

THE EYE OF NIGHT

THE STREETLAMPS CAME ON from above of course, but Chen Gao always felt as though the streams of light shot out in opposite directions from the top of his head. The street was an endless river of light. A large elm tree added its shadow to those of the people waiting for a bus.

He saw trucks and cars, trolley buses, and bicycles. He heard the shriek of whistles and the high-pitched din of voices talking and laughing. To Chen Gao, the city truly showed its peculiarities and vitality at night. He noticed people with permanent-waved hair and naturally straight hair, women wearing sleeveless dresses and shoes with spiked heels or pumps. He smelled the strong scents of perfume and face powder. Chen Gao was interested in everything and everyone he saw. He had not been to the city in over twenty years. He had spent those years living in a tiny village in a remote province where only a third of the street lights were turned on at night.

He didn't know whether this was due to forgetfulness or to technical mishaps but this was not a major problem because the people there lived more or less according to the old rural system of waking at sunrise and sleeping at sunset. No sooner was it 6 p.m. than all the offices, factories, shops and canteens closed down. In the evenings, the people stayed indoors, caring for children, smoking, washing clothes, and talking of things soon forgotten.

The bus arrived. The conductor was speaking into a megaphone while the passengers swarmed off the bus and Chen Gao and others crowded on. It was packed and there were no seats, but the people seemed not to mind. The conductor was a ruddy young woman with a smooth, resonant voice. In Chen Gao's remote village, such a young woman was sure to be chosen as an announcer for the cultural troupe. She flipped the electrical switch and the small shaded lamp used to check the tickets lit up. When she had torn up a few tickets, "snap," it went out again. Street lights, shadowy trees, buildings and pedestrians swept past. As the bus neared another station, the melodious voice announced the stop; the light went on again and people pushed and shoved once more.

Two young men dressed as workers got on. They were talking

animatedly. "Democracy is the key, democracy, democracy—" Chen Gao had been in the city just one week and everywhere he heard people discussing democracy. Discussion of democracy was as common in the city as a discussion of mutton in his village. He thought this was probably because the food supply was more adequate in the city and people didn't have to worry about mutton. Chen Gao smiled enviously. But he did not think democracy and mutton were contradictory. Without democracy, the mutton one was about to eat might be stolen. And a democracy that didn't help people in remote villages get more and meatier mutton was only extravagant prattle.

Chen Gao had come to the city to participate in a discussion about writing short stories and drama. Chen Gao had published five or six short stories since the fall of the "Gang of Four." Some people heaped excessive praise on him for writing more maturely and with a broader scope than in his past works, while an even greater number of others said he still hadn't recovered his standard of twenty years before. He recognized the fact that the craftsmanship of writers who over-emphasized mutton deteriorated easily. Still, he thought understanding the importance and urgency of mutton to be a big step forward. As he was coming to the meeting, the train had stopped over at a small station for an hour and twelve minutes because a man there—a man who had mutton but no home and was selling his mutton at a high price—had been crushed to death by the train. In order to sell off his mutton as soon as possible, he had gone so far as to forget his own safety and walked under the train as it was coming to a stop. As a result, the brakes jammed, the train slid ever so slightly, and the poor man was finished. This incident left Chen Gao feeling heavy-hearted throughout the trip.

At past meetings Chen Gao had always been the youngest member present; now he was one of the oldest. Furthermore, he was noticeably rustic, dark-skinned and coarse. Those tall, broad-shouldered, clear-eyed younger comrades expressed many bold, fresh ideas which were enlightening and arousing. However, the result was that literary questions weren't taken up. Despite the fact that those chairing the meeting did their utmost to guide everyone toward the central task, what people discussed most was the "Gang of Four's" dependence on a foothold in the countryside: anti-feudalism, democracy, ethics, and the legal system. They discussed how there were more and more young people gathering in the public parks for social dancing to the accompaniment of electric guitars, and how the park authorities had fought against this disaster by

broadcasting every three minutes the announcement that this kind of dancing was forbidden; violators will be fined and the parks will be closed as a consequence. Chen Gao also spoke at the meeting. Compared to the others, his remarks were low-key, "We must proceed bit by bit and begin with what's under our own feet, begin with ourselves. If half; no, a fifth; no, even a tenth of the statements made at this meeting became reality, we will have achieved our goal." This fact excited Chen Gao, but it made him apprehensive as well.

The bus reached the terminal but there were still many passengers on board. Everyone seemed relaxed. No one took any notice of the conductor's angry appeals to collect or check tickets. Like all out-of-towners, Chen Gao had happily held up his ticket early on, but the conductor hadn't even glanced at him. He had then very correctly taken the initiative to put it into her hands himself, but she hadn't even taken it.

