

Chapter 26

When Constabulary Duty's To Be Done
The Excellent and Manly Game of Rugby Football

Inside the police station was a high counter made of lacquered wood. Behind the counter was a policeman. He was Chinese and did not look very old at all. His face was very southern, almost Vietnamese—bony and angular, with a little full-lipped mouth and slightly prominent eyes. His adam's apple was prominent, too, and so were his elbows, as revealed by the short sleeves of his khaki uniform shirt. His manner was very cold. Weilin was afraid of him at once. When they came in he had been writing something in a huge bound ledger-style book. The escorts told him a story in Cantonese. Listening to the story, he just went on writing.

“*Giu ma 'ye?*” The officer, still writing, did not even look at him. Weilin, who could not understand the question, did not in fact know he was being addressed until one of the escorting officers kicked him.

“I'm sorry,” said Weilin in Mandarin. “I can't understand Cantonese.”

Now the officer glanced at him, just for an instant. Without changing expression in any other way at all, he restated his query in thick Mandarin.

“I asked your name.”

“My name is Liang Weilin.”

“Mainland boy.” (With no terminating particle or elevation of pitch to make it a question.)

“Yes.”

“Swimmer?”

“Yes.”

The officer favored him with a brief exophthalmic stare. The full, feminine mouth twitched in what might or might not have been a smile.

“Well, we’ll soon have you back on the commune.”

They were going to send him back! This thought had not occurred to Weilin at all until that moment. He thought of Flat All Around, the listless poverty of the production brigade, the terrible fierce winters.

“Please don’t send me back. I’m not a criminal. It’s only that I was hungry.”

The officer at the high counter had resumed writing in his ledger. “If you don’t want trouble, don’t break the law. You have family in Hong Kong?”

“No.” Weilin wanted to add: I have no family at all, anywhere. But at this moment a door opened in the passage that led back behind the counter to the right room and a foreigner emerged from the passage. He was tall, neither young nor old, and wore policeman’s uniform, except that he had long trousers. The other officers were all in the shorts and long socks. Across his top lip was a thin black mustache. The Chinese officers came to attention as the foreigner walked in—even the desk officer.

The foreigner handed a long manila folder up to the desk officer and said something to him in Cantonese. Then he turned to go out into the street. But when he saw Weilin he stopped abruptly. After looking at Weilin in stillness for a moment he asked a question in Cantonese. The desk officer told him the story.

“Swimmer, hm?” The foreigner’s Mandarin was very good, like one of the radio news readers from Beijing.

“Yes.”

“Deep Water Bay?”

“I’m not sure.”

“How long did it take you?”

“I don’t know. Seemed like all night.”

“No family in the Colony, hm?”

“No, comrade. No family at all, anywhere.”

Comrade had slipped out, the natural reaction to a uniform. The Chinese officers all laughed. The foreigner smiled broadly, his face crinkling up in a rather pleasant way. Oddly enough, Weilin felt less afraid of the foreigner than of the Chinese officers. He thought the foreigner might be a kind man.

The foreigner seemed to consider for a minute, then addressed three or four sentences to the desk officer and walked out into the street. The desk officer made a jerking motion with his head, and Weilin's escort, grabbing him by the elbows, hustled him down the passage the foreigner had emerged from.

At the end of the passage were concrete steps leading down. The steps led straight to a short corridor with a wooden door on each side and a metal barred door at the end. There was a mingled smell of food, excrement and disinfectant, and a whining, rattling mechanical noise. Both the smell and the noise increased in strength as they approached the end. One of the officers unlocked the metal-barred door and went in with Weilin. It was a simple square room, fifteen feet on a side. There was an aisle down the middle of the room. On each side were metal bars enclosing four cells, two on each side of the aisle. Only one cell was occupied. The escort opened the door of the cell diagonally opposite the one occupied, and pushed Weilin inside. Then he locked the door and left. The other officer had been waiting at the entrance to the room. He too left, locking the entrance door behind him.

