

Xiaoda Xiao

Devil's Trill

BEFORE THE SPRING FESTIVAL of 1973, my mother brought me my violin, a fine German model made in the mid-Nineteenth century, which had belonged to a Russian virtuoso who came to Shanghai shortly after the Russian Revolution. Nobody knew how he had managed to live so many years in a city where classical musicians were treated as if they were itinerant entertainers earning their tea and meals by playing in street-corner teahouses. When my great uncle encountered the Russian in a pawnshop on a hot summer day in the late Twenties, he was wearing an overcoat mended with various-colored patches and a pair of torn shoes. His pale, unshaven face and his weak voice betrayed his suffering from constant starvation. He wanted to pawn his violin for fifty silver dollars. The owner of the shop looked at the violin briefly, and then told the old man that he could only offer five. Through sign language my great uncle told the old man that he was interested, and so the deal was made. To ensure that the elderly Russian would not be robbed of the fifty dollars on the way home, my great uncle went with him to where he lived. It was there my great uncle learned that he was formerly a violinist in the Winter Palace.

My great uncle didn't play the violin, nor did his sons or grandchildren. When he gave it to me on his deathbed, he murmured, "I know you love the violin, but don't make a career of it, or you'll regret it. To this day I can still remember how that Russian violinist staggered in the street. When I sent him to his place that afternoon, he asked me to let him touch the violin for the last time. He held the violin to his cheek. His hands trembled, and he cried like a child. . ."

I, however, was moved by the Russian violinist's story, and aspired to become a violinist when I grew up. Years later I went to a music school. But now my dream was long forgotten. I

stopped thinking of the violin after I parted from Sun Hualin, the commanding officer's daughter. But one morning I was thrilled to hear violin music being piped out of a loudspeaker near the docks. I pulled over my loaded handcart, and listened with my eyes shut until the final note disappeared in the cold air. I realized that the terror or the hunger I suffered would not kill my passion for music, unlike the dignity, which I thought I had already lost. I wrote to my mother to bring the violin with her when she visited before the Spring Festival.



For the majority of the political prisoners, the situation in the barracks had become aggravated since Li Minchu was executed. We were bewildered, and as restless as ants in a frying pan, not knowing what to do. Because of Chief Chen, who had applied Chairman Mao's new theory to divide the inmates into the Left, the Middle and the Right, and had emphasized that there was a number of political prisoners in the barracks that must be of the Right, the death penalty seemed only a stone's throw away. Nobody knew who would be the next, for we were all candidates of the Right, except for Zu Shaojun and a few others who were held special by the authorities. It was possible that any one of us could be chosen for the next year's "Ultimate Revolutionary Humanity," or reserved for the year after the next.

There were good officers such as Chief Zhang and Chief Wang, who treated prisoners like human beings, and evil ones like Controller Yang and Controller Nei, who were fond of intimidating inmates with violence or calumny. And there were those who fell in between good and evil. After more than a year's reform I had grown used to all of them. My mind had reached a state that enabled me to show nothing on my face, whether I encountered a good officer or fell into the hand of an evil one. But I couldn't stand Chief Chen, for he had deprived me of my right, and made me a prisoner of the former police officer who had declared one night that I must report to him about my thoughts twice a week, if I didn't want to receive denouncement during the thought-reform courses. Zhuang Guoying, we called him Old Cop, would

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shout at the political prisoners with his arms folded in front of him as though he were still an officer. We all feared him. Even Zu Shojun, the big boss, didn't dare say anything against him.

I doubted if I would be able to survive under these circumstances. I could tolerate him for several weeks, or even months, but not to live under his despotic power for the rest of my term. I even started to envy Wu Dedon, who successfully stayed away from the swirl by pretending to have lost his senses: he always burst into a laughter for no reason.

Nobody could help me. Gao had avoided talking to me. I had asked Chief Zhang to transfer me to another group. To my disappointment, he said that it would make little difference, because Zhuang Guoying would become the big boss of the barracks soon and wherever I went I would still be under his nose. What mattered, the chief said, was that I should try to establish a good relationship with the Old Cop so that he would switch his attention to someone else. Probably Chief Zhang was right. So I tried to be on friendly terms with Zhuang Guoying, as I could no longer wear the tight shoes he gave me every day. I even implied to him that I would totally submit to his authority. But he ignored me. The only exception, it seemed, was when I brought in food and the violin from my mother's visit, at that moment I saw his eyes fixate on the food in my hands. I regretted that I hadn't seized the opportunity to drop two eggs into his enamel bowl, or tuck a bag of rice powder under his pillow.



