

## Father to a Village

### Anhui, August 1952:

Some eight hundred miles north of Hong Kong, in the Anhui village of Thirsty Hills, Cheng Yin hobbled on his crutches towards the shed housing the sow and its litter. Where his left leg ought to have been there was only a stump, ending above the knee. He had lost the leg during the assault on Luting Bridge during the course of the Long March. As he was about to lift the wire loop securing the wooden gate to the farrowing quarters, he heard the voice of his wife.

“Let me do that,” Ah Dun called, from outside the pen where the barrows and gilts were cooling in the mud.

Cheng Yin rested one hand on the gatepost and watched his wife waddling towards him in her cheap black rubber boots. She was, like him, dressed in a patched, short-sleeved blue cotton shirt. The only difference was that she wore long trousers with the legs tucked inside her boots. She placed her hand on top of his, rubbed it affectionately, and said: “Why don’t you attend to things nobody can help you with.”

Cheng Yin saw obvious tenderness in his wife’s eyes and her hand, strong and callused, felt reassuring upon his. Her plain, weather-beaten face pleased him more than ever. He could not help wondering, however, whether he had been right to take her away from the secure routine of the Soo mansion for the vagries of a pig farm. She might no longer be a bondsmaid but there remained servitude just the same. The shifting political orthodoxies of the day could be more oppressive. Thoughts and feelings he wanted to share with her had to remain unexpressed. Even in the privacy of their own bed, some things had to be left unsaid.

“There’ll be time enough for other things,” Cheng Yin said, forcing a smile. The summer day had been brutally hot, without even the whisper of a breeze. He recognized the smell of Ah Dun’s sweat. It mingled with the odours of the farm, the parched air of the village and those of his own body. He felt a comforting sense of familiarity.

“You’re a hopeless liar,” Ah Dun laughed, as she entered the farrowing quarter, shutting the gate after her. “Don’t forget you’re father to a village of sixty-one households, totalling three hundred and twelve mouths. You’ll never have enough time to attend to all their needs.”

A father to sixty-one households, Cheng Yin reflected. What a struggle it had been! The very name of the place was uninviting -- Thirsty Hills. Located in the uplands of Anhui, it was connected to the nearest town by seven miles of dirt track. It had been a triumph of endurance merely to survive. He first came across it when he accompanied his father and the bodyguards to collect rent for a landlord.

The village had no school, clinic, electricity, running water, irrigation or community organization. Two communal wells served the handful of families subsisting there. Trees in the neighbourhood had been progressively sacrificed for fuel, so that it was a trial to make anything grow in the eroded sun-baked earth. The will of landlords and rent collectors was law.

Because of what he had seen, he had run away at the age of sixteen to join the Red Army to create a better China. In the course of the Long March he had fought innumerable skirmishes and killed more enemies than he could remember. He had been one of the twenty-two members of the Second Company of the Fourth Shock Regiment selected to capture Luting Bridge. The assault had succeeded, though it claimed the lives of four of his comrades. And he lost a leg in the process. Each survivor was given a fountain pen, a notebook and some eating utensils as a reward.

He also received ten silver dollars as severance pay after losing his leg. Later he received another ten dollars as dowry for Ah Dun from her master, Herbalist Soo, the kindly man who tended his wound. Marriage led quickly to a son, whom they named Cheng Ching or Cheng the Righteous.

By the time he got back to Anhui with his family, however, his father had died. He and Ah Dun decided to rent a plot at Thirsty Hills to start a pig farm. Since he could no longer fight for the ideals he believed in, he thought sharing the hardships of the peasants would demonstrate his commitment to his fellow men.

“Only a litter of ten this time,” Cheng Yin said, as he watched his wife nudging the piglets into the farrowing stalls. “We have to be careful the sow doesn’t crush another young. We’ve enough trouble maintaining meat rations as it is.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” Ah Dun said. “You always do. This lot should be right by the Lunar New Year.”

Cheng Yin felt a weariness he could not express. He knew the problems he faced as Party Secretary. He was responsible for finding solutions. He would gladly pass the job to someone else, except there was no one else.

Two years before, after thirteen years of struggles and failures, he had finally managed to produce enough pork to provide each family with six ounces of meat per week. The villagers had been so pleased they marked that milestone with a celebration. He had not been able to improve on that ration since.

To increase production he needed feed in the form of corn, barley, oats and sorghum. But where was he to find them for pigs when even people went without? Animals needed antibiotics too, and there had been none for sick villagers. Pigs needed better accommodation than that of his family, richer pastures to graze for snails, earthworms and insect larvae, and a dozen other requirements. Without them how could sows produce three litters a year as they did in America, with offspring growing to over a thousand pounds in weight?