The cell contained a wood-frame bed with straps of some rough cloth to sleep on and a quilt that looked none too clean. Also a bucket made of galvanized metal with a half-inch of lurid green disinfectant in the bottom. Weilin lay down on the bed, pushing the quilt down to the bottom. The room was warm, though not as warm as it should have been, windowless and underground. The difference was accounted for by a ventilation system, behind a large square grille on the back wall opposite the entrance. This was the rattling noise heard from the passage outside. Though not particularly loud it had a penetrating, irregular quality that made it hard to ignore. Weilin thought he would not be able to sleep.

Now he heard the other occupant of the room calling to him in Cantonese. "*Wai, wai.*" He got up and went to the bars separating his cell

from the adjacent one. The other person was not in that cell, but in the one across the aisle from it. However, Weilin could see him quite clearly. He was short and very dark-skinned, dressed in dirty pants and a shirt, both of which seemed too big for him. Some of the darkness of his skin might also have been due to dirt, Weilin thought.

“Can you speak Mandarin?”

“I can.” The fellow’s Mandarin was thicker than the desk officer’s by a whole order of magnitude: *ngoi mcan*. “What are you in for?”

“Stealing. How about you?”

“Nothing! That son of a bitch! My neighbor, fuck his mother, called the police. Said my apartment was full of stolen jewelry.”

“Really? Was it true?”

“Of course not! He just wanted to make a nuisance of himself, because my boy beat up his boy. That fucking cunt! So of course the police came. When they saw there wasn’t any jewelry they asked me for money. I only had twenty and they said it wasn’t enough. So here I am, until my old woman comes up with a hundred. Fuck their mothers! Uh-oh, watch your ass.”

This last injunction referred to the sound of steps in the passage outside. An officer appeared and unlocked the entrance door. In came a very old man in a loose old-fashioned southern-style outfit: frogged jacket with a detachable white collar, baggy pants and black slippers, skull cap. The old fellow was carrying some metal food containers. This time the officer followed him in. Kneeling, he unlocked a wooden hatch let into the bars of Weilin’s cell. The old man passed in the food containers. Then he and the officer left.

The other prisoner shouted at them, apparently in indignation. It did seem odd (Weilin thought) that they would feed only him and not the other. But he was not about to refuse food at this point. One of the containers held steamed rice, another some boiled green vegetables; and there was a lidded cup of weak green tea. Weilin ate the lot without pausing, paying no attention to the long tirade in Cantonese coming from the other cell. When he had finished he lay on the bed and at once, miraculously, fell asleep, and in a sweet, sweet dream played with Han Yuezhu in the little dell by the Chengdu Road.

“*Hei san! Hei san!*” The policeman’s harsh shout, right by his bed, jolted Weilin awake into cold fluorescent light. Blinking, he allowed himself to be led back upstairs, and pushed into a room leading off the upstairs passage behind the counter. This room had a window with venetian blinds and an air conditioner, not currently active. It also had a book-case loaded with imposing dark-blue tomes, and some filing cabinets, and a desk. Behind the desk sat the foreign police officer Weilin had seen earlier.

“Did they feed you?” asked the officer in Mandarin.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

The officer had his elbows on the desk. He was twiddling a pencil in his hands, but did not seem inclined to write anything.

“No family in Hong Kong, hm?”

“No. No family anywhere.”

“Everybody has *some* family.”

“No. My parents are both dead. I’m an only child. My father’s relatives . . . I don’t know. We never had much to do with them. Anyway, they are in the mainland. My mother had a lot of relatives, but all in the mainland, in the far northeast.” Weilin thought it prudent not to mention Fourth Outside Uncle.

The foreigner digested this for a while. Then: “How old are you?”

Weilin was going to lie, saying fifteen, but he was a poor liar and telegraphed his intention, dropping his head.

“Really. Tell me the truth. Don’t be afraid.”

“Twelve. But almost thirteen.”

The foreign policeman nodded, then went into reflection, twirling his pencil.

“I was only hungry. I’m not a criminal.” Weilin thought he should make a case as best he could.

“I can see that,” said the foreigner quietly. At once Weilin knew this was a friend. Almost involuntarily, and feeling himself close to tears, he said: “Please help me.”

