

## A Weakness for Chocolate

by

David T. K. Wong

“Why don’t you confess?” the Interrogator shouted, banging his hand down on the wooden counter behind which he sat. He was short, stocky and middle-aged and he deported himself like a malevolent magistrate. Sitting next to him was a young assistant with downcast eyes, busy scribbling a record of the proceedings.

Wen-Yee swallowed hard to contain her fear as she stood before the two men. Incongruously, she became fascinated by a prominent protrusion of flesh at the centre of the Interrogator’s forehead. He reminded her of one of those treacherous imperial eunuchs often portrayed in period films.

“This is rubbish!” the Interrogator cried, in the face of Wen-Yee’s silence. With a sweep of his hand he sent the pages of her family history flying from the counter. “This won’t do. It wouldn’t fool a child.”

Wen-Yee stared vacantly as she watched the pages she had written floating down to the floor like autumn leaves. She was uncertain as to whether she was expected to apologize or to pick them up.

“A confession opens the way to rehabilitation, more lenient treatment,” the Interrogator continued. His tone remained menacing. “Those who do not admit their crimes end up rotting here till they die.”

“I’ve committed no crime. What can I confess?” Wen-Yee allowed, hesitantly. “I’ve already put down all I know.”

“Try harder. You’re a British spy. We have proof that the woman Lamb is an MI-5 agent. You might as well admit it. Make a clean breast of it. Confess fully.”

The Interrogation Room in the cellar suddenly seemed to turn desperately cold and claustrophobic. The forbidding face of the Interrogator seemed to zoom down on her so quickly that Wen-Yee could not help letting out a cry.

## II

Wen-Yee woke with a start. She had been dreaming again about her interrogations. Her fingers felt stiff and her feet were cold. The journey across the Pacific seemed interminable. The thin airline blanket had slipped to the floor. She retrieved it and wrapped it around herself again. Her head was aching. Her ears, her gums and her bones ached as well. She struggled against the constraint of the seat belt as the cabin lights dimmed. She had never been on a plane before and was glad the seat next to hers was empty, freeing her from the need to respond to conversation and the fear of disturbing anyone by her fidgeting.

She clutched a large, worn plastic handbag close to her hollow chest, as if its pressure provided relief from her aches and pains. The bag was filled with all manner of odds and ends, including that tiny, foil-wrapped square of milk chocolate retained from her dinner tray.

Two other items in the bag were of particular importance to her -- a Green Card from the American immigration authorities, secured by her elder brother, Kee, and the Third Volume of the collected works of Chairman Mao. The former was freshly issued while the latter remained in almost mint condition, in spite of having been in her possession for some twenty-seven years.

Wen-yee's face was creased and leathery from long exposure to the elements. Her long neck, with loose folds of skin like those of a tortoise, was just as leathery. Her left eye was half-blinded with trachoma. She had several teeth missing and her hair had turned prematurely to a dirty white. The hands clasping the antique handbag were twisted with arthritis.

She had been a great beauty once, with a neck as graceful as a swan's. She had been vivacious and out-going. Her lambent eyes, her playful mouth and her long, silken hair had endowed her with the kind of loveliness that reduced suitors to despair. But that had been long ago, during her age of innocence, and at the time of her friendship with Monica Lamb. Their mutual weakness for Cadbury's chocolates was what had landed her in prison.

She wondered momentarily where Monica might be. No doubt nicely settled somewhere in Somerset, married to that childhood sweetheart she had spoken about. Possibly surrounded by a brood of children. Perhaps she might even be blessed with grandchildren by now.

Wen-Yee was the younger of two children. Her father had been the head of the Shanghai branch of an American bank and her mother a socialite, blessed with great refinement and liberal ideas. The children had been brought up to value etiquette and good manners as much as integrity and lofty ideals. Until the outbreak of the Pacific War they had lived in a well-appointed house in Rue Moliere in the French Concession in Shanghai . They had escaped to the war-time capital of Chungking after the Japanese invaded and had returned during that unstable aftermath which passed for peace.

