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Painting Pork

One night after our Communist Youth League study session, Lao High cornered me while I was leaving and said, "Flour, I need to talk to you." He led me into his office behind the classroom and collapsed in his chair, looking as tired as the toothpick that dipped from his lips. "What do you think of what Zhaonian's doing?"

I adjusted my eyeglasses, unsure how to answer.

Chen Zhaonian was the fanatical propagandist of the Youth League. He once declared he wanted to rewrite the traffic-light laws since red was the party color and therefore should mean *go* and not *stop*. Fortunately, there were no traffic lights in the village, but Zhaonian's hand could be seen everywhere else. In the loudspeakers blaring revolutionary exhortations around the clock. In the Mao-portrait stencils coating every wall. And, as of last week, in the directive that all livestock—goats, pigs, even chickens—be painted red like the buildings had been. Yes, he was insane, but how did you say that to another League leader, even if it was rumored that everyone hated Zhaonian?

I finally decided on a safe ancient proverb: "If an old man who moved mountains could be considered foolish, then there must also be a reason behind Zhaonian's ideas."

Lao High's response—glancing away with an off-centered smirk—transmitted an unmistakable message: *you stupid girl*. When his eyes returned to mine, his toothpick began bobbing: "Let me tell you a funny story. A few days ago, Zhaonian and Oil Strip went to Old Man Wu to paint his livestock. Now, the guy only has one pig, but he's quite endeared to it. When Zhaonian and Oil Strip tried to paint it, they were"—the smirk returned—"dissuaded from that action. But now I have a problem. Zhaonian's been browbeating me to somehow get Old Man Wu to let his pig be painted. It's the only animal left, he says. That's why you're here."

"Me? What can I do? Why don't you threaten him with the cowshed? He'll comply—"

Lao High shook his head. "You don't know, do you? Wu's one of the eight thousand."

Then I understood. The Long March survivors. As Lao High further explained, Old Man Wu was, in fact, part of the assault team that secured Luding Bridge in May 1935 from the Nationalists. This action, as every schoolkid knew, allowed Mao and his forces to escape into the Great Snow Mountains. It now seemed incredible that Old Man Wu would be residing in our village. After all, such a war hero could have a powerful job and a plush apartment in Beijing. But instead, after Liberation, he had returned with his bride to his birthplace,

and here he'd stayed for the past two decades. His wife had died a couple of years before, and not having any children, Old Man Wu now lived alone—except for a pig he called Dongdong.

"And since it lives inside the house, we need you to lure it out."

"I'm sorry, but why are you picking me again?"

Lao High reached into a drawer and slid a photograph across the table. It showed Old Man Wu as a young man, and standing beside him was a woman in her twenties. Slender, pale-complected, sharp-nosed. I started. She looked like my nonexistent twin sister.

Lao High grinned. "He won't listen to us, but he might his wife. Here's the plan . . ."

I was to pretend to be writing an article about Luding Bridge for *The Jiangsu Daily*. During the interview with Old Man Wu, I was to turn the discussion from past heroism to present-day responsibility, and gently suggest that he should now follow the rules of the collective as he had as a young soldier. Besides relying on my resemblance to his wife, the plan also depended, I decided, on a total senility of Old Man Wu. That was insane, of course, and Lao High must've understood as much because he suddenly removed a tiny powder-filled vial from his pocket. "Empty this into his tea when he's not looking. He'll stay asleep long enough for you take the pig outside."

He handed over the vial, and speechless, I put it in my pants.

"And I know you don't like him, but Oil Strip's going with you to paint the pig."

I must've grimaced. If there was one person I despised more than Zhaonian, it was his deputy. Greasy hair and skin. Fish-bulgy eyes centered always three inches below my neckline.

Lao High stood up. "One more thing. Wu's wife never wore glasses so make sure to take yours off before you meet him." He spat out his toothpick, signaling the end of the meeting.

"Why are you called Flour?"

"I guess it has to do with my light complexion, sir," I answered, and tried not to squint. I'd taken off my glasses ten minutes ago when I left Oil Strip hiding behind a bamboo thicket and approached Old Man Wu's cottage. My looks garnered an invitation to enjoy afternoon tea. Now, as I balanced myself on a tipsy chair inside Wu's living room, I fought an urge to put my glasses back on; with my unadorned eyes, I saw the world as if swimming underwater.

"My wife was also quite pale," said Old Man Wu, his face a beige oval perched atop a blue indistinct body. "You know, I almost fainted when I saw you. I didn't think such a

resemblance was possible. What are your bosses trying to do, shock me to death?"

"Excuse me, sir?"

"I know you've been sent here to convince me to let Dongdong be painted."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wu, but I don't know what you mean. Who's Dongdong?"

Old Man Wu chuckled, clearly unimpressed by my acting. "Who's Dongdong? Let me show you." He turned and called out into the next room, "Dongdong! Dongdong!"

A snorting pink shape padded into the room. Old Man Wu scratched the round shape as it stopped by the table. Then the pink blob trudged away and collapsed noisily in a corner.

