

John J. Berry

THE HEART OF POWER

IT IS ALWAYS HOT in the dictatorship. But neither the Leader nor the people find the heat oppressive, and on this as on all other matters they are of one mind. The heat is accepted as a constant; it was there at the time of the imperialists and before then during the lost centuries of torpor and division and farther back in the great age of kings and glory. Every day the sun rises and pours down, relentlessly, like lava from the sky.

The unity of the Leader and the people is manifested everywhere: in the proclamations of the people's committees; in innumerable radio broadcasts and newspaper articles; in the pictures of the Leader's face that are posted all over the city—on the whitewashed walls of the government buildings, on the sides of buses grinding slowly down the main avenues, on the tin shanties of the poor that have proliferated on the outskirts of the city and which now surround the Presidential Palace in a warm embrace.

The people are witness to the Leader's love for them; it is evident in all his acts—in the literacy program, the health clinics serving the peasants, the new hydroelectric project. The love of the Leader is essential to the people, for their greatest wish is not to be despised, and it is very difficult to achieve this desire. This is what the struggle is about, although it is phrased in other terms: building socialism, making revolution, becoming developed. And there is the great proof that the Leader loves them: he does not despise them. How could he?—he is one of them, the son of a peasant, a junior officer in the army, then a member of the People's Committee of Officers, then head of the People's Committee, finally President for Life of the People's Republic. What has he in common with the former dictator, with his foreign degree and foreign ways and foreign friends? The Leader claims that his predecessor was a tool of the foreign imperialists, and the people accept this charge as possibly true; but what they really think is that the former dictator was foreign in his views, which is to say that deep down he despised them too. So the gist of his program was to modern-

ize the country so that it would be more like the Western countries and then he would not have to be ashamed of them any more, which was a serious burden to him, at least until the Committee of Officers shot him.

So now the people and their leader are one.

“Why do you not rebel?” the French journalist inquires of a young man.

He smiles; he is seventeen and a former student who works at the Ministry of Culture, which is in the process of defining indigenous art. It is his first job, unless working in the sugar cane fields sixteen hours a day can be considered a job. The journalist is a woman, in her mid-twenties, and there is a flirtatiousness in the question, which brings his smile and causes her to smile back. He does not bother to answer, since the question has no weight; it hangs in the air between them for a moment and then wafts away.

“What of those who are arrested—there are rumors of torture?”

This is a real question. The boy, whose name is Machel, knows he must answer. A number of his friends have been among those arrested, and he is aware of their fate.

“The people who are arrested are enemies of the revolution, and if they are tortured it is because it is necessary to find out their plans and confederates. The revolution is only beginning and if we fail to protect it then the imperialists will return, and those who would aid them threaten us all.”

“What of freedom of speech, of press? Why aren’t these allowed?”

“Because they are not true freedoms, since they will only cause delay and hold us back. The greatest freedom is the ability to achieve what is necessary, and for that we need unity of purpose. We are underdeveloped and cannot afford the luxury of dissention and factionalism.”

He is pleased with his answers, as is the journalist. She is from a progressive publication and is not unfriendly to the boy’s point of view. And the interview will read well in her article, which she hopes will be objective and not sentimental.

Later that day Machel and his friend Faron sit on the floor of the small,

one room apartment they share, drink coffee and argue. Machel argues that since socialism is scientific its principles are apparent; thus debate within the party is needless and divisive, since the Leader can determine the proper path without advice. Faron, who is a year older than Machel and who hopes to be an engineer, argues that as science is based on empirical observation, experiments are required in many instances to discover the correct method of implementing new programs. Machel notes that if what Faron says is true, then government projects and programs would have to be implemented repeatedly to ascertain their proper methodology, which is absurd since there is barely time to implement them in the first place. Faron, however, raises the possibility of limited testing, of implementing programs where practical on a small scale to enable the government to correct imprecise assumptions and to deal with unforeseen difficulties. Machel responds that progress cannot be achieved piecemeal. It is getting late and agreement must be reached, and since the phrase piecemeal progress rings false to both of them, it is Faron who concedes error.