Both Wen-Yee and Kee attended Catholic missionary schools after the war, not so much for religious instruction as for the schools' reputation for academic excellence. Kee, upon graduation, went on to study civil engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Wen-

Yee, three years younger, continued with high school in Shanghai.

Then twin disasters struck. Civil war broke out, followed shortly afterwards by the death of their father from liver failure. The family remained financially well placed, however, because of the trusts her father had far-sightedly set up in America for each member of the family.

As Communist forces swept south, many well-to-do families fled. Wen-yee, excited by descriptions in Kee's letters about the wonders of America, was all for leaving. Her mother, however, made clear her intention to remain. Her mother was a patriot at heart and wanted to see whether a change in government might tame the hyper-inflation and corruption wrecking the country. Besides, she had become so accustomed to servants that she felt unable to live without them in a foreign land. Nonetheless, she encouraged her daughter to go. But Wen-Yee could not bear the thought of abandoning her mother. In the end she too elected to remain. She figured she could always leave at a later date.

Wen-Yee graduated from high school a year after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. At first life seemed more stable and orderly. Inflation and corruption were brought under control. People took pride in a new China and felt that the nation could once again hold its head high. Because of her proficiency in both English and Chinese, she landed a job with the China branch of Imperial Chemicals, one of the very few international companies maintaining offices there after the Communist victory. She became secretary to Mr. Hodgson, the manager.

Although Britain was among the first countries to recognize the new government, a strained relationship developed between the two countries when China intervened in the Korean War. Although no state of war existed between Britain and China, the embargoes imposed by the United Nations and supported by Britain, created a certain political awkwardness. Mr. Hodgson had to liaise frequently with the British

Consul in Shanghai when Chinese orders for sensitive industrial products were received.

Wen-Yee thus came to know Monica Lamb, the secretary of the British Consul. It was Monica who answered the telephone whenever she tried to connect her boss with the Consul or to make appointments to see him.

After a period of such official dealings, the girls began chatting and passing the time of day. Eventually they decided to put faces to the voices and to meet for tea at the Friendship Hotel. Their friendship was sealed when Monica brought along to their first meeting a gift of two bars of Cadbury's fruit and nut chocolate.

"Ooooh!" Wen-Yee cooed with delight at the offering. "I've been dying for one of these!" Then, lowering her voice, she added: "Our local chocolates are just not up to it."

Monica was only a couple of years older than Wen-Yee and was equally jolly and out-going. She had joined the Foreign Service to see a bit of the world before settling down to marriage.

Her posting to Shanghai had been a disappointment, however. She had counted on the so-called Paris of the East to offer some of the mystery and excitement touted assiduously in fiction and film. But all she found was a pervading drabness and a new puritanism. Making friends with those of her own age proved difficult. There were few expatriates and the new Chinese rulers frowned upon local people fraternizing with foreigners. She was therefore delighted that her work brought her into contact with a Chinese girl of her own age.

Wen-Yee and her mother were unusual in that they had always enjoyed a cosmopolitan lifestyle and were acquainted with many of the foreigners remaining in Shanghai. Wen-Yee's employment with a foreign company also bestowed a certain licence. Besides, the political atmosphere

was still fairly relaxed in the early 1950's.

The girls soon found common interests in jazz, ballroom dancing and tennis. They proved evenly matched on the courts and took to playing regularly at one of the few remaining foreign clubs in the city. Afterwards they went to each other's homes to eat and chat.

Monica's flat held a special interest for Wen-Yee. The British girl had an impressive collection of records. They would sit around listening to music by Tommy Dorsey or Benny Goodman and when they felt like it they would practise jitterbugging.

"I wish we could find men who could really jitterbug in this dump," Monica said once. "It's depressing when all we have to choose from are the likes of my boss and your Mr. Hodgson. Besides, they're married and move like elephants!"