"Mr. Wu, I don't want to paint your pig. I want to write an article—"

"—about Luding Bridge. Yes, you've told me. I just find that hard to believe." A blurry quarter-moon of teeth. "You see, Flour, people generally don't want to write flattering articles about someone who'd attacked them days earlier with a meat cleaver."

I must've blanched. So that was the "dissuasion" Lao High talked about!

"Don't worry, I wasn't really going to use it. I just wanted them away from Dongdong." I could hear the smile in Wu's

voice. "But alright, I'll play along and answer your questions about Luding Bridge. But first, I'd like you to answer a few of my questions."

I nodded slowly.

"Why are you kids painting all the village animals?"

I regurgitated my Youth League lessons: "By painting the animals red, we remind people of revolutionary ideals so no one becomes complacent. After all, 'modesty helps one go forward, whereas conceit makes one lag behind.'"

"Quoting the Chairman, are we? That's fine, but how does a painted pig help people 'go forward'? Wouldn't it instead make them go backward since the paint would harm the animal and also spoil its meat?"

"It's not the same paint they use on buildings, sir," I countered, though I had no idea.

"Alright, forget animals for a minute and let's talk about people. Those boys I see around the village with the Mao pins stuck in their flesh. What's the point of that?"

"As our dear leader has stated, 'It is sheer fantasy to imagine that the cause of socialism is all plain sailing.' The pain of the pins reminds the boys of the struggles of the past and—"

"Reminds them? You kids hadn't even been born before Liberation! These struggles you talk about you only know

through books. And since you like quotes, have you heard this one: 'theory becomes purposeless if it's not connected with revolutionary practice'?"

I had, of course; it was from Stalin. However, I stayed quiet so Wu could calm down. When the red oval became beige again, I said, "You're right about us being callow, sir. But that's why we've come to the countryside. And that's why I'd like to interview you about Luding Bridge. Hopefully, the article will inspire more city kids to come here and live a life of 'revolutionary practice.'"

"*Tianye!*" Old Man Wu laughed. "You even bullshit like my wife."

A funny thing happened when Old Man Wu began telling me the story of Luding Bridge. The old cynic transformed into a revolutionary as fervent as any of the youth he'd just ridiculed.

"You have to understand, the Long March was the greatest military success in history. Of course, some people ask me how I could say this since it was really a yearlong retreat. But let me ask you, what could we have done *but* retreat? The Nationalists had five times our men and far better military gear including planes by the hundreds. We only had rifles and a few field guns. Had we defended ourselves in Jiangxi like that

foreign blockhead Li De had advised, China wouldn't exist today. So yes, it was a retreat. We lost ninety thousand men, most of our military gear, and our entire base of operations—fifteen years of effort gone. But we saved our army, and from our new base in Northern Shanxi, we saved China fifteen years later. At the beginning of the march, though, we weren't sure we would survive the next week or even the next day."

I scribbled notes as he related the first months of the march. I didn't need to, of course; like everyone else, I'd already heard the stories from dozens of other mouths. The bloody crossings of the Xiang and Yu Rivers. The meeting in Zunyi where Mao was given control of the Red Army. Mao's subsequent scattering of the troops to confuse the pursuing Nationalists. The hardship stories. Starving men devouring wild grass, tree bark, even their own belts; the unlucky ones mistakenly eating poisonous wild mushrooms then retching out their stomach linings until they died. The marching routine—four hours of marching followed by four hours of sleeping, day and night. And since few could sleep in the wretched conditions—no shelter, almost no food, frequent strafing from Nationalist planes—it was essentially a nonstop march. "And everyone marched except that damn Li De, who insisted on being carried in a litter!"

I nodded and reverently scribbled on, continuing with my charade, though by the time he got to Luding Bridge, my overtaxed eyes were throbbing.

"You have to understand, after just six months, we were already down to only twenty thousand men. The Nationalists were closing in, and the only way out was to cross the Datong River and escape into the Great Snow Mountains. But unlike the Xiang and Yu, the Datong was too wild to cross by ferry. Its current was so fierce, it was practically a horizontal waterfall. So we had to cross by bridge.

"Now, as you know, Luding Bridge was about a hundred meters long and three meters wide, and made entirely of thirteen chains. Nine supported the wood planks that acted as the floor and the rest made the handrails. The damn thing was three hundred years old, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was a Nationalist scout team had beaten us to it and burned all the planks so only the chains remained. Then those bastards waited for us on the opposite bank with their guns drawn.

"Our commander at the time asked for volunteers to cross the bridge and take them out. I volunteered along with twenty others, and it wasn't because of bravery. You see, I was so tired and miserable, I really didn't care if I *did* get shot and fall into that damn river. Each of us got a handgun and a couple of grenades, then off we went. We couldn't even wait for

nightfall since the Nationalist Army could've been on top of us by then. So we formed into double lines and started crossing, one line holding onto the left handrails, the other the right ones. It was very slow going since the chains were still hot, and there were the remains of the planks, which we had to sidestep since many were still burning.