He took out his little address book, opened the ash-blue cover, looked up an address and began to make inquiries. He asked one person the direction to the address he had written down, but there were a good many people who pointed it out to him. Only on this point did he feel that the people of this big city retained the tradition of "courtesy." He said his thanks and left the bright lights of the bus terminal, made several turns and entered the maze of a new residential area.

To say it was a maze was not to say it was complex, but that it was a simple unit of six one-story residential buildings, each no different than the others. They were thickly dotted with balconies packed with confused piles of belongings. Windows shone with green fluorescent lights and the yellow gleam of ordinary light bulbs. Even the noises floating out of each building's windows varied little. There was an international soccer match on TV. The Chinese team scored a goal and the spectators on the field and those in front of the flickering TV screens cheered together. People were shouting wildly. The sound of applause and cheering rose like a torrent. The popular old sports announcer Shang Shi was yelling for dear life knowing that at such a time commentary would be superfluous. From other windows came the sounds of hammering, of vegetables being chopped, of children quarreling and of adults threatening each other.

So many sounds, lights, and objects seemed all heaped together in each matchbox-like, blank building. Although this kind of cramped life was alien to Chen Gao, even a bit laughable, the shadowy trees, each one as

tall as a building, cast a veneer of mystery over everything. In his village, the evening sound heard most often was the barking of dogs. He was familiar with these dogs' barks to the point where he could distinguish, from a chorus of barks, which sound came from what color dog and who its master was. Then there were the sounds of trucks hauling goods. Their glaring headlights left one dazed. All the houses in the street shook in the wake of the trucks' rumbling.

Walking in this maze of residential buildings, Chen Gao had some regrets. He really shouldn't have left that bright main street and that noisily crowded happy bus with everyone travelling down the road together. That had been good, but now he felt all alone. It would have been even better if he had just stayed in the hostel and not come out at all. He could have argued the night away with those younger friends, each one clamoring to present his prescription for curing the ills of Lin Biao and the "Gang of Four." They would have discussed Belgrade, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Singapore. After dinner they could even have bought a plate of deep-fried shrimp chips and boiled peanuts with a litre of beer, to dispel the heat and to enliven the conversation. Now, however, he had inexplicably taken a very long bus ride to hunt for an unknown address to find a mysterious person to do a bewildering thing. Actually, the thing wasn't a bit bewildering; it was quite normal, quite proper, it was only that it was inappropriate for him to do it and that was that. It would be better for him to get up on the stage and dance the role of the prince in "Swan Lake," than to do this, though he had a bit of a limp when he walked. Of course, it wouldn't be noticed unless one were especially looking for it. This limp was a little souvenir from the "Clean up All Ghosts and Demons" campaign.

A feeling of having no appetite reminded him of the time he had left this city over twenty years ago. Then too he felt sad for "leaving the crowd behind." He had published several novels which were criticized for being excessive and now inadequate. Because of this, he had swung back and forth for a long time between being part of the majority of good people or part of the minority of bad people. It was a dangerous game.

According to what people had said, the building he was looking for was not far. Why did they build here? It looked as if they were going to put in some pipes; no, not just pipes, there were bricks, tiles, lumber and stone as well. Maybe they were going to build another couple of one-story buildings, a canteen, perhaps. Of course, it might also be a

public toilet. In any case, there was a wide ditch which he probably couldn't leap across. Before being "swept clean," he could have done it, but now he must find a bridge—a plank. So he anxiously walked up and down along the ditch, but in the end found no plank. All that walking in vain. Should he go around, or jump across? No, he couldn't bow to old age yet—he backed up a few steps, one, two, three . . . No, it was no good, one foot seemed to be bogged down in the sand. He had already begun to jump, but he didn't rise into the air, he fell into the ditch. Luckily, there was nothing hard or sharp at the bottom, but it took him close to ten minutes to recover from the pain and fright. He laughed and crawled lamely out. Wouldn't you know it, just as he was climbing out, he stepped into a puddle with his other foot. He pulled it out, but his shoe and sock were soaked. His foot felt very gritty, like the texture of sandy rice. He raised his head and saw an orange-red lightbulb on a crooked pole fixed to the side of the building. This lightbulb's existence here was like a tiny question mark, or, say, an exclamation point, drawn on a huge blackboard.

He walked toward the question mark/exclamation point. A mixture of shouting and whistling floated out of the windows again; probably the foreign team had scored another point. He drew near the door; carefully examined the writing above it, and decided that this was the place he was looking for. Still, he wasn't satisfied, but stood in the doorway waiting for someone to come by so he could inquire once more. At the same time, he felt quite embarrassed.