"I wouldn't dare to jitterbug in public!" Wen-Yee said. "It would cause a scandal. The authorities regard it as decadent."

"Fiddlesticks! Do you know why the Communists are afraid of jitterbugging? It's because it's lively, it's catching and it's an expression of freedom. They're scared they might get hooked. If the Mayor of Shanghai and his cadres started jitterbugging do you think they'd be so uptight? It would lead to a fresh revolution. I have half a mind to organize a city-wide party to launch it."

"You'll create a diplomatic incident!" Wen-Yee said, and they both doubled up with laughter over the visions of fat cadres shaking their backsides in the air and solemn Communists waving their limbs about.

Monica was anxious to learn the mix of ingredients which made Chinese food so tasty. When she visited Wen-Yee's home the two of them would create such utter chaos and laughter in the kitchen that Wen-Yee's mother and her cook could only watch with shaking heads.

As their friendship developed they exchanged confidences,

about romances and adventures they hoped to have one day. They talked extravagantly of soaking up jazz in New Orleans, watching Wimbledon from Centre Court and travelling the world. The pleasure of their shared fantasies was augmented by innumerable bars of Cadbury's chocolate secured by Monica from the Consulate's canteen.

Once, during the hairy crab season, Wen-Yee decided to treat her friend to that delicacy. Tradition required a crab meal to be accompanied by heated Shao Hsing wine.

After umpteen cups of Shao Hsing, Monica said: "Know something, I'll tell you a secret. I used to be wild and radical. Before I came here eighteen months ago, I had this notion I would do my bit for freedom by bedding a Chinese Commie or two. Corrupt them, you know, make them start thinking what might be on the other side of the bamboo curtain."

"You're not serious, are you?" Wen-Yee responded, utterly shocked. "That is something unthinkable for a Chinese girl. How could you think of sleeping with a man for the sake of freedom or democracy?"

"Why not? It would be a better reason for doing it than a cheap meal or a night on the town."

"Won't your government be terribly upset if you went to bed with a Communist?"

"Yes, I suppose. They'll pack me home as a security risk. But don't worry. I'm safe. The cadres I've met are all so unbelievably wooden and reserved! They'd blush if I so much as look at them! I haven't been able to get a nibble. All the same, if I had pulled it off it would be something to chuckle over in my old age."

"I envy you for being so fearless and liberated. Sometimes I wish I could be. Please don't laugh at me but do you realize that I'm still a virgin? I'm twenty-one, for heaven's sake! Sometimes I dream of a man

coming and sweeping me off my feet. But I haven't come across anyone who even attracts me remotely. I'll probably die an old maid."

"Oh, sweetie, you needn't worry about that! You're such a beauty you'll end up with all the men you could possibly want. Don't be in a hurry. For now let's drink to a Prince Charming coming into your life and an adventurous Commie into mine!"

They drank till they got uproariously smashed and opened their hearts to each other. Eventually they would pass out in each other's arms.

Wen-Yee recalled those innocent times with wistful nostalgia and dozed off to the drone of airplane engines again.

### III

It was an announcement for seat belts to be fastened that woke Wen-Yee from her sleep. It disorientated her. For a second she thought she must be dreaming from within her prison. Then the slight shuddering of the plane in turbulence reassured her as to where she was. Everything seemed so bizarre in retrospect.

She retraced in her mind the absurdity of everything that had happened to her. Her sudden arrest in front of colleagues, being held incommunicado, the unexplained death of her mother, being assigned a number to which she had to respond to for years, life in a labour camp, the presentation of a four-volume set of Chairman Mao's Collected Works. And most of all the endless writing and re-writing of her family history and the detailed questioning of each syllable by the Interrogator. His shrill, contemptuous voice invaded her consciousness still. Yet, in spite of the years of questioning by him, she never knew his name.

She had been simply bewildered before the interrogations started. She had done nothing to warrant the humiliation of being arrested

in her own office. Although she had not been permitted to see or to contact anyone, she was certain Mr. Hodgson or a colleague would have informed her mother. Mr. Hodgson might have even contacted the British Consul to lodge a protest.

