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1989

Communist Harmony

by Janet A. Doleh

Wu Song hurried to button his worn woolen jacket and pull on threadbare gloves as he left the icy apartment. The pungent smell of rotting cabbages filled the narrow corridor. His own allotment of ten cabbages was faring better, buried in the small patch of dirt behind the apartment complex. He would dig them up for his wife when she needed them.

The blue Mercedes waited for him at the corner. Wu Song slid in the back, grateful for the warmth, one of the small pleasures of working for the Shanghai Technology Venture. As the government's liaison assigned to STV, Wu Song enjoyed certain privileges. Being driven to and from work was an important one. The morning drive also gave him the opportunity to report to Fen Li, the driver, who contacted Mr. Yu in Beijing twice daily with status reports.

"Nehow, Fen Li," Wu Song said as the car accelerated down the narrow street. "How are you?"

"Good, very good," replied Fen Li. "My mother's surgery went well last night." Fen Li's elderly mother was dying of cancer. Her latest operation removed part of one lung.

"Excellent. I am glad to hear it," said Wu Song. He thought of his own mother, who had died of cancer a year ago. Too many freezing cold winters, too many days of burning the deadly soft coal so abundant on the streets of Shanghai, had taken a final toll on her failing lungs. Silently he cursed the system that relegated their parents to such a fate.

"Any news?" Feng Li broke in on Wu Song's thoughts.

"Yes, I do have something. Two of the workers are talking of leaving for Australia."

Fen Li grimaced his disapproval. "Which ones?"

Jing and Shao. The company mustn't lose Shao; he is one of the best engineers."

"How do they plan to go?" asked Fen Li.

"Jing has been overheard talking about friends already in Australia. She has paid a lot of money to start the paperwork. We think someone from the outside is helping her."

"And Shao?"

"Nothing concrete yet. Perhaps he is counting on Jing's friends to help him as well."

Fen Li nodded. "Watch them closely. Be sure they attend the weekly political re-education meetings. I will document this today."

"Yes," agreed Wu Song. "And now about the American, Mr. Jim Wesson. We had him picked up last night by security. We kept his passport."

"What did he do? Meet a Chinese girl?" asked Fen Li.

"Exactly. One of STV's engineers."

"Too bad for her," said Fen Li. He didn't like to see a promising young girl's life ruined by an unthinking foreigner. The social ostracism that she would face now would disgrace her family. "Which girl is it?"

"Foong Kit. One of Wesson's engineers on the microchip project. Her work has been critical to the project's success."

"Do not return the passport yet," said Fen Li. "But do not hassle anyone. Let them continue the project. We have plenty of time to deal with them after it ships."

Wu Song stared out the window. A crush of cars, bicyclists, buses, and pedestrians jammed the street. Clouds of exhaust and smoke from coal fires mingled with the brown cloud of pollution stretching across Shanghai. The stench and grime clung to buildings, trees, and people alike. Wu Song couldn't remember a time when the city was clean, the air fresh, the sky blue. Only his occasional trips to meet with Mr. Yu in Beijing reminded him that there was a cleaner world outside the smoky haze of Shanghai.

Sometimes Wu Song dreamed of leaving China. The foreigners who came to work at STV on two-year contracts spoke of America as if it were paradise. They owned land, cars, and homes large enough for five Chinese families. They had freedom to choose careers and to quit jobs they didn't like. They openly criticized government policies they didn't like. They had as many children as they wished. Wu Song sighed. Perhaps they had more

than was good for the soul of a man. At least in China, he had security. His government rewarded all men equally, as long as they upheld the system. Older workers could make a little more money. Health care was free.

Wu Song thought of his wife and young son. He was fortunate to have a son. It had been painful when the first two pregnancies resulted in daughters. With the blessing of his parents and wife, Wu Song smothered both babies and slipped their bodies into the Huang Pu River. Many families did so every year, although no one spoke openly about it. Daughters could not provide security for elderly parents the way a son could. Wu Song closed his eyes and nodded. He had a son and he had a job that fed and clothed his family. It was enough.

The Mercedes stopped in front of a dingy high rise. Wu Song and Fen Li exchanged a nod, then Wu Song hurried inside and took the ancient elevator to STV's offices on the eighth floor. He passed his own desk, situated between the elevator and the reception area, and made his customary check to see that the night crew engineers were still on duty. As usual, one was sleeping at his station and the other was studying English. Wu Song continued

past the engineering area to the small kitchen. Dirty cups cluttered the counter. He rinsed his cup with icy tap water, then filled it and placed it in the microwave to boil. Boiling the water killed the bacteria that thrived in Shanghai's water supply but couldn't remove the numerous chemicals. Wu Song was so accustomed to the metallic taste that it seemed normal. He added a generous pinch of green tea leaves and raised the cup to his face, deeply inhaling the soothing steam.

"Nehow, Wu Song."

He turned to greet Chen Tung Ma, director of personnel. Chen crowded into the narrow room and began preparing his tea. Wu Song waited by the doorway.

"Have you prepared for our guest today?" Chen asked. He was referring to the security preparations required for foreign visitors.

"I will do it right away," replied Wu Song. "He is staying at the Jinjiang Hotel?"

"Yes. Contact the manager, Mr. Rey, to help with the arrangements." Wu Song nodded, then hurried down the corridor. He needed to be at his desk to observe and record the exact time of arrival of each engineer and office worker. Mr. Yu required a full report.

Forty-five minutes later, the arrival log was complete. He signed it and sealed it in an envelope. It was time to call Mr. Rey.

The telephone used for confidential security arrangements was the car phone in the Mercedes. Wu Song summoned Fen Li by beeper, then took the elevator down to the ground floor. When Fen Li arrived, Wu Song slid into the front passenger seat and closed the door.

“Security call,” he said.

He dialed the number and within minutes had made the arrangements. The hotel agreed to put the foreigner in one of the rooms wired for sound. His belongings would be expertly searched by hand and then electronically scanned. One of the hotel security personnel would log the exact activities of the foreigner when he was inside the hotel. Every morning, Wu Song would call for a daily report.

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Satisfied, he nodded to Fen Li and opened the car door. He walked back into the building, thinking about the importance of his job. Because he and thousands of other loyal Chinese citizens obeyed and upheld the system, they had nothing to fear. Each painstaking task of observing, recording, and reporting the actions of foreigners strengthened their security. And the watchful eye they kept on each other showed their patriotism.

Wu Song felt good about the system.

Back on the eighth floor, he took his customary place at his desk. He sat up straight, eyes slowly sweeping the area with the demeanor of a professional watchdog. The clock on the wall clicked off the seconds. Three hours and thirty-four minutes until the noon meal. The day was going quite well.