teeth?"

"To eat chaff and leaves in times of rapid economic progress? Yes, do you want to see?"

"Ah, good. Yes, I see. Mm, I think you already ate today. Do your eyes have double pupils?"

"To spot ox-ghosts and snake-monsters? You tell me."

"Is your body black?"

"Like the mayor of Los Angeles? No."

"Is it one-sided?"

"Huh?"

"Do your arms have four joints?"

Mi Mi swam across the stage, knotting and waving his arms.

"Mm, I guess so."

"Does your chest have four nipples?"

"Why, are you thirsty?" Mi Mi clapped his hands.

"Waiter, hey! Comrade! Here, bring Teacher a cup of milk."

"Is your virtue prompt?"

"Why, are you thirsty?"

"Did you bring silkworm culture to the black-haired people?"

"Silkworms don't grow in North China."

"So I take it you've never visited the Silkworm Chamber. Do you have red shoes?"

"Like a feudal lord? No."

"Did you conquer the Pierce Breasts, the Long Legs, the Three Miao and the Nine Li, and slay Huan Tou, Gong Gong, Dao Wu and Dao Tie?"

"Are they reactionaries?"

"Did you read the future on a turtle's back?"

"I forget, please turn around."

"Did you plant the hundred cereals, sponsor the development of birds, quadrupeds and reptiles, and establish the order of the sun, moon, stars and ocean tides?"

"Do I look like a Party cadre?"

"Have you consulted with the Hidden Girl?"

"I don't like to boast. Will you introduce me?"

"Sorry, not possible." Si peered at the ceiling and counted on his fingers. "Mm," he grunted. He studied Mi's palm. "Aiya!" he concluded. "Too pitiful! Young Mi, I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Ei, I'm disappointed, Teacher Si. You've done so much for me all these years."

"It's like this, Young Mi. If you were the son of a dragon, your virtue prompt at birth and if you had conquered the Three Miao and the Nine Li, you could have four wives who would bear you twenty-five sons."

"I think our brigade secretary would criticize me."

"And if you controlled twelve hundred virgins without emitting, you would ascend to Heaven in broad daylight!"

"Ei! Ei! Twelve hundred virgins? Who gives a fart for the secretary! I'm sure my daddy was a big red dragon at fat as your arm! Ai, Teacher Si! Teacher Si! Twelve hundred virgins? Let me at those Pierce Breasts! Let me at those Long Legs! I'll break their necks! I'll pulverize them!"

The audience clapped and hooted. Mi-Te-Si-Ke-Bing burst into the classic "I'll Thrash You With A Steel Mace" from Battle of Dragon and Tiger. The crowd applauded again, including Han and Ah-Jeff though they looked rather bored. Old Ye, the other Guangzhou man, who was a thin-

necked chinless man, cautiously nodded and grinned. Han tapped the crystal of his wristwatch.

"Let's go," he said.

Leaving Peter behind with the two girls, they retraced their steps back to the alley. The sunglassed personage did not bestir itself to open the door.