Chapter 10

Weilin Ventures a Bold Suggestion
An Old Campaigner Earns Merit for His Next Life

After Mother's death in February that year, the year 1970, there was a period of some weeks when, so far as Weilin was ever able to recollect, nothing happened at all. Or at least, it was difficult for him to apprehend that such things as happened were in fact happening to him.

Responsibility for his welfare fell upon the production brigade. However, nobody there seemed to have a clue what to do with him. Everybody's idea was that he should be taken in by relatives, as generally happened in such cases. Since Uncle Zhou's circumstances were already strained, this would have meant going to live with Auntie An in the mountains up by the Korean border. But Weilin did not want to go and live with Auntie An, and evaded this fate by simply not mentioning her. Apparently there was nothing about Auntie An in Mother's file, only a transfer notice from Dewy Spring; and nobody in the brigade or its school knew enough about her to be able to locate Auntie An. Indeed, it seemed that the brigade did not even know about Uncle Zhou. At any rate, no-one spoke of him. There was a boys' orphanage in the provincial capital, but for inmates under thirteen only. Being just eight months short of thirteen, it seemed hardly worth while for Weilin to apply. In any case, the brigade would have to pay for his upkeep there, and the Revolutionary Committee felt that all things considered it would be cheaper to keep him on, if he could be found some useful work to do.

This decision was conveyed to Weilin by Secretary Duo, at an interview in his office.

"You'll have the same coupons as before," said Secretary Duo. "And you'll be on work points, like everybody else. We don't do badly here, as you know, so long as there's some rain in May and June." He leaned forward and blew his nose onto the floor, wiping his fingers on his jacket.

"And shall I still go on living in the same room?"

"Don't see why not. Nowhere else for you to live, anyway."

And so Weilin became a full-time employee of Love Socialism! Production Brigade. Dully, in no frame of mind to care about it, he had supposed this would mean working in the fields at last. In fact none of the work units seemed to want him in their fields, being too jealous of their work points, and too suspicious of the capabilities of anyone not born a peasant, and he ended up doing odd jobs, mostly around the brigade office. The conditions were just sufficient to keep him from starving, and the work was never arduous. Indeed, much of the time there was nothing to do at all, and Weilin could wander off into the countryside. When the weather warmed he started going back to the river to swim.

It was in the summer, in July that year, that Weilin saw Asan again. His fear of being seen in the town had subsided by this time, and he had made two or three trips in, to stroll around Number One department store and check out the railroad station plaza. He always hoped to see Asan and his bookstall, but the bookstall was never there.

On this particular day in late July there were two men in the station plaza selling patent medicine. By way of advertising, they were giving a demonstration of *qigong*. [*Qigong* is a traditional art of mind and body control, attained through breathing exercises.] One of the men was the *qigong* practitioner, the other the salesman. The *qigong* man was stripped to the waist. He was muscular and fierce-looking. He broke a brick and some tiles with his head, and leaned at an alarming angle against a spear, the tip of the spear pressing on his naked belly, the other end held fast to the ground. After these wonders the salesman went into his pitch. Weilin lost interest and was turning away when he saw Asan in the crowd. Asan saw him at the same moment and came over, greeting him with a slap on the shoulder. He looked the same as ever; big and confident, though

perhaps a little shabbier than Weilin remembered. His army green pants had a long tear up one leg that had been inexpertly stitched closed, and the Capital shoes had given way to a pair of battered army-green sneakers. He favored Weilin with a broad grin.

"Little Liang. Haven't seen you around."

"My mother got sick. I had to look after her. Then she died. Now I work for the production brigade."

Asan looked grave. "I'm really sorry about your Ma. But what's this about you working on the farm? You're too smart for peasant work, Little Liang."

"What else can I do? I have no way out."

"There's always a way out. Hey, you look undernourished. Come on, I know a place we can eat."

"I've got no money."

"Fuck that. Come with me."

Asan led him through some back streets to a dingy place in the old part of town. It was hardly any larger than the living space of someone's house, with four tables jammed together and a hatch in the wall where you ordered your food. Without consulting Weilin about it, Asan ordered tripe in noodle soup, some batter sticks, and two bowls of beer.

"They water the beer, of course," he explained as they started on the food, "but then so does everybody else. These people use clean water, at least."

