

Days in May

Peking, May 1954:

“This is Tienanmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace,” the tour guide explained through a megaphone, as Cheng Ching and his group of volunteers stared in rapt attention. A short distance away, other guides shepherding other groups bellowed similarly into their megaphones, creating an echoing din.

“This gate used to be the entrance to the imperial complex lying to the north, previously known as the Forbidden City. The Forbidden City was built during the Ming Dynasty and was used by a number of Ming and Ching emperors. The former royal gardens of Chung Nan Hai inside is where the nation’s top leaders now reside. We will be visiting public parts of the Forbidden City presently.

“To the south you can see construction in progress. The government is building the largest square in the world in Peking, as a showplace of the new China. A magnificent memorial to martyrs of the Revolution will stand at the centre. Foundations have already been laid. A Great Hall of the People, where legislators will meet, is to be erected on one side of the square and museums displaying the heritage and achievements of the nation on the other.

“The Gate of Heavenly Peace itself, as you can see, is a red brick structure with a roof in imperial yellow. There are five openings. Above the central opening, a portrait of our beloved leader, Chairman Mao, is permanently on display.”

Cheng Ching gazed up at the portrait. Chairman Mao seemed to beam benignly upon him. Cheng Ching wanted the tour to end, so that he could find Ying and exchange experiences with her. But the guide droned on.

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Cheng Ching had arrived in Peking a week earlier, having been plucked unexpectedly from his unit in Korea to participate in the celebrations and parades normally scheduled for May. Then he would be discharged, to return home after almost twenty months in Korea.

Except for a few from his own company, the others accorded similar treatment were strangers. Their haunted looks suggested they belonged to outfits which had suffered high casualties. He himself had spent a gruelling winter manning the ceasefire line. The freezing cold and the boredom of inactivity had been nearly as unendurable as the fighting.

His orders to move out had come so suddenly that he had no time to inform Ying. To his utter amazement, however, he discovered during the journey to Peking that Ying and some other nurses were on the same train.

“Elder sister!” he almost screamed, when he spotted her while he walked through the carriages.

“Little Ching!” Ying responded, in that cheery Chinese form of address adopted towards juniors. She rushed to hug him. “What are you doing on this train?” She looked as radiant as ever.

“I tried to reach you. I’ve been selected to take part in the May Day parade. And the May the Fourth commemorations afterwards. Then I’m going home! My stint is over!”

“Me too!” Ying trilled. “I wrote to you. But I don’t suppose you got my letter. We must explore Peking together. I’m so excited. I’ve never been there. Have you?”

“No, never. They must give us some free time before we go home. I’m only worried it won’t be enough. There’s so much to take in here, unlike poor Sepo.”

Their fortuitous encounter confirmed his belief that their fates were intertwined.

But their quarters turned out to be located in different parts of the city and rehearsals for the ceremonies prevented any meeting. They could not even spot each other’s units among the innumerable groups and contingents. The May Day parade itself was a heady affair. The procession snaked for miles and took hours to pass the review podium where Chairman Mao and other leaders took the salute. The cheers of the crowds and the music from numerous bands were deafening.

Cheng Ching had anticipated he would be free after the May Day parade. But he was wrong. Organized visits to the Great Wall and the Ming tombs had been arranged for the following day and rehearsals for the May the Fourth commemorations the day after that. It appeared that the only free time was a half-day of unescorted sight-seeing on the day before dispersal.

After the May Day parade, he returned weary and downcast to his quarters. He resented being kept from Ying. The moment he reached his quarters, however, his group leader handed him a new blue cotton Mao suit and told him to get cleaned up for a function. Knowing that cloth was rationed and that a new suit was a windfall, he realized something momentous must be in the wind. It turned out he was one of a small number selected to represent his group at a reception hosted by national leaders.

After a hurried meal he was loaded with the others onto a bus, which picked up further contingents along the way. He neither knew where he was heading nor what to expect. He was eventually deposited outside a large building of venerable design and led into a sumptuous reception hall, with lacquered latticed panels, high gilded ceilings and tall curtained windows.

A band, dressed in white uniforms covered in braid, occupied a small dais at one end of the vast chamber. Except for an area of polished parquet in front of the dais, the floor was covered with a thick-piled Tientsin carpet of an intricate design. Tables piled with food and drink stood at strategic locations around the room.

The young men and women stood expectantly in small groups. Most had volunteered for Korea as engineers, mechanics, doctors, nurses, anti-aircraft gunners, infantrymen, cooks or stretcher-bearers. The men were dressed mainly in blue Mao suits. The small number in uniform represented units of the People’s Liberation Army which had volunteered en masse. The women were in white blouses and navy blue skirts.

