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Paper Butterfly

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Extract

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Prologue

East Wind Lao Gai Camp
Gansu province, China
December 1989

On they went, singing, "Communism is the red lantern of our heart" their voices soaring above the bitter wind. Their feet trampled on dead grass and bare earth. They swung their arms in rhythm, holding their heads upright, eyes fixed on each other's shaven heads. They sang eagerly, forcefully. Two words, lao gai *– work and reform – were emblazoned in white on their padded grey jackets. Behind them, the sky was the colour of sand, the sun white.*

This land offered nothing but harsh wind and dry yellow earth. Under the dome of the sky, snow-peaked mountains stood like unwanted burdens of the past. This was the province where the Great Wall ended, that the Silk Road had passed through. Both had lain forgotten for the last thousand years.

The guards opened the gate to let the convicts in. Above the high wall five red characters, East Wind Lao Gai Camp, confronted them.

"Halt!"

The prisoners stopped.

"Face forward!"

Officer Grasshopper Yao, tall, coat-hanger shoulders, called the roll. A red star, small but highly polished, shone in the fur of his hat.

"Twelve thirty-one."

"Dao." *The prisoner shouted yes.*

"Fifty-six thirty-four."

"Dao."

A sudden gust blew sand into the air, as though a truck was unloading on a construction site, and 3424 closed his eyes. He was a young man: the contours of his face were those of a boy, his skin yet to roughen, physique to fill out.

The guard swung his club and the prisoner fell to the ground, blood gushing, his handsome face ruined.

"Answer, Lin, you anti-Party, anti-revolutionary swine!"

"It was the wind, the sand," Lin mumbled, blood trickling through his fingers. He didn't look up. He was trying to discover where the pain was coming from. When he touched the gash on his cheek, he shrieked.

Now the guard kicked his ribs. Lin screamed and crumpled to the ground.

"Silence! You're here to reform yourself!" the guard yelled. "The first thing you will learn is respect. When you're asked a

question, you will answer. If you defy the People, the People will crush you. Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir!" the ranks of prisoners shouted in unison.

East Wind Lao Gai Camp consisted of row upon row of barracks. Convicts, normally in pairs, shared small cells in each block. The blocks had low ceilings, with lightbulbs glaring from cone-shaped shades. The floors were stone, from the local quarry. Each cell contained two bedrolls, two washing basins, two towels and one latrine bucket.

Lin coughed, and tasted blood. Above the gash, his left eye had swollen. His cellmate, Little Soldier, tried to clean the wound, but Lin snatched the towel. "I'll do it," he said. The cut was raw, and he gasped when he touched it.

Little Soldier squatted, as far away from the latrine bucket as he could. "He's making you pay for yesterday. You can't fight Grasshopper Yao."

Lin spat blood. "How long can he keep it up?"

"Till you give up. Just bite your lip and don't rise to him. Then maybe he'll get bored, move on to someone else."

"I'm in here for whatever crime I committed, but he has no right to beat me. I'll protest to the authorities."

"Protest? You won't get anywhere by writing letters. Look at Old Tang. They put him in a little black cell for a year with no light. And what about Cripple? He wasn't a cripple when he came in. The brutes in Number Two made a mess of him. Guards' idea, I heard." Little Soldier chewed his nails. "College

kid, do nothing — or you'll get yourself killed. Let it go. You can't change anything."

Dinner came on aluminium plates, the same every day, wotou, *or hard corn bun, mixed with vegetables.*

"Thirty-four twenty-four, you didn't complete your quota today. Half rations for you." A single wotou, *the size of Lin's fist, lay on his plate.*

They squatted to eat.

"You must reach your quota, Lin." Little Soldier swallowed. "Your hands are like a girl's, but not for long working in the lime kiln." He showed Lin his hands, which were dark brown and calloused. "These are worker's hands. I do my quota and lie low. Two more years, and then I'll go home to my mama. No more bootlegging. I'll find a woman and be happy."

"Does your ma know where you are?"

"She may. They caught us in Inner Mongolia with our mules. My brother was our leader. They put a bullet in the back of his head. Mama had to pay for the bullet, she said. I haven't seen her since they pushed me onto a truck to come here. They didn't tell me where I was going."