How could he explain why America produced bigger and better pigs with that terrible war in Korea? Everything American had to be demonized and denounced. As Party Secretary, it was his job to fire up villagers against American imperialism, to get them to volunteer for war in the frozen wastes of a foreign land. He knew he had not done as well as he should and the greatest reminder of his deficiencies was his own son.

“Is Ah Ching still not back?” Ah Dun asked, as they moved towards their mean brick home. Blackie, their dog, was asleep on the doorstep.

“Don’t fret. He’s a responsible lad,” Cheng Yin said. “He’ll be back in time to collect the swill. Don’t forget he has a seven-mile ride from town, even if his bike doesn’t suffer another puncture on that miserable road.”

“Sixteen’s an unpredictable age,” Ah Dun said. “All very well for him to attend secondary school in town and join the Communist Youth League. The more he learns the more he will grow restless with village life.”

“He’s an intelligent boy,” Cheng Yin said, as he watched Ah Dun exchanging her boots for a pair of rubber sandals before entering the house. “Can’t expect him to collect swill and help in the fields for the rest of his life. Everyone must discover for himself what he wants to do with his life.”

Cheng Yin sat down on a bench outside their home, parked his crutches against the wall and ruffled the dog’s neck. Blackie was growing as old as himself, he thought. He was only thirty-six by the calendar but his hair had turned prematurely grey. So too had his wife’s. The untidy stubble around his mouth, once so resolute, added to the impression of weariness. He felt dried up and used up, like some beast of burden required to do too much for too long.

For fifteen years he had struggled to improve things in that desolate village. He had studied tomes on herbal medicine given by Herbalist Soo, in order to provide rudimentary health care. He had dug more wells and tried to pass on knowledge about irrigation and water hygiene. He had started a primary school to prevent the next generation growing up as ignorant as their parents.

When Liberation came, he thought the threshold to a better life had been reached. True, land was soon confiscated from absentee landlords and given to the peasants. The bullying rent collectors and rapacious moneylenders disappeared. But a quota on production still had to be given to the state and those who fell behind accumulated debts just the same. As Party Secretary, he was the representative of the authorities, the enforcer of official demands.

Perhaps it was in the nature of the world to change slowly. Only his blind conceit caused him to think differently. Improvements in drainage and irrigation took time but could be nullified overnight by a rock slide. Trees took ages to grow and unseasonable frost or a year of drought could undo months of painstaking work. He felt tired. Fifteen years of unremitting toil had all but snuffed out the fire of commitment. The light had gone out in his eyes. Each generation had to cope with its own vanquished dreams.

Others had done better. Old Yeh, his former company commander and leader in the assault on Luting Bridge, was now a Major General in the People’s Liberation Army. They had kept in touch. But at the moment he did not envy his command in that impossible war. Old Yeh was in Mukden, on the staff of General Peng Teh-hwa, the Commander-in-Chief of all Chinese forces in Korea. He could sense a secret pain behind words in his former comrade’s letters when he talked of the courage of men prevailing over technology and machines. They had both been left with only grand words for those under their respective charges.

He had no ambition left. He recognized his own failure. To look after the sixty-one families, to join them in their dumb, obstinate struggle for existence in their godforsaken

wilderness, was all he could do. Both he and Ah Dun sought consolation in their son. Perhaps a better world might be possible for him.

Korea now threatened like an approaching storm. It threatened to suck their son and other young men in the village away, perhaps to die unnoticed and alone on some alien plot. A creeping, unarticulated terror possessed him. He sensed the same terror possessing his wife, as she turned restlessly in bed. Neither could give voice to their common distress, however, because in the world they inhabited, every word or deed could be weighed by others in political terms. Fears for the safety of a son implied doubts over the leadership of the Communist Party and inevitability of victory in Korea.

Blackie stood up suddenly and wagged its tail. It wheezed out a couple of senile barks and Cheng Yin knew his son had returned. He looked towards the path leading down into the village and saw Cheng Ching coasting home on his bicycle. His heart skipped a beat, for the lateness of the return filled him with a premonition of disaster.

Cheng Ching greeted him cheerfully. Constant exposure to the sun had given him a healthy tan. Tiny pearls of perspiration glistened on his youthful brow. He parked his antiquated bicycle against the wall of their house and bent down to pet Blackie. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "Haven't forgotten about the swill."