"Of course, while we crossed, both our side and theirs were shooting nonstop at each other. What made it scary for us, though, was there was no cover. We just had to continue inching forward on those chains, and hoped none of the bullets find us. And you know what, those Nationalists were terrible shots. We'd crossed half the bridge, and none of us had been hit. I was beginning to think we would all make it when the guy in front of me suddenly fell off the bridge. He didn't make a single sound—he just fell. I saw him tumble head over heels and splash into the brown rapids below. It shocked me how quick it was. When I looked up, I saw the handrail in front of me was splattered with blood, and that's when I knew he'd been shot. And I hadn't gone another meter when, across from me, another man fell into the river. But this guy screamed, which scared the man right behind him into releasing his own grip. And this guy would've fallen too except he grabbed onto one of the central plank chains as he fell and held on for dear life. Then he did something smart: he wrapped his legs around the chain and began crawling upside

down like a circus performer. It looked damn funny, but I'd bet you he made a smaller target than us morons still standing!

"As we neared the opposite bank, our side intensified their shooting so that a continuous stream of bullets raked the hills where the Nationalists were hiding. We finally got to solid ground and luckily, there were rocks there so we ducked under those. Even better, sixteen of us made it. We carefully craned our necks up and surveyed the hills above us. Then we found out why we'd been so lucky. There were only ten or so Nationalists up there, and every time they looked down, their eyes were wide and scared. They were just kids like us, but we were so mad, we didn't care. We almost couldn't contain ourselves when we threw our grenades above us. KOOM KOOM KOOM! Rocks and dirt fell all around us, and then everything went quiet. We waited a few minutes then climbed up the hills. Every one of those damn turtle eggs had burst apart."

As he finished talking, I asked loads of questions, again mostly to buttress my lie. And when I asked what his strongest memory of that day was, he provided a surprising answer.

"A couple hours after the battle, I was just sitting there watching the rest of our army cross the bridge. A bunch of farmers from Luding village came by to watch also, some even providing us with food and water. I'll never forget this: a girl around twelve came up and offered me a bowl of porridge.

But hungry as I was, I found I couldn't pay any attention to the food. You see, I could not look away from her. Of course, we're no longer supposed to believe in fate or any other feudal superstition, but let me tell you, I knew, just knew, that if I somehow survived the war, I would marry this girl. And you know what? Fifteen years later, when Liberation came, I went back to Luding, and we did get married. And I've always found this to be more amazing than anything else in the war—though, don't write that in your article!"

He punctuated his statement with a laugh, and I smiled along. My rationality, though, was still grappling with his idea of predestined love when I noticed the oval had become still.

"I guess it was also fate that took her away from me two years ago. And decreed we couldn't have children like everyone else. But I have no regrets. She'd given me twenty years of happiness." There was a sigh as I observed a blurry hand wipe the upper half of the oval. "And I still have Dongdong. You see, my wife always wanted a pet, but she was allergic to cats and dogs so I thought why not a pig? So I gave her Dongdong as a birthday gift five years ago. He was just a piglet then. So there's a very simple reason why I can't let him be painted. My wife wouldn't have liked it, and that's more than enough reason for me. Do you understand, Flour?"

I nodded. As I watched the gentle old man sip his tea, I now hoped he wouldn't leave me alone—not even for a second. But then my fear came true as he stood up. "Excuse me while this old root takes care of some business." His chuckling form shuffled into the next room, leaving me alone with his half-empty teacup.

"What took you so long?" Oil Strip demanded as he emerged from the bamboo thicket.

Seeing his leering fish eyes again made me wish I hadn't put back on my glasses. "Just paint the pig, okay?" I said, struggling with the rope that collared Dongdong's squirming neck. "I don't want to be around here when Wu wakes up."

"Oh, he won't wake for a few hours." Oil Strip took the rope from me, the pig whining pitifully. With his other hand, Oil Strip grabbed his paint can and brush.

"Is that the same paint you use on buildings?"

"What?"

"The paint. Is it the same stuff you use on the walls of buildings?"

"Yeah, it is. But don't you worry because we're not going to use that." Chuckling, he led Dongdong away. "The Youth League's having a feast tonight, Flour. Roast pork for everyone. We're going to paint this pig red with its own—"

"WHAT?"

He spewed hideous laughter. "You think Zhaonian and I were going to forget what happened without payback? That old lunatic attacked us with a meat cleaver!"

"NO!" I stepped in front of him. "You can't do—"

Laughing, Oil Strip elbowed me aside. Although he was just one of Zhaonian's peons, he was still of higher rank than I was. However, this fact was smothered by blinding fury as I shoved him as hard as I could from behind, sending him tumbling into the gully off the road. "You whore!" he shouted, and began crawling back up the shoulder.

"RUN!" I screamed and pushed Dongdong hard. The pig gave a distressed snort then ran away as fast as his stumpy legs allowed. Then I was sent sprawling as Oil Strip rammed into me from behind. As I landed in the grass off the road, my glasses somersaulted off my face. I couldn't see anything again, though I couldn't have even if I still had my lenses on. As my eyes dissolved in a cascade of tears, I pressed my palms against my ears, blocking out Oil Strip's sprinting footsteps and the unavoidable capture and painting of Dongdong the pig.