"Have you had letters from her?"

"She can't write. A man in our village writes letters for everyone, but not for my mama."

"I've not heard from Grandpa either. He can't know where I am or he'd write. I don't think anyone knows where I am."

The wotou *was hard to chew and even harder to swallow.*

"He'll be waiting for you. My mama's waiting for me, I know." Little Soldier thumped his chest.

"Maybe he's dead. He was seventy-two when I was arrested. I think of him every day. I wish I could just send a few lines to him. I don't want him to worry."

"Do nothing – understand?"

"If I ever get out of here, I swear I'll –" Lin clenched his *fists.*

"Your cut's open again." Little Soldier grabbed the towel and handed it to Lin. *"Press it hard."*

At night, Lin lay on his bedroll, the stench of the latrine bucket overpowering. Little Soldier snored. Through the tiny window high on the wall, he could see the clear night sky and a star.

He remembered the stars of Beijing's summer nights, the scent of grapes and the cool shade of the vines. Grandpa and he had sat on the doorstep, fanning themselves. It was too hot to sleep. Mosquitoes hung in the air in packs.

Grandpa had told stories: Guan Yin and Liu Hui, the Legend of the Three Kingdoms; the Monkey King and Monk Tangseng; the Saga of the Kong Fu Knights. "They are stories for boys, for you," he had said. "Boys must learn faith and loyalty."

For twenty years, Grandpa had watched him grow. There had been elementary school, fist fights, his first bicycle, the first three-good award, football, catching dragonflies in the city moat, studying late at night. Now the doorstep was worn, the middle bowed.

He had left Grandpa to go to university. Lin had never seen the ocean but he wanted to study oceanography. He had liked

the idea of roaming the sea in its infinity. He wanted to learn more of the sea animals he had read about and seen on television in nature programmes. When Lin was at high school, their neighbours, the Chens, had bought a TV set and he had gone next door to watch it whenever a nature programme was showing. He had grown up with the Chens' son, whom everyone called Fatty even after he had grown into a slender young man.

"Go," said Grandpa, sitting cross-legged on his bed. "A good son travels the four seas. Your mother and father would have been proud of you. Don't worry about me. I have strong bones. Besides, I have our neighbours. Nothing will happen to me."

Lin wrote to his grandfather from university. He wrote about the sea that at last he had seen, shimmering under the dawn light. He told his grandfather that he had never seen anything more beautiful. "The sound of the sea, Grandpa," he remembered writing, "is like a song. Some hear it. Some feel it. Many remember it."

It was by the sea that he first saw her, like a song he couldn't forget. Her fair skin, open smile and large brown eyes were as alluring to him as the sea.

The day she said she loved him, he was the happiest man on earth. They were walking on the beach and Venus sparkled in the sky, as if she were sending a secret message to the lovers below. The air tasted salty and they were filled with desire and love. The waves lapped gently on the shore.

Lin woke. His body ached from twelve hours in the lime kiln. The gash on his face felt as if it had been the work of a

hundred knives rather than a club. Her touch vanished. Around his head, the bedroll was damp.

Deliberately Lin rubbed at his wound until it opened again. He ground his teeth. Remember this pain, this night, and every day of lao gai, *he ordered himself. Remember your enemies. Never forget.*

PART ONE

1

It was two weeks before Chinese New Year, the Spring Festival that marks the end of winter. It is the principal holiday of the year, with celebrations that last seven days. Red Luck Posters were stuck to the door of each home. Meat was marinated and strong rice wine, *ju*, bought. Families arranged visits, and banquets were prepared. In Beijing millions thronged the Temple Fairs to complete their holiday shopping.

The largest *Miaohui* was in Ditan Park. There the noise was deafening. Drums thudded, cymbals clashed and trumpets blared in the cold air. Stall-holders called their wares and customers shouted for children to keep up.

Swept along by the crowds, Mei walked beside her sister, whose mood had darkened. "Why must we come here every year?" Lu moaned. "All these people pushing each other – and where's Mama?"