“Well, somebody’s got to help you, that’s for sure.”

Suddenly decided, the foreigner took a pad from one of the desk drawers and began writing. He wrote three or four lines, then leaned to one side and fished in a trouser pocket, pulling out some money.

“Here, take this.” He handed Weilin a bundle of ones. “Get a taxi. Ask him to take you to this address. Should be about three dollars. When you get there, walk around for a while. Stay on the street where I can see you. But try not to look like a burglar. Don’t hurry. I’ll be an hour behind you, at least.”

The foreigner came out from his desk and opened the door. He took a step into the passage and shouted something in Cantonese. Someone shouted a response. He stepped back into the room.

“Go on, now.”

Utterly baffled, Weilin stepped out. The desk clerk glanced at him as he came round the corner, then turned back to his ledger. A large clock on the wall registered precisely twelve midnight.

In the street, Weilin examined his wealth. Nine dollars! The man said it would only be three for the taxi. The streets were still very lively. Weilin walked at random for a while, coming eventually to a stretch of open-air food stalls. He treated himself to a dollar bowl of beef tripe in soup and some chicken feet. Thus refreshed he set off through the back streets again, coming out at last on the big main road. Here he hailed a cab, feeling very grand.

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The address the foreign policeman had given him was in a pleasant, quiet area, away from the main part of the city. The houses were low, two or three stories, with cars parked outside, or sometimes in forecourts off the street. There was little traffic and no pedestrians at all. The main sound was the hum of air conditioners, drowned at long intervals by the thunder of a plane going in to the airport at Qide, which must have been somewhere close by.

Try not to look like a burglar. Weilin indeed felt conspicuous on the empty sidewalks. He tried to walk briskly, as if to some purpose, for the benefit of the occasional passing car, but did not dare venture too far

from the place he'd been left. To the corner; then another block; half of another, to where the road began to turn; then back, and a block in the other direction. He did not feel tired at all now. His belly was agreeably full, and the nighttime air merely warm, not oppressive.

A car passed him, and turned into a driveway a few yards ahead. It was still for a while as Weilin approached. Then the car's lights all went out together and a figure appeared alongside. It was the foreign policeman. He made a beckoning motion with his arm, then turned toward the house. Weilin went over. The policeman had opened the door. Making a brief movement of his head to indicate that Weilin should follow, he went in.

Inside was just a stairway. At the top of the stairs, another locked door. This time the policeman stood aside to let Weilin go in first.

The apartment seemed to Weilin's eyes very large. It had carpet going all the way to the walls on every side. There were several pieces of furniture, none of which seemed to match any of the others. The most striking object was a circular target affair a foot and a half across hanging on one wall. The target was divided into twenty sectors, numbered apparently at random. The windows of the room had venetian blinds, like the policeman's office. The room seemed hot and stuffy. It smelt faintly of food.

"Let's get some air," said the policeman. He walked over to the window and switched on an air conditioner. Then he went through a door into an adjacent room, and Weilin heard another air conditioner go on.

"Excuse me," said Weilin, standing in the middle of the large room. "How is it you speak such good Mandarin?"

"It's my job," said the policeman. He stood opposite Weilin, arms akimbo, smiling slightly. Weilin felt the warmth again—but something else, too, something he could not place. "When you join the Hong Kong police" (the foreigner continued) "they give you a crash course in Cantonese. Spoken and written, both. Any time you hear a foreign devil speaking Cantonese, it's either a policeman or a priest. The priests are better, generally speaking. Especially the Jesuits." He turned away, to a door on the other side.

"But how about Mandarin?" Weilin persisted. "Isn't Cantonese enough? I mean, everyone in Hong Kong seems to speak it. They don't seem to bother much with Mandarin."

“Well . . . wait a minute.” He went in to the other room. Weilin could see, as the light went on, it was a bathroom. Shining white tile, a mirror. As the light went on it started something else, a fan or ventilator. The policeman came out again. “Not quite true. The movies are all in Mandarin. So are the pop songs. And the written characters are the same, more or less. So, having nothing much better to do, I thought I’d learn some real Chinese.”