The tripe was delicious, a wonderful relief from the alternated sorghum mash and millet gruel at the brigade dining room. They ate and drank, Asan talking through his food. His fortunes were at a low ebb, it seemed. After the bank raid, the police had gone into the streets with army men in support and rounded up anyone who looked like a trouble-maker. This had pulled in far more people than they could deal with properly, so most had been let go after a routine beating. Red Wang had been charged, though—nothing to do with the bank job, they had fished up some offense from his Red Guard days—and his family had had to pay a huge bribe to get him out. Donkey, having no family who cared sufficiently to bribe him out of trouble, had got three years Reform Through Labor for hooliganism, and was now doing time at a camp near the Mongolian

border. Again, the sticks did not seem to know Donkey had been at the bank, and Donkey had not volunteered the information, perhaps feeling that bad as Reform Through Labor might be, it was less of an inconvenience than being shot.

Asan himself had only avoided arrest by chance. When the army and police did their first sweep, he was hiding in the old brickyard, making *tongfang* with one of the girls from the textile factory. He gave a full and graphic account of the episode, dwelling at length on the exceptional flow of the girl's juices. This part of the discourse left Weilin embarrassed and puzzled. He could not figure out where these juices were supposed to be flowing from, or what purpose they served; and it all sounded very disgusting anyway.

"Now," said Asan, sitting back and lighting a cigarette, "the whole district's as quiet as a bone yard. Nobody wants to do deals, nobody wants to take a chance, nobody wants to fuck. I haven't felt a girl's tits for three months, can you believe it? As for any kind of enterprise—well, they're shooting people now for picking pockets. Imagine that! Pick a pocket, get a bullet through the gourd! And that's after they've broken all your bones, of course. I keep myself looking shabby now—he pulled with disgust at the fabric of his pants—so nobody will think I'm running any schemes."

"What about the money you got from . . . "

"Hush!" Asan looked round nervously. They were the only customers, but the proprietor could be seen behind his hatch, leaning against the wall picking his nose and scrutinizing the extracta. "Walls have ears, don't you know? Yeah, I got some." He laughed. "Know what it was? Ten-fen bills. I got three hundred of the fucking things. Thirty dollars!" Asan laughed again and shook his head. "The others I don't think got anything. In too much of a hurry to get out of there. Thirty dollars! I wouldn't mind, if we hadn't closed down the whole town like this. You can't do *anything* now. To tell the truth, I'm thinking of relocating."

"Where will you go?"

"To Beijing, if I can get a residence permit. I'm working on it. Nothing's impossible, you know."

"Me, I'm going to Hong Kong," said Weilin.

The truth was that up to that instant he had not given a moment's thought to following Mother's suggestion. It had just seemed impossible; and he had anyway been disabled by grief and hopelessness. But Asan was so cool, so confident in his life and his schemes, the temptation to try to impress him was irresistible, and Hong Kong bobbed up to the surface of Weilin's thoughts, and he said it.

Asan was not as impressed as he decently ought have been. He nodded, and took a drag on his cigarette.

"Hong Kong, huh? It's a long way. Er, in the south, isn't it?" Asan's ignorance could still shock Weilin.

"I don't care how far. It's better than here. There are no movements, and the standard of living is much higher."

"That's not what I heard. Hong Kong? It's like the old society, isn't it? Darkness and oppression." Asan frowned, summoning up his fragmentary knowledge of public affairs. "Capitalism. Or is it feudalism? One of those things."

"How can it be worse than here? I've been hungry for months, and the winter—so cold! Hong Kong's in the south, at least the climate will be bearable." Following Mother's injunction, Weilin did not want to say anything about Fourth Outside Uncle.

"I don't know, Little Liang. It's a long way to go to be disappointed. Suppose it *is* just like the old society? Suppose you end up a rickshaw boy, with an opium habit? Perhaps you won't be able to come back."

"I'll never come back! How can Hong Kong be worse than this? They killed my father, they killed my mother. Now I'm supposed to be a peasant all my life. No, if Hong Kong doesn't suit me, I'll go . . . " He struggled to think of another foreign place. " . . . I'll go to America!"

Asan chuckled. "Well, you certainly have great plans! But, by the way, just how exactly are you going to travel? By jet plane, perhaps? By helicopter?"

"I don't care. I'll steal a train ticket. I don't know. I'll find a way."

"Hng." Asan drew deeply on his cigarette, pondering. "It's a long way to go," he said again at last.

"I don't care. I'm going," said Weilin, with great and sudden determination. He felt it, too, for the moment at any rate; though now he wondered for the first time: How exactly am I going to do this?

"Perhaps you could help me get a ticket," he said boldly.

Asan considered. "Rail tickets are not easy to get," he said at last. "Red Wang was my main contact for that little business, and he's sitting at home pissing in his pants. You need a letter from your unit. Then there's the expense. To Hong Kong? It's the other end of the country, right? Must be a hundred dollars, at least."

Weilin's entire income, board and lodging aside, was four dollars fifty a month. Now it all seemed impossible again. He regretted having raised the subject of Hong Kong. Of course he could not go to Hong Kong! He would be a gofer for the brigade office all his life, not even allowed to work in the fields with the peasants. There really was no way out, after all. His head drooped. He dipped his finger in a puddle of soup that had spilled on the table, and drew out a long pseudopod.