"She said she wanted to buy something." Mei stood on tiptoe to search but couldn't see her. Red lanterns swayed

under the white stone arch of the Sacrifice altar where in times past the emperor would offer sacrifices to earth at the summer solstice, and behind it, more crowds and stalls.

"Fireworks! Fireworks for Spring Festival!"

"Luck Posters to welcome the spring and banish ghosts!"

Dancers on stilts appeared at the end of the lane, accompanied by trumpets and drums. The women wore red satin and waved vast pink fans. The men were in long blue robes and domed hats, beneath which their faces were heavily made up with thickly lined eyes and rouge cheeks. Two children ran in front of them, causing some to wobble. At that moment Mei saw her mother pushing through the crowd with two bottle gourds.

"*Hulu?*" Lu frowned, and uncrossed her arms to take a gourd.

"For luck – and a grandson soon," said Ling Bai.

"Mama!" Lu protested. Her blush of embarrassment was endearing.

"As for you," Ling Bai turned to Mei, "it will protect you against demons."

"I don't need it."

Ling Bai glared at her elder daughter. "Thirty-one years old and no husband? You need a lucky charm."

Lu nudged Mei with her elbow. "Just take it," she whispered.

"*Hulu* is very powerful. Look at the curves. It's heaven and earth in union, true harmony. Especially lucky for a woman," Ling Bai averred.

They walked up the stone steps to the Sacrifice altar where a *jiaozi* theatre was in full swing, musicians playing, in exaggerated ways, trumpets, drums, cymbals and an erhu, a stringed instrument. As four men danced, they tossed a sedan chair – the *jiaozi* – with an actress inside it.

"Where are you going, young wife?" roared the men.

"Going back to my mama's house," sang the actress.

"Where is your husband?"

"At home, like a little boy, with his mother."

The audience laughed. But Lu stood rigid and glared at the spectacle. She loathed folk dancing. Mei glanced at her mother, who was smiling, enjoying the play. Her face was lined and strands of her grey hair flew about her face in the wind. Mei shivered – with cold and guilt. But how could she love if she couldn't forgive? Her father ... She had learned the truth, which had separated her from her mother as completely as if a shutter had fallen between them.

She shook her head, as if to clear it. She wished she could confide in someone, to share the burden ...

"Shall we find some *bingtang hulu*?" asked Ling Bai. Candied-hawthorn-on-a-stick was a favourite winter delicacy that everyone munched at the *Miaohui*.

"Not for me," said Lu. "How can you eat something that's been lying about in this dust for hours?"

The Wangs made their way to the North Gate, Ling Bai searching for a *bingtang hulu* stall.

"People are staring at you," Mei muttered to her sister.

"Are they?"

She sounded indifferent and Mei knew why. Her sister was strikingly beautiful, but never gave it a thought. It was of interest only to others.

Ling Bai bought two *bingtang hulu*, one for Mei and one for herself. They ate them as they walked. The path leading to the North Gate was packed with stalls. A man was pouring tea from a large copper pot with a very long spout. Smoke rose from kebab braziers, the scent of cumin and chilli in the air. Colourful windmills spun, and red lanterns dangled, like giant fruit, from leafless branches.

An ice slide stood in the middle of North Gate Square, children and adults squealing and laughing as they glided down. A long queue snaked round the ticket booth. Bright banners displaying *miyu*, riddles, hung from the trees, where a large crowd had gathered.

Ling Bai and Mei liked *miyu*. Some years ago, when Mei was still a girl, they had competed on National Day and won prizes.

"There's one," said Mei, reading aloud, "A good beginning – a foreign currency." She thought for a while. "The answer is US dollars – *mei yuan*. *Mei* means 'beautiful' and *yuan* can mean 'beginning'," she whispered to Ling Bai.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed her mother. "Write it down and we'll win a prize."

"One won't get us far. We'll need to solve at least ten to win something worthwhile."

"We have plenty of time." She glanced at Lu.

"I'm tired of standing about in the cold," said Lu gently. It wasn't a complaint. "We've been out for hours."

"Perhaps you're right," Ling Bai said, clutching her shopping-bag.

Lu took her mother's arm. "It's the same every year."

They heard a drumroll from the direction of the Sacrifice altar and someone shouted, "Lion Dance!" The crowd surged.