Ah Dun came to the door at the sound of her son's voice. "Look at you!" she remonstrated. "You're soaked in sweat! Come in and have some tea."

Cheng Ching followed his mother in and re-emerged some time later dressed in a worn blue shirt, a pair of green drill shorts and rope-soled sandals. He was a lean and healthy lad, with the well-defined muscles and grace of movement of an acrobat. He appeared unseasonably mature for his age, however, in spite of bright, innocent eyes. He went to the rear of the dwelling to fetch a bamboo carrying pole and two wooden swill buckets before beginning his journey through the village. He strode in a jaunty fashion, with the pole balanced on his right shoulder and a bucket dangling from each end.

Cheng Yin watched his son go with a sinking heart. He had noted the raptness in the lad's face. There was also a certain spring in his gait, suggesting possession of a satisfying secret. He imagined he too must have betrayed similar signs on the eve of running away twenty odd years ago. That reflection strengthened his apprehension.

Dinner passed uneventfully. His son's bright eyes appeared more subdued. After evening meal it was customary for Cheng Yin to share the sole rickety, work-scarred table in the home with his son, he to do the paperwork befalling a Party Secretary, such as keeping records of ration coupons for oil, sugar, cloth and other necessities, while his son completed school assignments. That routine had enabled him to keep an eye on the extra-curricular readings he had imposed on his son. From time to time father and son would interrupt each other to discuss some point of fact or principle or to mull a question.

Cheng Yin had no wish to follow that routine this particular evening. Instead, he left the table to his son and settled himself on the bench outside, to gaze reflectively into the gathering gloom.

After homework, his son came out and asked: "Father, would you care to stroll a while?"

Cheng Yin rose and gathered up his parked crutches. They made off in the direction of the fields, away from the frail, flickering oil lamps of the village. Blackie followed at their heels. The intense heat of the day had cooled and there was even the hint of a breeze. The arid fields were like a darkening immensity, harsh, unamenable, eternally mocking. A faint orange smudge on the horizon was all that remained of the dying day. Neither moon nor star was to be seen. Silence buzzed all around, punctuated by the occasional chirping of cicadas.

Father and son stopped on a slight rise close to a crude wooden shack erected to serve as a primary school. Blackie whimpered and settled at their feet. During their walk dusk had thickened surreptitiously, turning them from visible forms into felt presences.

"Father, I have something important to tell you," Cheng Ching began abruptly. "If I have caused disappointment, please forgive me. I need your help to explain to Mother."

"What have you done?" Cheng Yin replied, keeping his voice as bland as possible.

"I've volunteered for Korea. I report in four weeks."

"How is that possible? You're not of age." Cheng Yin fought desperately to maintain a casual, dismissive tone.

"I told them I was seventeen and a half."

"You told an untruth to Party officials?"

"I didn't mean to. It just came out. Two members of the Youth League decided to volunteer. We all went to support them. In the excitement I said I wanted to volunteer too. The others cheered me on. Since the other volunteers said they were seventeen and a half, I said the same."

"Didn't the officials question you?"

"No, not when I told them you were the Party Secretary in our village and a veteran of the Long March. They were more than eager to sign me up."

A silence descended between them. Cheng Yin saw at once the impossibility of remedying the position. To raise the issue of his son being underaged would reflect upon both his son's integrity and his own lack of enthusiasm for the war.

He could, in the extreme, try to prevail upon Old Yeh to assign Ah Ching to duties out of harm's way. But that would be a shameful and undignified request. They would think less of each other for it. He saw no alternative to letting his son go.

"You have volunteered to serve your country. Why should you need forgiveness?" Cheng Yin said, finally, choosing his words carefully. Even in the dead of night, away from the huts of the village, there was still a chance of being overheard.

"It occurred to me while I was collecting swill I would be leaving you and Mother in an impossible position. You can't collect swill or distribute pig manure with a missing leg and Mother already has too much to do. I didn't think when I volunteered. It was selfish of me."

Cheng Yin reached out and placed a hand firmly on his son's shoulder. The shoulder muscles felt taut beneath his touch. "It's all right, Son," he said. "When I ran off to join the Red

Army, I didn't even pause to say farewell to my father. I was afraid he would stop me. I've regretted that ever since because your grandfather died before I got home. At least we will manage a proper leave-taking. Don't worry about the swill. We'll get along somehow. It only needs a small re-allocation of duties among two or three villagers. Why are you so anxious to volunteer?"