There is a snag in the hydroelectric project. The layer of silt on the riverbed, deposited over thousands of years, is deeper than expected. Great stones, cut from quarries on the mountainside and hauled down to the site in trucks, are being laid along the bed to form a solid base into which pilings can be driven to support the superstructure of the dam. But as quickly as the stones are laid down they sink out of sight, the silt bubbles up, and nothing has changed.

The Leader appears at the site, where everyone is arguing about what should be done. The superintendent of the dam workers wants to lay down more stones, since eventually the silt must give way to the river bottom. The foreign advisors warn that too many stones will not provide solid support, since they will shift position over time, and add that their initial advice that the dam be constructed upriver should have been followed. The advisors are North Koreans. The Leader had wanted East German advisors, but traumatic and disheartening dislocations in the Socialist Bloc had rendered them politically unreliable, and so he had had to settle for North Koreans.

The Leader wants the dam close to the capital and not hidden way out in the countryside. So he expels the North Koreans and tells the

dam workers to lay down more stones. The North Koreans leave in a huff and the Leader is driven back to the palace. That night he lies awake and worries about the hydroelectric project. It is the showpiece of his modernization program: by damming the river they will be able to generate sufficient electricity to provide power to every village in the country. At least that is the plan, and it will have to work, for he has already bought over seventy million dollars worth of lamps, lightbulbs, toasters and microwave ovens. Eventually he falls asleep and dreams of great bolts of electricity running from his upraised hand into an endless array of labor-saving devices he has acquired for the people, and of their joy at being freed at last from the long toil of centuries.

A month passes and still the stones continue to sink, as the silt closes over with an increasingly ominous smacking sound. Also the dam workers are having problems moving the stones from the quarries to the site, since many of the trucks are beginning to break down under the weight of their cargo. Publicly the Leader tells the people that the difficulties being encountered in the hydroelectric project are part of the inevitable price of underdevelopment and should serve as an incentive for even greater efforts on everyone's part; privately he tells confidants that none of this would have happened if he had had German advisors.

Machel is in love. The girl's name is Aliashi and she works with him at the Ministry of Culture. Together they define indigenous art. Things are brought in—mosaics, pottery, paintings, sculpture—and a decision has to be made. The items that seem of recent vintage are taken upstairs for examination by the more experienced cultural workers, since it is here that foreign influences are most apt to have intruded, but the rest can be examined by the workers downstairs. Much of what comes in is from excavations, found by workers while digging irrigation ditches or foundations for health clinics; the artifacts are mostly broken and covered with mold, and can easily be classified as indigenous. In some cases, however, it is not so clear. For example, Machel first meets Aliashi while examining a silk screen painting of a stylized elephant.

"There are no elephants here," Machel notes.

"The artist could have seen a picture of one, or have traveled and actually seen one," Aliashi responds. She has long lustrous hair and great soft eyes. Machel is immediately in love, and it becomes important for him to demonstrate his skill and fidelity as a cultural worker.

"But this does not look like a real elephant," he says, tracing with his finger the elongated lines of the animal's body, "so it is not likely that he saw a picture, unless the picture itself was distorted, which means he only copied it which is not creative. And if he traveled and saw an elephant he must have been of the bourgeoisie, since only the rich could afford to travel to where elephants live."

"We do not know how old it is," Aliashi says, "and so we do not know if the artist was bourgeois. He may have belonged to the ancient ruling class, which would not make him bourgeois."

"The rich are the rich."

"No, I think that is inexact. The ancient rich were of the people, since at that time the people were one. It was only later, with the coming of the bourgeoisie, that the rich exploited the poor. The artist could have been from a noble family; he may even have been a prince."

They both stare at the painting, entranced now at the possibility that they view the work of ancient royalty, preserved by some miracle from the ravages of time and the thievery of foreigners.

They do not know how old it is, but there is no way to tell and a decision must be made. Machel proposes a solution: since the representation is stylized, it cannot be of the bourgeoisie, whose art is realistic; but it is reasonable to assume that it belongs to the time before exploitation, since the art of the ancients was often stylized. Aliashi hesitates. Although she does not want to argue against a clear solution, she knows that the party advocates socialist realism and opposes the absurd renditions of Western modernism as decadent. How then to reconcile the position of the party with the solution proposed? She explains her hesitation to Machel, and they consider the matter together and conclude that socialist realism can be produced only under socialism, and as the work is otherwise legitimate, it need not be realistic to be authentic.