It was Spring Festival Eve. We didn't go to the quarry in the afternoon. I had been lying on my bunk since lunch, my back leaning against the wall, and I was plucking my violin. Zhuang Guoying, who had finished writing in his mini notebook, was also sitting on his top bunk. On the other side of him sat a former coppersmith, Pan Hugen, who was serving his eight-year prison term for rape. Pan Hugen had just returned from the visit of his wife, and was busily occupying himself with the cream-colored cakes that she had brought in. When he put the cakes into a sack, he murmured to himself that a mouse might eat a

hole in it, and took the cakes out of it. He then put them into a wooden crate in which he had already stored his rice powder. Seeing there wasn't enough room in it for the cakes, he took the cakes out and climbed up to his top bunk again. He was sweating profusely with eyes downcast. Suddenly, he slapped his own head and shouted to himself gaily, "How could I forget my travel bag?"

Jumping to his feet, he squatted to search under the bunk with both hands, and eventually pulled out a brownish travel bag covered with a layer of dust. To his elation, this bag was just big enough for his cakes. He had barely put the cakes in it, however, when he murmured to himself that he couldn't put the bag back under the bunk, since the bag didn't have a lock. Like everybody else, he had learned from his own experience that if he left the cakes unlocked in the barracks he would lose them overnight. One could feel those darting eyes.

"You may put it under your head," Zhuang Guoying said.

Pan Hugen raised his head to look at Old Cop. He nodded gratefully, and put the travel bag on top of his pillow. He quickly handed a piece of cake to Zhuang Guoying, but the latter refused to take it. It was against prison regulations to accept other inmates' food. The coppersmith lay flat on his bed with the travel bag under his head. The group grew silent.

I continued to pluck the violin with my eyes shut, although I couldn't relax because I had a feeling that Old Cop would soon tell me to stop. When I opened my eyes again, I found a crowd of inmates from other groups gathering before my bunk, among them Zu Shaojun, the big boss of the barracks who was going to finish his twelve-year term in less than a month. Zhuang Guoying must have thought that the big boss was looking for him to discuss his successor, because he elbowed himself up and gestured to tell Zu Shaojun to come over. When he learned that Zu was here to hear me pluck the violin, he turned to me and ordered, "You may go to the yard. Don't disturb other men's rest."

Though angry, I was able to control myself, and only reminded him that it was Spring Festival Eve. He showed me his wry grin and shouted, "Get out of here or I'll smash your violin!"

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“Take it easy. Don’t forget it’s Spring Festival Eve, it’s the time we should say congratulations to each other for the peacefulness of the past year and send good wishes for the year to come,” Zu Shaojun soothed him.

The crowd dispersed. Zu Shaojun told me that I could go to his place before he departed.

I felt frustrated, for I knew that I would suffer more if I didn’t ask Old Cop for his forgiveness, though I didn’t know what I wanted him to forgive me for. I was young and the way I had been brought up didn’t allow me to keep quiet when I saw evil. My groupmates didn’t seem to appreciate what I had done for them. They simply let Old Cop isolate me as if it were none of their business.

With my violin I went to the empty cement yard. It was cold and windy. I came to the newspaper pavilion, the only spot that the biting, north wind couldn’t reach. But I turned around when I remembered that Zhu Hen had hanged himself on it last Spring Festival, and started to pace along the stone wall. I imagined how desperate the Russian violinist had felt on that summer day when he was going to sell the violin. I then recalled that my violin teacher, who was also a Russian, had always told me to do scales and études in slow tempos, so that I hadn’t learned as many solo pieces as I should have given the number of years I had practiced. Shortly before his departure to Moscow, however, he taught me “Devil’s Trill,” a violin sonata by Tartini. He praised me for mastering the trills quickly.

When I turned to walk in the other direction, I felt that my head was filled with pleasant memories about Spring Festivals: kneeling in front of my ancestors’ memorial tablets before receiving a red packet from my grandmother as a Lunar New Year gift; whipping a top in the yard of my home with my cousins, and wandering by myself in the market street, where I had always heard a street musician playing the flute. The simple melodies he played, mingled with the people’s bargaining with the street vendors and their various accents. These, and the outcries of a street artist making small dough figures, had become symbols of joy since my childhood, so that whenever I played

“Devil’s Trill” many years later, my mind would return to that street scene.

After another turn or two, I felt that I had to find a place to play “Devil’s Trill” right away, and so entered the lavatory through its doorless entrance. As I anticipated, the room was fully loaded with prisoners in their black wadded jackets, squatting over the excrement ditch, their elbows resting upon their knees and hands clasped before their faces. This ugly, elongated black row called to mind a row of fish hawks perching on rims of the boats as they sailed by the docks. But I didn’t expect that the odor to be so strong that it nearly knocked me out.