Just before he left, a leading comrade from his village, whom he knew and very much respected, came to see him and gave him a letter, asking him to meet the head of some company when he arrived in the city. "We're old Comrades-in-arms," Chen Gao's acquaintance had said, "I've already put it all down in the letter. The only car in our organization, a Shanghai model, has broken down. The supervisor and the driver have already been to a number of garages and it looks as if there's nowhere in this province that can do a good job on it. They lack some essential parts. This old friend of mine is in the auto repair trade. He promised me a long time ago that 'If it's anything to do with repairing cars, leave it to me.' Look him up and when you've worked things out, send me a telegram."

It was just such a run of the mill matter as this: Find one leader with position and power, one's own man, an old friend, to fix a state-owned car belonging to the unit of another leader with position and power who

in his locality commanded respect. There was no reason to refuse this old comrade's request, and Chen Gao, who understood the importance of mutton, had not formed any suspicions about the necessity of bringing the letter and finding the man. This incidental handling of a bit of business for his local unit was, of course, a duty to which he should give priority. But, ever since he had taken on this responsibility, he felt it was a bit like putting on a pair of shoes that didn't fit, or putting on a pair of pants only to discover that each leg was a different color.

The comrade in his remote village seemed to have read his mind. No sooner had he arrived in the city than a telegram was sent urging him to do something about the matter as soon as possible. Anyway, he thought, I'm not doing this for myself. I have never ridden in that "Shanghai" car and I never will. He had urged himself on, through the road with its river of street lights, out of the terminal with its theatrical brightness and warmhearted passengers. He had walked around and around, had fallen into a ditch and climbed out, clothes soiled, foot muddy. Now he had finally arrived.

At last, having had two children verify the building and apartment number, he walked quickly to the fourth floor. First he gave himself a few minutes to calm down and regulate his breathing, and then, as gently as possible, in a civilized yet sufficiently loud manner, he knocked on the door.

There was no movement, but a slight tinkling sound which seemed to come from within. He put his ear to the door. There seemed to be music playing. So he had no choice but to brush aside the disheartening yet relieved impulse to say, "ei . . . no one's home," and firmly knocked again.

After the third knock, he heard footsteps, then the sound of the lock being turned. The door opened. It was a young man with dishevelled hair whose torso and thighs were bare. From head to toe, he wore only a pair of white undershorts and white plastic slippers. His flesh glistened. "What do you want?" he asked, a bit impatiently.

Chen Gao gave the name on the envelope. "I'm looking for Comrade X."

"He's not here." The young man turned and would have closed the door, but Chen Gao took a step forward. He introduced himself in the most polite manner, taking care to use the pronunciation most standard in that city. He asked, "Are you one of Comrade X's family?" (He judged that this was Comrade X's son and actually the polite phrases

were completely unnecessary for one as much his junior as this young man.) “Can you hear me out and relay my business to Comrade X?”

He couldn't see the young man's expression in the darkness, but his intuition told him that he frowned and hesitated for a moment before he finally said, “Come in,” and he turned and went in with no greeting for his guest, in the manner of a nurse in a dental hospital telling a patient to come and have his tooth extracted.

Chen Gao followed the young man's footsteps in the pitch dark corridor. They passed a number of doors, one on the left, one on the right. There were many doors behind the first. One door was pulled open and a soft stream of light, the lovely sound of singing, and the mellow aroma of liquor wafted out.

There was a spring bed with an apricot-silk-covered quilt, not folded but piled like a big, overturned dumpling. There was a floor lamp which gave out a brightness that could repel someone a thousand miles away. The door of the cabinet at the head of the bed stood half open, exposing the marbles on the top shelf. Many good friends in his village had entrusted Chen Gao with buying marbles for them, but he hadn't bought them. There too, the production of these large free-standing cabinets was just coming into its own. He scanned the room again. It was furnished with rattan chairs and deck chairs and a round table. The table was covered with pages from the text of the model revolutionary play “Tale of the Red Lantern,” depicting the living room at Pigeon mountain in the fourth act. There was a pocket-size tape player with four speakers, imported goods, from which came the voice of a Hong Kong singing star. It was a mellow, delicate voice with crisp enunciation. As he heard it, he couldn't keep from smiling. If he took this tape and played it in his village, it would frighten the people living there more than an invading infantry. The only thing that made Chen Gao feel at home was half a glass of water sitting on top of the cabinet at the head of the bed. It was like finding an old acquaintance in the midst of strangers.