That night he walks her home after work. She lives with urban rela-

tives and two other families in a flat in the old colonial section. They cannot go inside, since there is no privacy; instead they stand outside in the dark, silently staring at one another, unable to speak now that they are the reality to be defined. They hold hands briefly and then she must go in, leaving him alone in a world at once filled with great promise and achingly empty.

The North Korean advisors have come back. It is to everyone's interest that the misunderstanding be resolved. The North Korean government must save face, for it is important that the contributions of its experts be recognized. The Leader, on the other hand, must have foreign advisors for purposes of domestic credibility, for despite all his assurances to the contrary, the people do not believe they can accomplish any task of even moderate complexity without the presence of foreign advisors.

Soon after the North Koreans return, the Leader gives a speech to the people. His speeches, although fairly frequent, are great occasions, for he is an exciting speaker and almost everyone likes to hear him talk, and after the speech there is often a community sing. Speeches are given in the Coliseum of Progress, a huge stadium constructed by the former dictator, who wanted to put together a soccer team to win the World Cup and needed a place for them to play. The team never qualified for the World Cup, or even got to the stage of international competition, but the stadium remains, although now it is used only for speeches and patriotic displays. Loudspeakers wired to the podium make it possible for the speaker to be heard everywhere in the stadium, which is important, since the crowds that come to listen—drawn largely from the urban poor anxious to escape their sweltering tin shanties—often number over a hundred thousand.

The Leader now addresses such a gathering. He speaks to them of national purpose, of the need to continually make the revolution, and of the never ending nature of the struggle to overcome underdevelopment. Toward the end of the speech he becomes more animated than usual: he inveighs against the efforts of the foreign imperialists, engaged as they are in perpetual motion against the state, and stresses the need for continued vigilance on the part of the people against foreign agents and saboteurs, who have become increasingly active, for it has

turned out that all of the microwave ovens have been stolen.

After the speech a general search is made to locate the missing ovens, but none is found. It is universally understood that someone in the government has sold them abroad and pocketed the money; but it is equally well understood that the imperialists and their stooges have stolen the microwaves in order to leave the people with nothing. The imperialists escape; their stooges do not.

Machel has a new assignment. He works on an emergency committee that arranges for students and government workers to assist the dam workers in bringing stones down from the quarries to the site. By now most of the trucks have broken down, and so they have resorted to an older way of doing things: the stones are hoisted onto wooden carts and are hauled, by teams of workers yoked to the carts by heavy ropes, from the mountainside to the riverbank. Only there are not enough dam workers to do the job, so it has fallen to students and government workers to help, since apart from the peasants they are the only source of labor, and the peasants are needed to work the cane fields. Machel has not been required to perform this particular task, since he appoints those who are to do it, but he is only too aware that if he runs out of candidates he will be compelled, by the implacable logic of scientific socialism, to appoint himself. Thus he is dutiful in seeking others.

Meanwhile he has Aliashi to absorb his thoughts. They are together much of the day: they work together, eat lunch together, and after work they go for long walks. They tell each other of the life in the villages they came from, and which they have left behind now in the great activity of the revolution. Their villages, although far apart, seem to be much alike—for each of them it would have been an arranged marriage, with everything left to their families to decide. Now they are on their own, for arranged marriages are no longer permitted, at least not in the city. This aspect of his freedom is troubling to Machel, for he is not clear on how he should proceed. As much as he loves Aliashi, he hesitates to do more than hold her hand, since to go even a step farther is to make irrevocable commitments which he is not sure he can meet or even fully define. Aliashi, on the other hand, is strangely untroubled by the problem of what should happen next. She mentions couples that she knows and discusses the particulars of their lives: how

they cope with the housing shortage, their stratagems for obtaining privacy, the often convoluted ways they have found to care for their children, even to allowing the families with whom one or the other shares quarters to assume certain parental responsibilities. She applauds their cleverness. It is as if she views the whole matter as a great adventure and is heedless of obstacles and honor.