Asan seemed to be deep in thought. His cigarette finished, he dropped it to the floor and ground it with his foot. Abruptly, he stood up.

"I'll see what I can do. How often do you come into town?"

"I can come any time."

"Meet me in the old brickyard. Mmm, four weeks from today. Twelve thirty, nap time. I don't promise anything, mind. But I'll see what I can do."

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Weilin hardly dared hope for anything to come of the Hong Kong idea. It had fixed itself in his mind now, though, and he could not stop thinking about it. He wanted to know about Hong Kong—where it was, what things were like there. There were no maps in the brigade offices, but one of the schoolrooms had a map of China on the wall. It showed Hong Kong as a small dot on the south coast, with a broken line around it and the words **SEIZED BY BRITAIN**. It was indeed very far: much further than Beijing, further even than Shanghai. Very close to Guangzhou though. Perhaps if one could get to Guangzhou, one could walk to Hong Kong. It wasn't clear from the maps.

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He went to the old brickyard at the appointed time. It was deserted, the kiln cool inside away from the noonday sun. The brickyard had been built during the Great Leap Forward, back in the fifties, when every unit was supposed to strive for self-sufficiency. The authorities of Flat All Around had decided to make their own bricks, so they had built this brickyard. There were huge kilns, big enough to walk around in, where the bricks had been baked. However, because the local clay had been wrong for bricks, or the necessary expertise had been lacking, or peasants requisitioned for the work had drifted back to their fields, or starved to death in the great famine, or for some other reason, the whole project had been abandoned. Now the brickyard was deserted. There were stacks of crumbling yellow bricks all around, with grass growing out of the cracks between rows of bricks. The kilns were all empty; local people passing by used them as toilets. There were always turds in various stages of decomposition on the floor by the walls and in the corners, the fresher ones attended by little buzzing clouds of flies.

Asan turned up half an hour late, looking pleased with himself.

"Well, well, Little Liang!"

"You found out something? You can help me?"

By way of reply Asan took a piece of paper from the inside pocket of his jacket, and flourished it. It was white, six inches by four, and covered with ruled lines and neat small characters.

"A railroad ticket! You got me a railroad ticket!"

"Take a good look. The money I spent to get this, they could nail me for the bank job. And I had to give up my share in the fruit business. Not that I'll be needing it any more."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, it'll be no use to me, once we're in Hong Kong."

"*We?*"

"Sure. I'm going to Hong Kong, too. I've been thinking about it, since you raised the subject. This place is dead. Everybody's just waiting for the next movement. You're right, things will be better in Hong Kong. So I'm coming with you."

"But . . . Do you have another ticket?"

Asan grinned. "No, just the one. And it has my name on it. But don't worry, I'll get you to Hong Kong."

"But how will I get there with no ticket?"

"We'll hide you under the train seat. Don't worry. I've found out everything. They don't check your ticket when you get on, only when the train is going. We just have to keep you out of sight when the inspectors come around."

Weilin was unsure. It couldn't really be so easy, surely. But Asan was beaming his big audacious smile, and Weilin felt sure that if only he stayed close to his friend, everything would be managed somehow.

"Can you swim?" asked Asan.

"Sure. I can swim very well. Why?"

"Because we'll have to swim over to Hong Kong across the sea. The land border's guarded both sides, you can't get through. You have to swim. But people do it all the time, it's all right."

Weilin didn't care about the swimming. He was suddenly impatient to leave. "What's the date on the ticket?"

"Friday. Night train, eight o'clock. Will you be ready?"

Weilin laughed. "I'm ready right now."

Packing did not present any serious challenges. Weilin's entire possessions at this point in his life were: two T-shirts, one newish, one very old and ragged; a pair of pants, baggy and somewhat too big; a pair of shorts he wore as underpants; the cotton-padded winter jacket and pants Mother had made for him in '67 and enlarged each subsequent fall, in very poor condition now; a pair of canvas shoes with worn-out soles; a hat; a quilt; a toothbrush; a towel; a mess tin; an oil lamp; a thermos flask inherited from Mother; and a single photograph of Mother and Father, taken before he was born, which had been overlooked in Father's tin box when the Red Guards took all their Bourgeois Things. The rest of Mother's possessions, such as they were, had been taken by the brigade to defray her cremation expenses—all but a red plastic hair clip Weilin had salvaged somehow.