Mei, Lu and Ling Bai walked out of the North Gate, where taxis were delivering revellers to the fair. Lu found an empty one and got in, her mother following. Mei sat next to the driver.

"Where to?" cried the driver, jovially.

"The Grand Hotel," said Lu.

He started the engine and turned on the meter. "Which way shall I go? Changan Boulevard is at a standstill."

"Whichever way's the quickest," said Lu, with a hint of impatience.

At the Grand Hotel, they sat at a table with a white linen cloth in the Red Wall café. The waitress brought tea in a silver pot, and as she set it down, the china tinkled. She went away, then returned with cappuccino for Lu.

The café had a high ceiling, crystal lights and a spiral staircase with a vine growing up the banister. Potted plants and panoramic windows gave the impression of a lush conservatory. A waiter brought western cakes on a trolley, so perfect they might have been made of plastic.

"Too beautiful to eat." Ling Bai eyed them. Mei ordered a yellow piece with icing sugar. She hoped it was cheesecake, which she had eaten once before and liked.

Lu stirred her coffee. "They were saying there'll be snow tomorrow."

"I'm not surprised. This is the time of Big Chill, the coldest two weeks of the year," said Ling Bai.

Sitting in the café, Mei found that hard to believe. They were insulated here from the outside world.

Lu took out her mobile phone. "Li-ning is having lunch at the China Club. Maybe he could join us if they've finished."

Mei and Ling Bai sipped their tea, awkward together now that Lu's attention was elsewhere. Mei gazed out of a window, her strong nose and firm mouth making her profile sharp. The sky was darker, the clouds dense, and traffic thick as mud idled on Changan Boulevard. She stretched for a glimpse of Tiananmen Square, which was not far way, but couldn't see it.

"Can't you come for a few minutes?" Lu said, into the phone. She sounded annoyed.

"When do you leave for Canada?" Mei asked her mother, although she knew the date. She was embarrassed that Ling Bai was eavesdropping on Lu's conversation.

"In a week, I think," said Ling Bai, gloomily. "Will I see you before I go?"

"You know that Gupin, my assistant, is going home for Spring Festival. I'm afraid I'll be too busy," Mei said to her tea cup rather than her mother.

Ling Bai sighed. "You should think of finding a new assistant. I thought you were doing well – why keep a migrant worker in the office, especially a man? People will talk."

"I don't care what anyone says. Gupin is good at his job. Unlike some, he has a high-school diploma and is taking evening classes at the university." Suddenly she was picturing Gupin's chiselled face and muscular shoulders in her mind's eye. She wondered what he was doing this weekend. Perhaps he was still at work on the case of the boy who had died in hospital during a routine operation. Perhaps he had been shopping for his sick mother – he may even have been at the *Miaohui*, buying Beijing treats to take home. The thought made her smile.

Lu shut her phone. "I'm sorry. Li-ning won't be able to come, even though he wants to. They're going to the driving range with Big Boss Dong."

"He's always busy." Mei had remembered the last dinner Li-ning couldn't make.

"Everyone wants to collaborate with him on their projects or persuade him to invest. It's hard to be a tycoon."

"Surely – "

"I don't mind. I know what it takes to be a success. He has to put a great deal of time and effort into networking, which means making sacrifices in our personal life. I have to do the same for my show," Lu said. She hosted a programme on Beijing TV in which she interviewed and offered counselling to people who had problems like adulterous affairs or difficult mothers-in-law. It had proved popular, and for a time there had been talk about broadcasting it nationally.

"You both work so hard I hardly see you," Ling Bai said, looking first at Lu, then at Mei. "Especially you."

"Mama, you know everyone wants their case solved yesterday."

"Opportunity! It's everywhere, these days. If you don't grab it someone else will." Lu raised a hand to silence Mei, who had been about to interrupt. "I don't know how much you make, Mei, catching cheating husbands, but for us, lost opportunity might cost millions. So we work all the time, trying to keep up. Li-ning and I know we're being unfair to our family and friends," she laid a hand affectionately on her mother's, "and that's why this Spring Festival, we're taking Mama with us to Vancouver to see Li-ning's family."