At night Machel is tormented by his desires and during the day he is shamed by his inability to assume control over the situation. And it grows worse, for she now responds to his hesitancy with a political argument: she claims that women are not accorded full status as workers, that even in the revolution men do not accept women as equals. Machel denies all this, at least as to himself, but she argues that it is men in general who are deficient in revolutionary consciousness, and whatever his personal beliefs and practices he shares in the collective counterrevolutionary bias of his sex. He cannot fathom what his political consciousness has to do with the problem at hand. And she refuses to elaborate, reiterating instead, with increasing tearfulness, the general political proposition.

More sabotage. A huge cache of counterrevolutionary propaganda is uncovered. By chance a member of the Internal Security Bureau happens to be in the bazaar district, where a remnant of the once flourishing marketplace is allowed to operate, and where peasants can directly sell portions of their crop for foreign goods, such as canned fruit and bottles of aspirin, at prices that would not be possible at the official exchange rate. The security officer is shocked to find peasants eagerly bartering their produce for T-shirts bearing the likeness and name of Michael Jackson, an American practitioner of an especially decadent form of Western music called rock-and-roll. Worse yet it is discovered that thousands of Michael Jackson T-shirts have already been sold and are being worn in villages throughout the country. This was permitted on the mistaken view that Michael Jackson is a famous black revolutionary even now working to free the nation of Detroit from the yoke of American imperialism. Reclaiming the T-shirts proves difficult, however, since many peasants are fans of Michael Jackson and hide the T-shirts when the Security Brigades show up for them, and in the end the Leader relents and declares Michael Jackson a Hero of the Revolu-

tion, albeit in his own fashion.

There is good news and bad news. The good news is that the dam is finally being erected. After months of effort the riverbed has been covered over with stones, the piles driven in and the cement poured for the superstructure. In addition, the hydroelectric plant is being constructed, with prefabricated parts and machine components being flown in on great transport planes and assembled on the banks of the river. Vast quantities of wire cable have also been flown in, enough to connect every village in the country to the plant's generators. Already the lamps, lightbulbs and toasters have been distributed to the villagers with promises of electricity to follow.

The bad news comes from the Korean advisors. One of them has noticed a lowering of the level of water in the river. It is explained to him that during the hot season the water level always drops. The Korean replies that he thought the recent increase in the temperature was a temporary phenomenon, which surely could not last. He is assured that it can. After this revelation the Koreans huddle together and discuss things, occasionally sending an emissary over to ask further questions about the effects of the hot season or to measure the water level at different points in the river. At length they approach the superintendent with the bad news: any significant lowering of the water from its present level will render the plant inoperable, at least until the water rises, because even with the dam the river will not provide sufficient force to work the generators. How much lower will it go? they ask. This low, the superintendent indicates, pushing a stick into the riverbank well below the smoothly flowing green waters. The Koreans shake their heads; too low, they say.

Aliashi's behavior is becoming increasingly troubling to Machel. Gently, with the softest caresses, she is making demands. There is no avoiding it: she wishes them to be intimate. But he cannot love her and be intimate with her if they are not married, and for them marriage is not possible, since there is a housing shortage and they would have to live apart. She tells him that she would not mind such an arrangement, but when he tries to explain to her that a husband must provide a home for his wife or it is not a true marriage she responds with the familiar argument that such attitudes belong to the past and deny women their

rightful equality. She has even suggested that marriage itself can wait, so long as they are happy together.

The situation is made worse by something he cannot tell her: he is not well informed on his marital duties, for he left his village for the city before they were explained to him. He knows from what little his father and uncles taught him, and from the stories and jokes told by the men around the family fire, that it is his duty to please her and that it is a duty requiring extreme skill and patience; and he knows from statements that Aliashi has shyly made that this was also the way in her village. It is, of course, the custom everywhere, and without it there can be no love between a woman and a man, for no woman can respect a man who is deficient in the performance of so basic a duty.

Machel finds the state publications on this subject unenlightening, since they stress birth control and hygiene but, whether because they assume that certain things are taught elsewhere or out of a sense of official decorum, do not explain just how he is to go about performing his duties. And there is no one he can confide in, not even his friend Faron, for to admit ignorance at his age on such matters is a bottomless disgrace.

Meanwhile Aliashi gives him no peace. When he is with her, even as they sit beside each other at the Ministry and analyze cultural artifacts, she touches his arm, or perhaps even his leg, lightly with her hand. She is becoming increasingly forward. And he is helpless and cannot help himself, and she knows it and continues.