Cheng Ching noted also a good sprinkling of Communist Party cadres. There was a quality about them which reminded him of his father. They bore the stamp of strongly held ideals. They were dressed like him in blue Mao suits, though theirs were more worn than his own but of a better cut. Another distinguishing feature was the fountain pens clipped to their breast pockets.

He remembered that his father had been awarded a fountain pen after storming Luting Bridge. His father had passed the pen to him when he entered secondary school but he had considered it too precious to bring to Korea. He wished he had it with him now, so that he might clip it onto his own breast pocket.

He surveyed the room in search of Ying but could not find her. The possibility that she might not have been chosen as a representative for her group suddenly occurred to him and his heart sank.

Clapping broke out suddenly from the other end of the room and he saw Chairman Mao and other leaders entering followed by a large entourage. He recognized Liu Shao-chi and Chou En-lai. The clapping swelled into a wild current of enthusiasm which was picked up by those standing around him. The leaders responded by clapping in return.

Cheng Ching watched them moving off in different directions to mingle with guests. Their bodyguards and aides followed. As the Chairman moved steadily in his direction, Cheng Ching's heart began pounding furiously. His throat felt as if it had turned to sandpaper.

Before he knew it, the Chairman was in front of him, glowing like the sun at dawn. His face was smooth and ageless and he radiated charisma. He was dressed in a grey suit of the style he had made fashionable. But there was no fountain pen clipped to his breast pocket.

"How are you?" the Chairman asked. "Did you get that scar in Korea?"

"Yes, Chairman Mao. A mere trifle," Cheng Ching replied, unable to recognize his own voice.

"A wound received in battle is no trifle. It should be worn with honour. What is your name and where do you come from?"

"My humble surname is Cheng and my given name is Ching. I'm from a village in Anhui." As he uttered the words it seemed everything he had done in Korea had served some higher purpose. He had been a mere instrument, a foot soldier, in some masterly plan devised by the man standing in front of him. He felt all eyes on him. He was no longer a nobody, a collector of swill and pig manure. He had played a part in the destiny of his nation!

"Your parents are farmers?"

"My father was in the Red Army, till he lost a leg. My mother was a former bondsmaid. They now rear pigs."

"Splendid! Two generations of veterans! How did your father lose his leg?"

"During the Long March, on the assault at Luting Bridge."

"Ah! Luting Bridge! A hero of the Revolution! What is your father's name?"

"Cheng Yin."

The Chairman beamed but showed no sign of recognizing the name. "Capturing Luting Bridge was a critical event," he said, with a sudden seriousness. "If it had not been taken,

the whole course of the Revolution would have altered. You have done well to follow in the footsteps of your father. You are also a hero. I believe your period of service is about to end. What do you intend to do?"

Cheng Ching was momentarily lost for an answer. He had promised his father he would devote his life to the village at Thirsty Hills. But it seemed ridiculous to say that to the Chairman. He felt light-headed for an instant.

"Study hard, join the Communist Party and serve the nation," he replied, falling back on the answer drilled into him at the Communist Youth League.

"Good! That's what I like to hear!" the Chairman exclaimed. Mao turned to one of his aides and said: "Make sure to send a message to the Anhui authorities. Tell them a young man by the name of Cheng Ching is about to apply to join the Party. When his application comes in, I want them to know it has my personal endorsement."

"Thank you, Chairman Mao," Cheng Ching said, hardly believing his good fortune. At that moment he would have done anything for the Chairman, even returning to the mud and snow, to kill again and perhaps to be killed. The Chairman had once asserted that deaths weighed differently in different circumstances and that death for a just cause was as light as feather.

The Chairman extended his hand and Cheng Ching clasped it firmly.

"You come from good revolutionary stock," the Chairman said. "You have the makings of someone from whom great things can be expected. Good luck in your endeavours. Our country has need of men like you."

The Chairman moved on.

Cheng Ching remained rooted to the spot, almost fainting. Those around him congratulated him on finding favour with the Chairman. When a waiter passed with a tray of drinks, Cheng Ching grabbed one and gulped it down, indifferent to whether it was fiery mao tai or aerated water. It turned out to be beer.

It took minutes for him to calm down. Everything and everybody in the room seemed to have dissolved into a blur. Slowly, questions crept into his mind. Why had the Chairman favoured him? Was it mere chance he stopped where he did? The Chairman's skill at winning hearts was legendary. Was it all show or was he genuinely extending recognition to a loyal follower?

The sound of strange music floated towards him. It seemed to come from far away. "Ah, the band's playing a medley of foxtrots and waltzes," someone remarked. "They're the Chairman's favourites."

Being a village lad, Cheng Ching had never heard Western music and had no idea what foxtrots and waltzes were. He listened to the tempo and after a while saw to his utter amazement the Chairman dancing with Ying.

"Hey! Look! That's my elder sister dancing with the Chairman!" he cried excitedly.

"She's a beauty," his companion said, admiringly. "Your family must be blessed."