Among them I saw Thin Coffin, my former groupmate in Group 3, and Cockeye, another former groupmate in Group 2. They were both having diarrhea, a remarkable phenomenon during Spring Festival time. Their lousy stomachs and intestines gave them no peace at all, even though they had been squatting there for hours already. Nevertheless, they were talking enthusiastically about the food that was to be served on the Spring Festival Day.

“I heard them say there’ll be another big piece of pork tomorrow,” Cockeye said.

“Are you sure?” Thin Coffin asked him.

“Yes, a big piece of pork,” Cockeye said.

They stopped talking when they saw me coming with my violin.

“Hey, are you going to play here?” Cockeye asked me. I didn’t answer him. The strong smell had forced me to hold my breath. I was about to leave when Thin Coffin said that he could play the violin, too, and wanted me to play a serenade for him.

“The smell’s not so good,” he said sympathetically, “but let me tell you, most of us have been here since noon and we’ve grown used to it.”

Two inmates squatting beside him chimed in with Thin Coffin as he was trying to produce a smile on his taut face. I told them I should warm up for a while before I could play a song.

“Please,” Thin Coffin said, “I’ll be here for the rest of the afternoon. And I won’t rise until I hear you play Tosali Serenade.”

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The excrement ditch was built against the inner wall of the lavatory, while a long urinating ditch was situated on the opposite side, leaving a path in between only as wide as my shoulder. The only spot where I would not be rubbing shoulders with the inmates coming and going was the inner corner of the room, near the paneless window where last spring Shan Jungen had picked up my gloves. He had paid with his life for the theft. I shrank when I recalled how we carried him to the prison hospital, with his head wrapped in a blood-soaked towel. But then I comforted myself that I wasn't alone here. Besides, it occurred to me that every single square foot inside the stone walls might have an equally horrible story if I checked with those who had been here before I came. I shouldn't be too fussy. I started to tune the violin. It was quiet for several minutes. Everyone looked at me as though expecting to hear a wonderful song. They resumed chatting with each other when I started to play a scale. Thin Coffin was right, I had already gotten used to the smell quite quickly, and by the time I started to play the "Devil's Trill," I was able to imagine with my eyes shut that I was playing the violin at home. But I couldn't recall it, not even the easiest part of the piece. And my fingers didn't listen to me.

It was almost suppertime when I left the lavatory. As I passed through the big room, I heard inmates call me Lavatory Violinist, and felt them looking at me respectfully. After supper, I left my group again. The wind had stopped, and it grew warmer than in the afternoon. There was a big crowd in the cement yard. All the inmates were in high spirits. They wanted me to play songs for them.

"On no other occasion will you have as large an audience as tonight," said Zu Shaojun. "You really need to thank Spring Festival Eve."

Later on, I went with the big boss to his bunk in the general service group. He had also invited Li Weiguo, the former middle school music teacher, and Chow Zhude, the former psychiatrist. They all said that even though I couldn't perform anything complete, they could tell from the way I held the violin and the bow that I had once been a good violinist.

“Last year we drank tea at Zhu Hen’s bunk,” Li Weiguo murmured nostalgically.

“You don’t mean he’s going to follow Zhu Hen’s example,” Chow Zhude joked.

“He won’t,” Zu Shaojun said, “Zhu Hen had problems but he doesn’t, though I noticed that they have one thing in common. That is, when they play their instruments, they both seem to have completely forgotten where they are.”

The big boss grew more talkative as the night waned. He kept telling us that it was still early and that we wouldn’t have another chance like this because he wouldn’t be here for the next Spring Festival. I thought of Zu Shaojun as simply the officers’ mouth-piece, despite the fact that the deep lines around his mouth made him look friendly. He was in his early forties, tall, and a little stooped.

“I am going to say good-bye to you guys soon,” he said.

“Are you going to go back to Shanghai?” Chow asked him.

“I don’t know,” Zu said. “I left home in 1961. My mother passed away in the following spring and three years later my father joined her. Now only my elder brother and his family still live in the house.”

Zu Shaojun had been a deacon in the church in Shanghai. After the liberation, the church bishop and several deacons were weeded out and imprisoned as alien elements. As one of the few, who survived the “church-combing-out movement,” Zu Shaojun continued to dedicate himself to God. He was betrayed by a colleague assigned to the church by the government, and got twelve years. He told us that he had been on a farm in Anhui Province before he was transferred to the island. When I asked him if he still prayed every day he remarked, “Do you think praying has to be done outwardly, like playing the violin?”