The Leader expels the Koreans for good. This time they will not be allowed to return, for there is no getting around this business of too little water in the river. After all, what are foreign advisors for if not to know about these things? It is only seasonal, the Koreans assure him; the power plant will be functional for at least six months of the year. The Leader is beside himself with rage and shame: who ever heard of a power plant that works only half the time? The whole project has been reduced to an absurdity—it would have been better never to have started it and to have spent the resources elsewhere. Now they will be a laughingstock. He cannot think of how he will explain it to the people. The lowering of the river during the hot season is universally understood, and the principles of hydroelectric power generation have been widely disseminated as part of the government's efforts to show-

case the project. So how will it be possible to explain what has happened?

And that is not all. The literacy program is in trouble. Peasant children are being taken out of the village schools to work in the fields, since it has turned out to be a drought year and the sugar cane burns in the sun, and they cannot spare anyone from the fields in the rush to harvest the crop before it dies. And in addition to their falling behind in achieving literacy, the most that can be salvaged of the crop will be insufficient to cover what remains to be paid for the materials and equipment imported for the hydroelectric plant. The deficiency will have to be made up for by cutting back on the purchase of medical supplies, which will bring the health program to a halt, for the truth is that they have barely enough supplies as it is.

The Leader cannot believe how underdeveloped they are. He is so distraught over events that he considers resigning, but he has been elected President for Life and knows that things tend to work out that way. He walks onto the terrace that opens out from his study and looks out over the palace grounds and beyond, through the shimmering waves created by the heat, to the cane fields in the distance, where even now the crop he had counted on so much is burning away, and farther yet to where the river flows and where in his mind's eye he can see the swamp grass and the sand bars growing more prominent, rising ever so slowly from the warm water to the blistering air, the unprotected grass soon burnt to a yellow husk and the sand relentlessly hardening.

"Here. We are alone." Aliashi leaves the lights off and slips out of her shirt and trousers. Machel does the same, his fingers like stone on the buttons. Her flat is empty because the other occupants are all at the rally at which the Leader is to exhort them to greater efforts and to explain modifications of certain of the government's programs. Machel wishes he were there, but it is too late now; they are alone together as she has planned. She lies down in the dark on the cot and waits for him, and now he is out of time—he cannot do or learn more in the interval that remains.

Afterwards they lie apart on the cot and do not talk. Although she has said nothing he knows it has not been right for her. He had hoped to the end that if it just happened it would come out right for both of

them, but that is not the case, for as with everything else there is a methodology and scientific principles apply. He has one last hope: it is possible that she does not expect him to be expert in these matters, that all such notions are part of the past when men ruled women and there was no equality. But now she is softly crying in the darkness and her tears open an abyss; they tell him that his shame is limitless and that nothing will ever be right for them again.

The Leader lies in bed, listening to the night cries of the birds outside the open windows. He is exhausted but cannot sleep. Usually he enjoys giving speeches; it is when the masses assemble before him, and when he hears his voice over the loudspeakers, electronically altered and amplified so that he seems to be a listener, one of the crowd himself, that he comes closest to the people and most fully realizes himself in their mute longings and aspirations. But the speech tonight was difficult and not successful; there was too much to explain and he could not get it clear to himself and so he could not make it clear to them, and their confusion and disappointment came back to him like a sad echo of his own confusion.

Gradually sleep comes and he drifts away, finding respite from misfortune and failure and the ceaseless burdens of underdevelopment. In his dreams the way is clear and unencumbered, the intractable problems of the day dissolve as in a mist, and all things are possible and will be realized; he dreams too of the people, who have suffered through uncounted centuries, but no more, for their cares are lifted from them and they walk free into history's great light. The cries of the birds intrude, almost waking him, but he drifts back to other sounds, to his voice over the loudspeakers and the cheers of the people and their songs of solidarity, and then a song from the army barracks, a march to victory, and then another song, an old song in the old colonial language; it is a lament and a dirge, for it speaks of the failure of love, whose power is illusory and never enough; and the Leader wakes instantly, shivering in the heat, transfixed by a vision of terror without end.