Chen Gao discovered a broken stool in front of the door, brought it over and sat down. His clothes were filthy. He began to give his reasons for coming. After a couple of sentences he paused, hoping the young man would turn down the music a bit. He waited several moments, but seeing that the young man had no intention of lowering the music, he continued abruptly. It was strange that Chen Gao, who had always been considered a good talker, seemed to have lost his tongue; he spoke in

fits and starts, in disconnected phrases. Some phrases he used inappropriately. For example, he had meant to say, "I'd like to ask Comrade X to help us make the contacts," but it came out, "Please give it your kind consideration," as if he had come to apply for a subsidy from the young man. He had originally intended to say, "I thought I'd come to see him first," but he said instead, "I've come to make contact." Furthermore, his voice had changed. It wasn't his own, but more like a blunt saw cutting wood.

After he finished he brought out the letter, but the young man, tilted back in the deck chair, didn't move. Chen Gao, who was probably twice his age, had no choice but to walk over and hand it to him. In so doing he got a clear look at the young man's conceited face, a face full of weariness, stupidity, and acne.

The young man opened the letter and glanced at it. He laughed once, a laugh full of contempt. His left foot began to beat time to the song. The sound of the tape player and its Hong Kong singing star was something new for Chen Gao. He certainly wasn't opposed to this style of singing, but he didn't find it very interesting either. A disdainful smile appeared on his face without his being aware of it.

"This X," (he was speaking of the leader of Chen Gao's area) is an old army buddy of my father's? How come I've never heard my father speak of him?"

Chen Gao felt as if he had been insulted. "You're young, perhaps your father never told you . . ." Chen Gao was no longer being polite either.

"But he did tell me that as soon as a vehicle needs fixing, everybody is his old friend!"

Chen Gao flushed, his heart began to pound and sweat oozed from his forehead. "Do you mean to say that your father doesn't know Comrade X, the head of my area? He went to Yanan in 1936, last year he even published an article in *Red Flag* . . . his brother is the commander of a Military Camp!"

When Chen Gao unexpectedly began reporting like this, especially when he mentioned the big shot, the military commander, he turned pale and dizzy, and he was pouring out sweat.

The young man's response was another contemptuous smile twenty times as big as the first. He even laughed out loud.

"Let me put it this way." The young man stood up, assuming an air of finality. "There are two main conditions for getting something done. The first is you must have something to exchange. What have you got to offer?"



“What have we got to offer? We have . . . mutton . . .” He said as if to himself.

“Mutton is no good.” The young man laughed again. His contempt was too great, and turned to pity. “The second condition, depends on your ability to pull it off—your ability to con people . . . why is my father the only one you can ask? Once you have the goods, there will be someone who can handle it for you. Just use whatever name you need to use.” Then he added, “My father has been sent to the seaside resort at Beidaihe . . . He’s convalescing.”

Chen Gao was bewildered. Just as he got to the door, he stopped a moment. He couldn’t help inclining his ear to the real music by the Hungarian composer, Lehar, which was now coming from the tape. It brought to mind a tableau of fluttering leaves and a jade-green lake surrounded by snow-capped mountains. His village was beside a high mountain lake. A wild swan often swam on the water.

He was back in the pitchblack corridor again. Chen Gao, running and stumbling as if drunk, charged down the stairs. He didn’t know if the tap-tapping was the sound of his footsteps or of his heart pounding against his side. As soon as he got out the door, he looked up. Heavens, that faint light bulb in the shape of a question mark or an exclamation point suddenly turned red. It looked like the eye of a monster.

Such a frightening eye—it could change a bird to a rat, a horse to a grasshopper. Still running wildly, Chen Gao cleared the ditch in one leap. The ball game had ended. In a soft, intimate voice the TV announcer was giving tomorrow’s weather. He reached the bus terminal in a flash. There were still just as many people waiting for the bus. There was a group of young women workers going to the night shift at the factory. They were all talking at once, discussing the workshop awards. There was a young couple holding hands, another wrapping their arms around each other’s waists. He thought that if certain people had seen this, they would certainly be shocked. Chen Gao got on the bus and stood near the door. This conductor was no longer young. Her body was so frail her bony shoulder blades seemed to be sticking out of her blouse. In twenty years of frustration and transformation, Chen Gao had gained a lot of precious knowledge but had also lost a few things which should never have been lost. Yet he still loved the lamp light, loved people on the night shift, loved democracy, rewards, mutton . . . the bell rang. There was one sound and then another, the three doors weren’t completely closed. Tree and light shadows began to recede. “Is there anyone

without a ticket?" The conductor asked once, but left before Chen Gao had a chance to get out his change. She thought that everyone on the bus was a night shift worker with a monthly ticket.

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