He was looking at Weilin again; same way, but more now of the other component, the one Weilin couldn’t place.

“First thing you should do is take a shower,” said the policeman. He nodded to the bathroom.

Weilin went in and closed the door. He took off his clothes and put them on a chair which seemed to be there for that purpose. The mirror went floor to ceiling, on the wall opposite the tub. Weilin stood in front of the mirror. He had never seen himself full length in a mirror before. He thought he was too thin, and his skin too dark. The policeman was undoubtedly right though: he needed a shower. Seeing his small, dark body against all the spotless white tile and porcelain he suddenly felt very grimy.

The shower had a large number of controls, all in shiny new metal. However, they only made water come from a faucet in the side of the tub. Nothing came out of the shower head. Weilin fiddled for a while, trying to get it right. Hot water; cold water; but only from the faucet.

He heard the door open. Acting on pure instinct he grabbed one of the towels on the floor by the tub and pulled it round him. The policeman did not come in, however, only called out: “Can you manage the shower all right?”

“I . . . it’s . . . No. The handles . . .”

Now the policeman came in. He showed Weilin a button that seemed not to have been there before, that routed water from the shower to the faucet. Then he got the shower going and went out. Weilin took off the towel and stepped into the shower. It was wonderfully refreshing. He let the water run over him for a while. Then he washed his hands and face, his arms and trunk, his feet, legs and bottom. He was rinsing off when he heard the policeman in the room.

“Everything all right?” called out the policeman from the other side of the shower curtain.

“Yes, yes, everything’s fine.”

“Good,” said the policeman. He pulled back the shower curtain and stepped into the tub. He was entirely naked.

Weilin was paralyzed with embarrassment. He did not know what to say. He had stepped back from the shower nozzle when the other came in. Now he stood and watched as the policeman positioned himself under the nozzle. The policeman himself was quite nonchalant, rubbing the water into his hair. He seemed much larger without his clothes. He had a good figure, smooth muscle on a big frame, though with a little starter tube of fat at the waist; and of course he was as hairy as an ape—thick black hair on his chest and limbs, with patches of it on his back. Ashamed of himself for looking, Weilin could not help but notice that his *jiba* was different from a Chinese person’s: it ended in a sort of cap or helmet.

“Wash my back for me.” The policeman was offering him the soap. Weilin could not look at his face for embarrassment. He took the soap. The policeman turned away, and Weilin soaped his back. The back was broad and meaty, with irregular patches of black hair. The skin itself was very white. Seeing his own skin against the policeman’s, Weilin again felt ashamed of his own darkness. We call ourselves the yellow race, he thought, but really we’re not yellow, we’re brown. Some darker than others, of course. Han Yuezhu was lighter than many fellow-countrymen, though certainly not as pale as the policeman.

“Now it’s your turn. Come on.”

There was no way to change places without brushing against each other. Making the maneuver, eyes lowered from embarrassment, Weilin noticed that the policeman’s *jiba* seemed much larger. Instead of hanging down flaccid it was sticking out, then drooping off on a curve like the piece of ivory in the ear lobe of the old Minority woman at the swimming pool.

Weilin put his hands up against the wall and let the policeman wash his back. It seemed to go on for a very long time, the hands moving slowly over his back and shoulders, under his arms, down his sides and hips. He wondered vaguely why the policeman was washing his hips, which he

could perfectly well do himself, and had in fact already done; but by now he had entered into a mood of resignation. He knew now that something was going to happen. He had no idea what; but it would probably not be worse than sleeping in the park and going hungry, and he felt sure that what he had seen in the policeman's face when it crinkled up that time was genuine kindness.

The policeman angled the shower head to rinse him down. Then abruptly, his voice somewhat hoarse: "All right. We're all clean. Let's get out."

Weilin needed no encouragement. He stepped out and picked up the towel from the floor where he had dropped it. Thankfully, he wrapped it round himself. The apartment seemed very little cooler, in spite of the two air conditioners. The policeman had got out too, and taken a towel from a rack on the wall.