It was close to midnight when I returned to my group. All the groupmates had slept. It was quiet, broken now and then by Wu Dedon’s uttering unintelligible words in his dream. He had inserted a piece of bamboo shaped like forceps into his mouth. As a result, he could no longer talk clearly. Carefully I put the violin into the case. Before I climbed up to my bed, I heard noise

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from the neighboring bunks. In the dim light of a bulb that was hung right above my bed, I saw on the wall that the shadows of two hands trying to catch each other as if performing a finger-shadow play. It was not until I had watched them for two minutes that I began to understand that these two hands were actually fighting. Holding my breath, I hid myself in the shadows, and continued to watch. I noticed that one of the two hands belonged to Old Cop, while the other belonged to Pan Hugen. The Old Cop's hand was trying to reach inside the coppersmith's travel bag, which he had put under his head for a pillow. And the coppersmith's hand was preventing his bag from being invaded. It wrenched away Old Cop's hand, which was trying to pull the zipper open. Strangely enough, both fighters covered their heads with their blankets as though embarrassed to face each other at the moment when their hands worked so hard against each other. Finally, the coppersmith compromised, and let Old Cop's hand enter his travel bag. But he didn't expect that the invader would be so greedy that it took a quarter of the cakes his wife had brought. With this booty, Old Cop's hand rapidly withdrew into his blanket. The coppersmith's hand grasped the edge of Old Cop's blanket to try to jerk it off him.

At that instant I pulled the blanket off Zhuang Guoying from the other side. He certainly didn't expect that there was another hand that would snatch his blanket. I did it with a flashing speed so that he didn't even have time to react: I saw him huddling on his side, chewing the cake carefully and swallowing it slowly with his eyes shut.

"What're you doing?" I shouted. Zhuang Guoying opened his eyes and stopped chewing, but his mouth was so full he couldn't say a word. All he could do was to swallow the cake as fast as he could. His eyes rolled upwards and his face turned purplish. When he finished this rather painful process of eating, he whispered breathlessly, "Don't shout. We're still friends."

I didn't shout, but I strangled him with both hands, and pulled him down to the ground. He struggled, striking my stomach with his knee, and finally freed himself. He grinned, and gnashed his teeth as if trying to scare me with his ugly and vicious

demeanor. I knocked him down with a heavy jab. When he rose from the ground, he jumped on me. He was strong and had been trained in martial arts as a policeman. But his blows didn't make me feel anything. I hit him harder and more effectively as the fighting went on. He rubbed his bleeding mouth and asked if I dared go to the cement yard. I said yes.

Many prisoners came out to watch us fighting. Two men walked up and held my arms when they noticed that I was fighting against the future big boss. Before I had time to shout, a shower of blows landed on my head. I felt black stars flashing across my eyes. My nose was broken. My eyes blurred. I didn't see anything except for Old Cop's grinning face jerking with each strike he launched on me. I knew I would collapse soon if he continued to hit me like that. At that point I heard someone yelling, "Don't hold him, or I'll tear you to pieces." Raising my head, I saw Jin Min, and behind him, another big muscled prisoner.

"Let them fight each other," another voice shouted.

To keep myself from falling, I reeled around. I saw the crowd looking at me curiously. When I finally controlled myself, I knocked Old Cop down. I watched him rise, and knocked him down again. When I did this six times he gave in.

"Did you steal Pan Hugen's cake?" I shouted.

"He gave it to me," he murmured.

"I didn't," shouted a voice from the crowd. It was the copper-smith. He had been among the onlookers as if it were none of his business. Gao was there, too. He declared that he had collected enough evidence from Old Cop's bed and would give it directly to Chief Zhang tomorrow morning. Old Cop was lying on the ground, and covering his face with both hands. They brought me to Song Shushao, the barracks physician, who checked my wound. To my surprise, he gave me the same herbs he had prescribed for the diarrhea patients.



Early next morning, I was summoned to the reform office. Only Chief Zhang was there. With an air of approval he told me that he had already learned what had happened the night before.

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Obviously, he felt pleased at what I had done to Old Cop. He appointed me to go to the headquarters to be a waiter for a large party—a job, he said, should have belonged to Old Cop, had he not cooked his own goose.

Each year at this time, the labor reform center would invite the important people on the island to a banquet. All the members of the local government, from the governor to the mailman, their families, and relatives were invited. The party would last for a whole day, but the climax was an enormous meal at noon.