She turned to Mei. "Mama told me you've stopped going to see her since she came out of the hospital."

"You've done no better." Mei stole an uneasy glance at Ling Bai.

"I'm busy. I have my show, I lecture and sometimes I travel overseas with my husband. And the *yichuo* – you can't imagine! Dinners, lunches, parties, going to the theatre and the opera with business contacts. If we never said no, we'd be working twenty-four hours a day. But Mama's been to us for dinner. We've gone shopping together." Lu glanced at Ling Bai. "We've grown closer since she had her stroke. What happened last spring made me realise that we can't take anything for granted. One day we will lose her and then we'll wish we'd looked after her properly."

Mei couldn't contradict her but neither could she explain. She was silent, swirling the tea in the bottom of her cup.

"Have you heard," said Ling Bai, eager to defuse the tension, "Hu Bin's been released."

"Wasn't he one of the student leaders at Tiananmen?"

Ling Bai nodded. "Mei knew him at university, didn't you?"

"I met him a couple of times on campus," said Mei. She had seen it in small print on page twenty-one of today's *Beijing Daily*. Hu Bin had been sentenced to twelve years for leading the student protest in 1989. His release, three years early, might mean he was ill.

Hu Bin's release had brought back uncomfortable memories. She had already been working at the police headquarters – the Ministry for Public Security – when the students had taken to the streets in the spring of 1989. Every day she had read avidly about the protest in the square, but unlike millions of other office and factory workers in the city, she had not gone out to join them. She had sat behind her desk at the ministry, ensconced on the other side, the side which in the end went against the students. To this day, she reproached herself for that. The guilt for not having being with those she cared about lodged in her heart like a stone. But how could she have known it would end in blood? That people would die, and friends like Hu Bin would be imprisoned for so long?

She could reproach herself for so much. It had been her, really, she reflected, who had stolen her father's life. Their mother had denounced him for criticising Mao's policies during the Cultural Revolution, the only way to save her children from the labour camp. Her evidence had helped send him to prison, where he died young. When Mei stumbled on

the truth last year, while uncovering an ancient jade lost since the Cultural Revolution, she had at first been angry, but then she had grieved. Hatred threatened to destroy her love for her mother. Mei wished she could forgive the woman who had made such great sacrifices and given Mei life twice.

Her mother's voice brought her back to the Red Wall café.

"It's a goodwill gesture, I suppose, to release him before the holiday."

"I'm sure that's right," said Lu, finishing her coffee. "It's about time too. Such ancient history. It's better for both sides to forget."

"It's only been nine years," retorted Mei.

"Exactly. Ancient history." Lu tossed her hair over a shoulder and laughed. "My dear sister, you live too much in the past, and everyone else has moved on. How does the old proverb go? 'The present is like gold.'"

At that moment, the waiter brought their cakes. For a while, they gazed, awestruck and silent, at the art on their plates. Then Mei took a bite of hers and shuddered. It was lime, not cheesecake, and she didn't like lime.

"Lu's right," Ling Bai said to Mei, through a mouthful of her Napoleon. "You must forget the past and move on. Don't carry it with you. Learn to forgive."

Mei's heart jumped. Did her mother know that she had found out what had happened to her father?

"Will you go back to Ya-ping?"

Mei sighed. "But you didn't like him – you didn't want me to marry him."

"That was years ago when he was only a student from the provinces. He's a successful businessman now, living in Chicago."

"He's also divorced."

"So is Li-ning." Ling Bai gazed proudly at her younger daughter. "It may make him a better husband."

Mei took another bite of her cake. "Once a cup's broken, it can't be mended."

"That's because you don't want to mend it," said Lu. "He broke your heart, yes, but that's more ancient history. Live in the present. It's the key to happiness."

"And you can let me worry about my love life."What if she couldn't learn to forgive and forget?

Lu gestured to the waiter for the bill, then said to Mei, "But I care about you because you're my sister. A friend of mine will call you tomorrow. His name is Mr Peng. He's the chairman of Guanghua Record Company. He might have a case for you – a big one."

"Thank you," said Mei. Her sister had irritated her with the unsolicited advice, but she had just redeemed herself.