It was now Cheng Ching's turn to be silent. "Father, I was ashamed of the record of our village," he replied, eventually, swallowing hard. "Newspapers and radio broadcasts tell us each day the Americans are committing rape and murder, bombing civilians and killing innocent children. How can any decent human being stand by while such atrocities continue? At the Youth League we are required to report on the number of anti-American rallies held in our respective townships or villages and the number who have volunteered. No one has volunteered from our village and our rallies have been few and far between. I felt I had to make a gesture.

"Father, we are taught to regard the men and women in the 6,000-mile Long March as national heroes, fighting and dying for what they believed in. Whenever we discuss the assault on Luting Bridge in our political studies, my heart swells with pride because you were part of that. I want to be like you, Father, to fight for things I believe in. That's why I want to go to Korea."

Cheng Yin tightened his grip on his son's shoulder as he tried to choose the right words. He felt his heart was about to break.

"The Party is in command of the nation and we must respect the line set by the Party," he said. "But the Party also recognizes that special circumstances can prevail to prevent the application of a general policy. That is the case here. It has been hard keeping this village going. It is poor, with an ageing population. If its small number of able-bodied men go off to fight, who will do the sowing and planting and reaping? The village will die. I cannot allow that. Too many people have invested their lives here. They have endured winters as sharp as razors, summer air too hot to breathe, droughts tasting of dust, hunger, diseases, decades of sapping toil. They deserve a victory against Nature, their ancient enemy."

"Oh, Father, please forgive me!" Cheng Ching cried. "I never thought I was needed so much in the village. I only thought of winning glory and returning a hero like you. When I come back I will devote my life to the village, as you have done."

"Wars seldom make heroes. Heroes are created afterwards, to lure future generations into risking their lives for some catchy slogan or a piece of coloured ribbon. I was never a hero. I simply obeyed orders. Who would have ever heard of the assault on Luting Bridge if we had failed? It would have disappeared into the mists of history as a foolhardy attempt by a group of stupid outlaws to capture a bridge. Don't try to be a hero in Korea. It is a dirty war, with no winners. Discount the talk about pushing imperialists into the sea. Each man must discover for himself the actualities of his world, the terms of his existence and the price that has to be paid. It is like eating and sleeping. No one else can do it for you.

"You have volunteered. The only thing your mother and I can do is to help you prepare. Just do your duty as you see fit and don't take unnecessary chances. Come back safely to us. The best thing that can happen would be for the ceasefire talks at Panmunjom to bear fruit before you reach the front. We had better head home now, before your mother starts worrying."

With those words, father and son, followed by Blackie, retraced their steps. As they walked, Cheng Yin realized that his missing leg was merely the first link in the long chain of destiny which fettered him to the village and from which there could be no escape. He hoped his son's destiny would be kinder.

News of the boy's imminent departure for Korea spread throughout the village. Neighbours came in twos and threes to congratulate Cheng Yin and Ah Dun for raising so patriotic and public-spirited a son. They showed up with their simple, honest, rough hewn faces, shuffling their feet at the door or taking a tentative seat on the edge of the bench outside. They expressed their approval through awkward exclamations and deep-throated grunts, pulling meditatively upon cigarettes during pauses. Those well-meaning sentiments were the hardest for Cheng Yin to bear.

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Two weeks later, after the evening meal, Cheng Yin brought out a pile of small packages and placed them on the battered family table. Each was wrapped in rice paper and labelled.

"These are herbal pills and powders," Cheng Yin said. "I'm sure the government has everything needed in spite of the United Nations embargo. But some medicines may not be readily available at the front. There are bound to be cases of dysentery, fever, pulled muscles, skin rashes and, unhappily, bullet wounds. Each package is marked, to identify what it is suitable for and the right dosage. The ones wrapped in red contain a powder to staunch bleeding. Always carry one. In case a comrade is wounded, you can use it to help him before the medics arrive. If the wound is not big, spread the powder directly on it. It will check the bleeding."

Then it was Ah Dun's turn. She handed her son a canvas belt with many small compartments. "I've made this for you," she said. "It'll make it easier for you to carry medicines."

Cheng Ching hugged his mother and tears welled up in his eyes.

On a clear, sunny morning, Cheng Yin and Ah Dun put on clean clothes and patriotic faces to send their son off. A gaggle of villagers joined in and one of the village youths, a particular friend of Cheng Ching's, offered him a pillion ride into town on a bicycle.

Except for a bagful of herbal medicines, Cheng Ching's personal possessions were meagre. The lad kept his final farewell for Blackie.