The banquet was for some three hundred people, prepared by five prison cooks, and as many as twenty helpers selected from various companies. It was regarded as an honor to be able to serve the guests of the labor reform center on such an occasion. It also had a substantial benefit: you could always bring food back to the barracks, the leftovers, of course, but still ten times better than what the big kitchen could offer, together with some rumors or news about the outside world you'd heard during the day.

Song Shushao, the quack, who had been there the previous year, was going with me. We were a little late, so when we hurried up to the backyard of the headquarters where prisoners from other companies had already been at work, we simply had no idea what we should do. In one corner of the yard, a group of prisoners was washing the soybeans and cabbage, another group, chopping potatoes and spinach grown in the greenhouse of the women inmates' farm. In the other, three women inmates were scraping the scales off fish with knives while talking enthusiastically about something funny. From inside the kitchen came the smell of onion and garlic, along with sounds of jabbering, laughing and chopping in quick rhythm. One could tell that there were several knives working together in the kitchen. To add to this festive atmosphere was the bright sky. But none of these groups seemed to be interested in us. When we hesitated if we should remain there or go to find the officer in charge, a prisoner wearing a grayish shirt came out from the kitchen door. He told us to go with him. He was in his early forties, and was the strongest man I had ever seen. His head was double the size of Song Shushao's, but his neck was even bigger and together they

made me think of a copper bell covered on his broad shoulders. When he introduced himself as Lao Zhong, all the prisoners in the yard stopped their hands and turned to look at him as though he were a hero. In fact Lao Zhong was a butcher. He wanted the two of us to go with him to the slaughterhouse, which was not far from the headquarters. On the way there he told us that there would be over five hundred guests coming to dine in the hall, two hundred more than the authorities had estimated, but the meat they had prepared was only for three hundred. To meet the additional demand, the commanding officer had signed an order to kill another pig.

It was not yet eight o'clock, but the main square had already been crowded with the civilians. Half of them followed us to the slaughter house where the pig had already been tied up on its legs and hung upside down from a pulley that was fastened between two bamboo poles, each as thick as a bowl. The pig was struggling, and let forth terrible screaming when Lao Zhong approached it with a knife. He scraped the knife on his own trousers the way a barber scraped his shaving knife on a leather, and was about to slit the pig's throat when there was a stir. Someone shouted that the commanding officer was coming. Immediately the crowd made way for the host of the party, who was wearing a navy overcoat with all the buttons unbuttoned so that one could see the new black Mao style uniform he was wearing inside, and a pair of shiny black leather boots in which the butcher's enormous head and a part of the pig were reflected like a mirror.

"Wait," the commanding officer said in his bass voice. He looked at the pig and then turned to Lao Zhong, asking, "Do you know where to set your knife?"

The butcher nodded, and measured the pig's throat with his thick-fingered hand, showing the commanding officer where he was going to cut. The commanding officer looked at him, and then turned to a young couple—the man was wearing a grayish wool overcoat and the woman a brown one. Her hair was made in a fashionable style that distinguished her from the local women. The commanding officer explained that it was very

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important to cut into the right spot, or the blood would run back to the pig's head to become a "bloody head," and such a head didn't taste any good.

"I know, your honor," the butcher said. He approached the pig, but, as though remembering something important, he paused and asked surprisingly, "How can you know that, your honor?"

"I was once a butcher myself," the commanding officer replied good-naturedly, looking at the young woman out of the corner of his eyes.

"I guess you guys are from Shanghai, am I right?" he asked the young man.

"Yes," he said.

"Have you ever seen this before?"

"It's the first time," the woman said, flushed.

The commanding officer turned back to the butcher and started to talk with him about butchering, which nobody seemed to understand because they communicated with each other in the slang of the profession. For example, the commanding officer said, "I think Three Seven is okay." The Butcher said, "Four Six is fine."

Both men agreed that butchering a pig was a sort of art which was as delicate as embroidering.

At that moment the officer in charge of the banquet arrived, a young man wearing a black Mao style uniform, who saluted the commanding officer and then urged the butcher that the job should be done as soon as possible because there was only one hour before the cooks would start cooking.

The butcher ordered Song Shushao and me to hold the pig's legs, and approached it with his knife. He slit its throat quickly. The pig's screaming almost split my eardrum, and its last throes threw both of us to the floor: I fell backward against the crowd while Song Shushao dived forward, his head right below the pig's throat. As a result, the shower of blood that erupted from the pig's slit throat spilled all over him.