He agonized briefly over the cotton-padded jacket, pants and hat, which were his most substantial possessions, and basic survival equipment in the northeastern winter. However, he reasoned that since Hong Kong was in the south, he would not be needing them, and left them lying on the *kang*. Everything else he took, bundled up in the quilt. The quilt

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itself was not very thick, and the whole bundle fitted easily under his arm. Weilin did not think it necessary to notify the brigade he was leaving. In the fullness of time they would notice his absence and assign the room to someone else.

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Asan was waiting for him at the railroad station on Friday evening, He too was traveling light, with only an army-style backpack slung casually over one shoulder. They boarded the eight o'clock train in a press of people, and scrambled for seats. Nobody checked their tickets, and in fact the train was milling with non-passengers seeing off colleagues and relatives. The last of these scrambled for the doors as the train began to move. Weilin watched the grimy back streets of Flat All Around slipping away into the gathering darkness, and cursed the place, and swore a bitter silent oath that whatever happened to him, he would never return to it.

"Oh, one thing I forgot to tell you," Asan was saying.

"What?"

"The ticket is only for Shanghai."

"So what shall we do then?"

Asan laughed. "We'll manage. Meantime, you'd better get under the seat. The inspectors will start coming round soon."

Weilin felt very self-conscious, asking the other passengers to move their legs so he could squirm under the seat. Most of them took it in good part; but there was a woman opposite with what Asan called a Class Struggle Face—angular and self-righteous—who took exception.

"If he hasn't got a ticket, he shouldn't be riding," she said, very loud. People in the next set of seats turned to look.

"He's an orphan from the south," explained Asan. "Didn't you hear his accent? His mother died just recently. He wants to get back to his family in the south, and he has no other way to do it."

"Leave him alone," said one of the passengers. This man belonged to a party of four—workers, from their appearance—who were starting up a card game on the floor between the seats. "He's not doing any harm, is he?"

"Many things happen that are not right," said an old fellow sitting by the window. "This is a very small one. Is it really worth making trouble about?"

"*I'm* not making trouble. I only said, it's not right."

"Oh, come on, comrade. He's only a kid," said another of the card players. "Let him sleep. The inspector won't see him down there."

Class Struggle Face was sufficiently cowed by all this opposition that she had nothing to say when the inspector came round. Weilin soon fell as nearly asleep as was possible in his cramped quarters, among the smell of dust and cigarette smoke and the noise of the card players. He woke briefly when the train stopped at Shenyang, and noticed that Asan had got into the card game somehow. When next he woke it was clear daylight outside and the train was running fast through a countryside of low hills and small villages. The card players were all asleep: two stretched out on the floor, Asan and the others leaning against each other at odd angles on the seats.

Weilin was hungry. He wanted to wake Asan to ask if he had any food, but thought Asan might be angry at being woken. Weilin struggled out from under the seat and went to the toilet at the end of the carriage. After relieving himself he felt hungrier than ever. His traveling companions were asleep, Class Struggle Face snoring like a hog. Only the old man by the window was awake. He favored Weilin with a discolored grin.

"Hungry, little fellow?"

"Yes."

"Here." The old boy reached into a cloth bag he was carrying, and produced a steamed bun. "I've got some tea, too. Come on, help yourself. Don't be polite!"

The bun looked delicious—white and soft. But Weilin hesitated. "What will you eat, comrade?"

The old man chuckled. "I can 'eat the air and drink the dew'," he replied, using a Taoist tag. "Never mind. This world belongs to youngsters like yourself. We old ones have played our part. What use are we? Look at me. I can't sleep, I can't work, I can't fuck, and I have no appetite. But I can still earn some merit with Lord Buddha for my next life. Come on! Eat."

Gratefully, Weilin ate. In contradiction to his philosophical boastings, the old boy produced a second bun for himself, and ate it with gusto. He also had some pickled turnip wrapped in wax paper, and a flask of cold tea.

While they ate he told Weilin stories about his life in the northeast. His father had gone south to fight for Sun Yatsen in the Xinhai revolution of 1911. He himself had been a soldier in the army of the Old Marshal, a famous northeastern warlord of the twenties. When the Japanese invaded he had gone into the mountains and lived with bandits, poaching ginseng and hunting bear. Several of the bear's body parts were culinary delicacies, or key ingredients of traditional medicine, and you could live well for a year from the proceeds of one bear. But it was very difficult to kill a bear. For all their size, they could move very quickly. Their flesh was thick and hard, and you had to shoot them in just the right spot. If you misjudged your aim the bear would keep right on coming, and tear you to shreds with his claws, which were three inches long and sharp as razors. Or else you would kill him all right, but at the cost of destroying his gall bladder or some other priceless organ. Weilin listened, hypnotized by the rhythm of the train and the old man's tales. In the small hours of the next morning they passed through the Wall at Sea-and-Mountain Pass, into China proper.