"Come on," he said, turning to the door. "We'll play a game."

Weilin was relieved. He thought a game would lighten the embarrassment. "What game?" he asked, following the policeman into the main room. The policeman had gone into the other room, the one with the second air conditioner.

"The glorious game of *rugger*," he called out. Weilin could hear drawers being opened and closed. He stood there in his towel in the main room. *Rugger*? It was a foreign word, one he had never heard before.

"I don't know this word."

"Glorious game. Glorious." The policeman appeared from the other room. He was dressed in a white open-collar sport shirt with long sleeves, dark blue shorts, and long white socks with red hoops round the top. He was carrying some clothes.

"Put these on. Then we'll play a game."

He went back into the bedroom. Weilin toweled himself off and put on the clothes. It was the same outfit the policeman had, only smaller in size and with a shirt hooped in blue and yellow instead of plain white. As he was pulling on the socks the policeman emerged carrying a large leather ball. It was a very odd ball: not round, but elongated. The policeman was smiling now, his face crinkled in that way that made it look kind.

"All right. Let's play."

“How do we play?”

“You try to get the ball from me, then I try to get it from you.”

And so they played. Weilin was hesitant at first, advancing slowly on the policeman, not at all sure what was expected of him. The policeman fainted away, and dodged behind a chair.

“Come on! Come on! China versus Scotland! Where’s your sense of national pride? Ha ha ha!”

Getting into the spirit of the thing, Weilin chased him round the apartment, cornering him at last in the second room, which contained a large double bed, a wardrobe and a chest of drawers. The policeman was trapped between the wardrobe and the bed. Faced with the necessity to attack him, Weilin hesitated. The policeman seemed very large and invulnerable. He was laughing, though, very freely and naturally, and between laughter, shouting out something in his own language: “*Rugger, rugger, sounds like bugger! Ha ha ha! Rugger, sounds like bugger, ha ha ha ha ha!*” Which of course Weilin could not understand at all. Gathering his courage he grabbed for the ball and held onto it. They fell sideways onto the bed, rolling over and over, the policeman laughing all the time. Weilin started laughing too. He could not help it. He got his arm between ball and policeman, squirmed out from under the man’s weight, and took off into the main room.

This went on for fifteen minutes or so, Weilin now enjoying himself unselfconsciously. The policeman was heavy and clumsy, and delivered a few bruises, but it was clear he meant no harm. At last both players were out of breath. Also sweating: the air conditioners had not had time to do a thorough job yet, and the apartment was still warm. They ended on the floor in the main room, Weilin clutching the ball to himself, the policeman too winded to grab for it, both of them laughing freely.

“Good game, eh?” said the policeman when he had some breath.

“Yes. A lot of fun.”

“It’s late, though. We’d best go to bed.”

The policeman got up and went into the bedroom. Weilin lay on the floor, still clutching the *rugger* ball. He knew now that the apartment had only one bed. There was a couch in the main room, and he wondered if he was to sleep on the couch.

“Come on,” called the policeman. Weilin got up and went into the bedroom. The policeman was standing there, naked. The bedclothes had been pulled down, some towels laid out on the bed. Suddenly Weilin felt scared, though he did not know why. The policeman saw it. He smiled, the crinkly, kindly smile.

“It’s all right. Nothing to be afraid of.”

Reaching out, he took the ball Weilin was still holding. He walked round the bed and set the ball on top of the wardrobe. Then he came back, right up to Weilin, and smiled again.

“Lie down on the bed.”

Weilin could think of nothing to do but obey. He sat on the edge of the bed, then turned to lie on the big towel spread on this side of the bed. The policeman walked round to the other side and climbed up to lie on the other towel.

“It’s all right. Just another game.”

What followed did not surprise Weilin as much as—thinking it over, as he did many times in the years that followed—perhaps it should have done: except that, at the moment when matters were obviously approaching some sort of conclusion, the policeman threw back his head and roared out a great rough oath in his own language.

“SCOTSWHA HAAAAAAAAEEEEEEEE!”