"You damned good-for-nothing bastards," the butcher roared at us. He kicked Song Shushao on his side, and ordered us to stay

out of his way. On the yard outside the slaughterhouse I found a water tap. But there was no hot water. Song Shushao said he couldn't wait any longer. He trembled, and held his arms tightly in front of him like a drowning chicken as I sprayed the cold water on him. He could hardly stand straight, or mutter a clear word, for his lips, which had turned blue, were shivering madly. I ran with him to the barracks where he changed his clothes. When we returned, the pig had stopped moving. After loosening the rope, Lao Zhong ordered us to help him pull the pig to the stove where water was boiling in a caldron as big as a bathtub. When he noticed that the commanding officer was watching him, however, he shoved us away. Taking off his shirt that had already been soaked with sweat, the butcher declared that he would do everything by himself. He pulled the dead pig to the cauldron. He then lowered himself and held the pig's four legs with both hands. With a thundering bellow and a sudden exertion, he awed the audience by lifting the pig up on his shoulder. He must have felt so smug as he laid the pig on the table beside the caldron that he completely forgot who he was, and loudly ordered the young officer who was standing beside the commanding officer to fetch him a bamboo pipe that was lying on the floor near the corner where several pigs' heads were hung from a bamboo pole. The young officer looked surprised and unhappy about being commanded by a prisoner in front of the commanding officer and so many civilians, but when the commanding officer told him to do as the butcher said, he handed the pipe to Lao Zhong who inserted the sharpened end of the pipe into one of the pig's rear trotters and started blowing on the other end of it with his mouth. His cheeks bulged. His face turned as red as a pig's liver. In a few minutes the pig grew as round as a balloon. With a tape, the butcher sealed the hole in the pig's trotter. He then rolled the pig into the cauldron as if rolling a ball. He turned it over and over in the hot water for ten minutes or so before he pulled it out. With his knife he began to shave it. The commanding officer stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the butcher's hand with which he held the knife, only now and then raising his hand to rub his newly shaved chin. More

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people came to watch. Some newcomers cursed the butcher, saying that it was sinister to kill animals on the Lunar New Year's Day. But they calmed down as soon as they learned that the commanding officer was among the onlookers.

The commanding officer raised a finger at the pig, and murmured to the butcher dreamily, "Don't miss that area. I always found that pigs are poorly shaven in those hidden spots."

The butcher raised his head. His eyebrows moved quickly. "Yes, your honor," he said. "But those roughly shaved pigs didn't come out of my hand."

Raising one of the pig's rear legs, he demonstrated how quickly and cleanly he shaved that area.

"It's just that simple, as you can see, your honor. I have to say those amateur butchers didn't even know how to shave the belly cleanly, not to mention hidden areas like this."

The crowd burst into lunatic laughter. Two young men in the front row even made fun at each other by imitating the butcher, while beside them the young woman from Shanghai flushed again. She held her boyfriend's hand. Immediately her action caused others' stares. Although the butcher's knife deeply engaged them, nobody seemed to have forgotten that according to the Great Leader, holding hands between the opposite sexes in public was an indecent action. The young woman quickly withdrew her hand from his. She lowered her head.

The commanding officer asked the butcher where he had come from, and why he was imprisoned.

"Your honor," replied the butcher, without stopping his knife, "to be frank with you, I was one of the three great masters in Yangzhou famous for our skills with the knife."

"What's that?" the general chief asked.

"One man worked in the public bath specializing in digging corns and trimming calluses on customers' feet with his knife; one was a barber who won the contest for shaving men's faces; and I was the third, famous for butchering pigs."

The commanding officer laughed heartily. The butcher stopped shaving the pig, and raised his head to tell the commanding officer in a low voice that the governor of the province had once

invited all three of them to a party in the government hall.

“Why did you come here then?” the commanding asked, as though talking with a friend.

“Your honor, I didn’t pay enough attention to my thoughts, that’s why I fell into the rotten quagmire of capitalism, and became a criminal to the Party and the people,” the butcher recited fluently.

“What’s your crime?”

“Your honor, I had inappropriate relations with women when I got drunk.”

The commanding officer didn’t ask any more. So the butcher picked up an axe and started chopping the pig’s head with it. When that was done, he put the head on the iron hook and ordered me to hang it on the bamboo pole with the other heads. I braced myself to go. The head was not as heavy as it looked, so I managed to carry it without letting it touch me. Meanwhile the butcher started to chop the carcass and remove the entrails. The kidney, liver, heart and intestines were put in different basins and were sent to the cadre’s kitchen for some special dishes. When we returned, the crowd was gone. Lao Zhong chopped the carcass into great chunks and put them in four wooden buckets. He ordered us to put them in a handcart and delivered them to the backyard of the headquarters.