Soon other couples joined the dancing and his view of the the Chairman and Ying became obscured. He had never seen Western dancing before. It seemed to be a form of rotating

hugging set to music. If he had not witnessed the Chairman and Ying indulging he would have considered it decadent. Now he thought only of how pleasurable it would be to whirl with Ying in his arms.

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“The tour of the Forbidden City is concluded.” The guide’s announcement jolted Cheng Ching out of his reverie. “You are now free to continue sight-seeing on your own. The coaches to take you back to your barracks or hostels will be parked in that carpark over there. They will leave at precisely six o’clock. Please remember the number of your coach. If you miss the departure time and cannot find your own way back, report to the nearest Public Security Bureau for assistance. I wish you all pleasant journeys to your homes tomorrow.”

Released from the tour, Cheng Ching rushed back to the Gate of Heavenly Peace where he found Ying already waiting next to the middle entrance, below the portrait of Chairman Mao.

“Elder Sister!” he shouted, running forward. “At last we are together. Where would you like to go? What should we see first?”

“Let us walk a while and talk,” Ying said.

“All right. It was marvellous watching you dance with the Chairman and the other leaders the other night. Democracy must be working in our country. I never imagined we could get so close to our leaders and engage them in conversation. None of them put on airs. They behaved just like ordinary people. You must tell me everything. I’ve got exciting news. I’ve been saving it for today. Can you believe it, Chairman Mao has given me his personal support to join the Communist Party!”

“Fantastic! Congratulations!”

Cheng Ching began recounting in detail his encounter with the Chairman. He was so caught up with his own narrative that he did not notice a growing pensiveness in Ying. When he had finished, he said: “How about that? Isn’t that like a dream come true? Now you must tell me your story. How did it feel dancing with the Chairman?”

“He was a very smooth dancer and a charming talker. It was certainly an experience I shall never forget.”

“What did he say to you?”

“I can’t go into that,” Ying said, with downcast eyes. “I’ve been warned by security people that whatever the Chairman says is a state secret, not to be repeated to anyone else. I will not be going home tomorrow.”

“Oh? You mean you’re staying a few days longer? That would be nice. I’d like to stay too, except that I don’t have enough money. I had thought of escorting you to Soochow before I head for Anhui.”

“It’s not a matter of staying for a few more days. I may have to stay for a very long time.”

“What? Why?”

“Chairman Mao has asked me to become one of his personal nurses. The Central Bureau of Guards are conducting security checks on me. If I pass, if no black mark can be found in my family background, I will be moving behind the vermilion walls of the Chung Nan Hai compound.”

“To serve the Chairman is a great honour. But what about your medical studies?”

Ying shrugged. “Everyone has to make sacrifices. Chairman Mao has taught us that self-denial is a political virtue. He sacrificed eight members of his family for the sake of the Revolution. How can I think of myself when I am required to serve him?”

Her voice sounded oddly flat, as if she were engaging in a debate with herself. “He is a very important person, the personification of our nation,” she continued. “His health is of the utmost importance. His wisdom is needed to guide us through the next stage of China’s development. How can I put my personal wishes ahead of the needs of the nation? Haven’t you and others shed blood for the nation? Should I do less? If I pass the security checks it will be my duty to join his nursing team.”

All Cheng Ching’s hopes for a relationship with Ying seemed to shake and crumble like buildings in an earthquake. “We can at least stay in touch, write to each other,” he said in desperation.

Ying shook her head. “That will not be possible. Inside Chung Nan Hai, everything is a state secret. It will be dangerous to communicate with anyone outside. Innocent remarks may be misunderstood. I’m sorry to be cut off from another brother. This time, I’m to blame.”

The bright Peking sunshine seemed to sear Cheng Ching. He felt as if he were being roasted in an inferno.

They were passing a photographer’s shop. “Let’s have our photograph taken together,” Ying said. “Then we’ll have something to remember each other by.”

Cheng Ching acquiesced without enthusiasm. The proprietor promised to have the prints ready by the following morning. Ying paid for the pictures and they left the shop.

Seeing that Cheng Ching was still downcast, Ying slipped her arm through his. “You told me Chairman Mao had spoken of you as a man from whom great things might be expected. I expect that too. The Chairman has given you a head start in the Party. Make the most of it. Once in a while spare a thought for your Elder Sister, for she will be thinking of you often. Now I must run. I have to present myself at the Central Bureau of Guards for questioning.”

Ying dashed away and Cheng Ching watched her receding figure disappear among the crowds. Slowly he retraced his steps to the Gate of Heavenly Peace. The portrait of Chairman Mao looked down. In spite of being his benefactor, Mao’s face now appeared smug and self-satisfied and less benign than before.

The Chairman had a million nurses to choose from, Cheng Ching thought. Why did he have to choose Ying? Why did he have to snuff out his hope of finding happiness?