The cooks cut the meat into smaller pieces. The piles of fresh meat were washed under the water tap, then went into the kitchen. Through its open door we could see the head chef, a middle-aged man cooking. He was now ordering his assistants to hand him the soy source, now yelling to exchange jokes with the three women inmates working in there. One of women I recognized as the former actress who had performed with Zhu Hen and Li Weiguo in the concert at the previous Spring Festival. I walked up and said hello to her. She recognized me, too, and called me in.

Her name was Liang Suying. When I told her that Zhu Hen had hanged himself right after the concert, she stopped her work and gaped at me for almost a few minutes. She wanted me to help her wash the dishes in the kitchen so that we could

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continue to talk. She had been an actress for the Beijing Opera before her arrest for a counterrevolutionary action. She was twenty-seven when she left her husband and her three-year-old son. She had been in for two years, so she was twenty-nine now. With fine wrinkles around her eyes, even if she didn't smile, she looked as if she were thirty-nine. She seemed to have gauged what I was thinking, and said that had I known her before, I would have gaped at her as she did now at the news of Zhu Hen's death.

I comforted her that she would regain her youthful look when she regained her freedom.

"He's never come to visit. I don't know if he's already had another woman. I don't care about his attitude toward me, but I miss my son so much. I've written at least a hundred letters begging him to let me see my son at least once. None of my letters have been answered. It's tough. . ."

I told her briefly about myself. From her eyes I learned that she trusted me. We worked side by side in the kitchen for the next two hours. During that period the feast was taking place on the other side of the wall.

When we went out to clean the hall, most of the guests had left, only here and there a drunkard was lying with his face down on the table, one of them was crying, the rest snoring. There were wineglasses and dishes lying about in disorder. We chose the untouched food from the leftovers and put them into big paper bags and brought them in the kitchen. Now we were going to have our lunch. Hu Yin hao, a handsome inmate in his mid-thirties from Company No. 8, took two bottles of red wine from inside his black wadded-numbered-jacket, and announced that they were the gift from the officer in charge to reward us for our good service. But he said we had to drink inside the kitchen and nobody should get drunk. We were jubilant, Liang Suying and the other two women even clapping their hands, although they said they couldn't drink.

So we raised our glasses. The two kitchen windows had been blocked by heaps of bowls and dishes, and the room grew as dark as in the evening. Under the dim light of a bulb hung from the

sooty cross beam, the faces of inmates turned softer and more appealing than under the sun. Around the long table sat fifteen prisoners. When more returned from the hall with bowls and dishes, they could only sit on the edge of the counter, or simply squat by the stove. Nobody complained. With the wine everybody was happy and polite as though a guest at the party. In one corner of the kitchen, beside three tin trash cans lay many big paper bags in which we had put the “untouched food” from the leftovers. I could imagine how excited those hungry men back in the barracks would be when I opened a bag of food for them. But this was not the time to think about them.

The wine was good. Somehow it aroused in me a feeling of self-importance, and an illusion that I was with Li Chin and other school friends in the Happy Commune. Except for Hu Yinhao, the head cook and the butcher, who were considered to have played crucial roles in preparing the meal, each of us had only half a glassful. A man sitting beside me, who had tossed down his wine in one gulp, joked that he'd rather go without it, because he just had a feeling that he was about to be carried away with the wine when he found his glass empty. As soon as we started to eat, the kitchen door was pushed open and in came the officer in charge. He told Hu Yinhao to make sure that nobody got drunk.

Shortly after the officer left, however, Lao Zhong tossed off his third glassful and turned to a woman sitting nearby. With a stiff tongue, he murmured, “It’s the S-pring F-estival.” And he tried to grasp her hand.

She screamed. The butcher withdrew his hand, but he rose and looked around bluntly. The woman ran away. We pushed him back to his seat. The butcher dropped his enormous head to his chest and fell silent. Nobody seemed to take it seriously and we resumed to talk. But right then the butcher cried, and banged the table with his heavy palm.

“Do you know who I am?” he yelled and looked around angrily as if trying to find out his enemy among us, “I’m one of the three great knifing masters. . .” But before he finished his drunken words the officer slipped in.

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"Get him down," the officer shouted. But the butcher toppled the table, and grabbed the officer by his arms and threw him to the floor as if throwing a sack of flour.

"Don't let him get the knife," the officer shouted. He threw a rope to Hu Yin hao and ordered us to tie the butcher. Except for the three women, who huddled together in the far corner of the kitchen, we all jumped on him. It took us more than five minutes to get him under control. His hands and feet were tied together the way a pig was tied. He was still yelling, so the officer picked up a greasy rag from the counter and gagged the butcher's mouth. The officer then ordered Song Shushao and me to get a handcart from the yard. When we came back with the handcart, he snickered and told us to put the butcher into it and deliver him to the slaughterhouse.

Lao Zhong slept the whole way there. When the officer ordered us to hang him on the pulley from which the pig had been hung in the morning, however, he opened his eyes wide and struggled. Song Shushao rolled the rope and the butcher was lifted in the air.

The officer walked around him, tapping his round head and said, "You'll remember how to talk to an officer."

The butcher couldn't say a word, since his mouth was gagged. He was sweating, and his hands turned purple. But he stared at the officer. An onlooker who had watched the butcher killing the pig in the morning reminded the officer that if the commanding officer stopped by, he might blame him for hanging the butcher in such a fashion.

"Don't even worry about that," the officer said. "He is in another party across the lake, and won't come back until tomorrow morning."

The butcher dropped his head backward as if hearing his death sentence being declared. The hall was crowded with civilians, mainly young men and boys, and the young couple from Shanghai was also there. Most of the young men and boys laughed at Lao Zhong. Two elder ones said that it was a retribution for his killing the pig on Spring Festival morning. A boy walked up to spit on him. When they realized that he could not

move at all, more boys came to torture him with their hands. They slapped his face, pinched his arms and legs, hit his stomach, and finally a boy even reached his hands between his legs, which caused the butcher to shake madly. Why they hated him so much probably only Chairman Mao knew, for down below on a poster of him smiling at the scene from the wall, was his famous saying, “To be merciful to the class enemy is a cruelty to the people!”

But that was too much, the officer yelled at the children to take their hands off the butcher. It took him almost an hour to get them out of the hall. Exhausted, the officer rested himself on the counter. He loosened the buttons of his new Mao style uniform, and fanned himself with his hat. He might have told us to release the butcher. But at that moment he saw a bamboo pipe on the counter, and immediately recognized it as the one that the butcher had used to blow up the pig in the morning. The officer became outraged again—he didn’t forget how the butcher had ordered him to fetch the pipe in front of the commanding officer and so many civilians.

“Don’t release him before five o’clock,” he said to us, and left.

So the butcher was in our hands. We could release him if we liked. But Song Shushao refused to do so. He didn’t forget that the butcher had kicked him, and that the blood shower he had taken in the morning. Instead he pulled the gag off Lao Zhong’s mouth, and asked him how he was feeling. The butcher breathed quickly, and groaned like a pig. Song Shushao slapped his face, and pinched his legs with both hands. While working, the quack bit his tongue, and winked at me. The butcher burst into screaming insanely.

Shortly after we released him from the pulley, Lao Zhong passed out. We put him into the handcart and took him back to the kitchen. Nobody was there. We were about to leave when Hu Yin hao came and told us that all the inmates were in the big hall to see a movie show—*Lenin in 1918*.

Although the movie had been shown three times already in the past year alone, the hall was full. I stood in the back of the crowd. It happened that Lian Suying was in front of me. Not far from us stood the young couple from Shanghai. I saw them

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holding hands together. Their faces shone with enjoyment.

When the scene at Swan Lake appeared, I found Liang Suying's hand was in mine. I stroked it. I played with every single finger of it. They were soft and nimble. She turned to look at me, her eyes brightening, a shy smile suspended on her thin lips. The crowd stirred: on the screen Lenin's bodyguard Vasily kissed his wife. Some folks before us clapped their hands, and recited loudly with Vasily as he told his wife: "Bread will be available. Meat will also be available."

Our hands played with each other. She leaned on me, so the back of her head was on my face. I sniffed her hair, and I said her name. She responded with her hand.

I didn't know how I got back to the barracks with the paper bag full of fried pork and other food that had been scraped from the guests' dishes. I didn't have to find my friends from among their groups, for they had waited for me at the big iron gate for almost two hours.

"Don't push," Thin Coffin yelled to the other inmates in a subdued voice. And he stretched his long arms to prevent the paper bag from being invaded. It was almost midnight when I finished distributing the leftovers. They each gave me a pat on the head, but none said a word because they didn't want to awake those who were sleeping inside the barracks. While they went to the far corner of the cement yard, I entered my barracks door. I climbed to my top bunk. It was nice to think that only a while ago I had held Liang Suying's hand in mine. The romantic feeling would last for a few days, and then it would sink in my memory, along with other things.