The arrival at the prison of bedding, some sweaters and a supply of daily necessities like soap, toothpaste and toilet paper confirmed her mother's knowledge of her predicament. She was convinced that, with her mother's help, the mistake would soon be cleared up.

But after two days in solitary confinement her bewilderment turned into anger. It was intolerable that she should be arrested and locked up without explanation. She had rights under the Chinese constitution. What was the world coming to? Why had she not been released?

Gradually anger gave way to anxiety. What if rectifying a mistake took days or weeks? She had already spurned the unappetizing meals of boiled cabbages and watery gruel for two days and her stomach was growling in protest. She could not continue without food. So when the slop next came around, she forced herself to swallow it. It was only after the start of the interrogations some weeks later that she realized she was being accused of espionage.

The years of questioning had left her confused as to the sequence of the sessions. They came without regularity or pattern, during all hours of the day and night, interspaced with varying periods in solitary confinement. Some had been accompanied by threats of execution, others by promises of lenient treatment. But all focused upon a single objective -- the securing of a full confession.

Tedious questions after tedious questions rained upon her, session after session. They would have been comical if her fate had not hung so precariously in the balance.

“Why don't you confess? What secrets have you passed to the

British spy?” the Interrogator repeatedly demanded.

“I don’t know any secrets. How can I pass on what I don’t know?”

“You knew some of the requirements of Chinese state enterprises. Orders had been placed with Imperial Chemicals.”

“I only typed bills, shipment orders, invoices and the like. The products involved were sometimes spelt out in technical terms I could not even understand.”

“Whether you understood technical terms or not, you were aware they constituted state secrets of importance to British intelligence.”

“How could they be state secrets when they were orders placed with a British company? Even if they had been secret, they ceased being so when the requirements were made known to Imperial Chemicals. Why would any British spy want such information from me when her government could get that from Imperial Chemicals?”

“So you accept that the information was of importance to the British Government and that Lamb was a British spy?”

“No! I accept nothing of the sort. I knew Miss Lamb only as the secretary of the British Consul.”

“That automatically makes her a spy. You should know members of foreign missions are all spies. If it were not for the purposes of spying, why did you consort with Lamb?”

“She was my friend.”

“You could have chosen friends from hundreds of millions of Chinese. Why did you have to choose a foreigner?”

“I also have Chinese friends.”

“Yes, we know all about them. They are all drawn from the same reactionary circles as yourself. Have you made friends with a single Chinese peasant?”

“I’ve had no opportunity.”

“What about a member of the proletariat?”

“I’ve made friends with colleagues at work.”

“Employees of Imperial Chemicals are not members of the proletariat. They are running dogs of imperialism, like yourself.”

“I’m on good terms with the servants at home.”

“That is a relationship between exploiters and the exploited.”

“We did not exploit anyone. My family has always treated servants well. They could have left if we had treated them badly. But they stayed. Some of them have stayed for more than thirty years.”

“That is because they have not acquired sufficient revolutionary awareness to realize they were working for spies.”

“I’m not a spy.”

“We have irrefutable proof. Denials are useless. You had best make a clean breast of it.”

As the interrogations continued week after week, month after month, the same questions kept coming back. After a while the outrage born of bewilderment could not be sustained. She was not getting enough to eat. The wooden bunk and the ceiling light, burning throughout the night to keep her under surveillance, rendered sleep difficult. Her dingy cell, full of dust and cobwebs, was bitterly cold in the winter and stiflingly hot in the summer. Her energy slowly seeped away.

She was allowed to shower only once a week. That seemed a torture for one accustomed to luxuriating in a warm, scented bath every day. Her grimy surroundings intensified her sense of loneliness and isolation, her feeling of being unclean and abandoned by the world.

The interminable waiting, not knowing when the next session would come, depressed her further. The guards were tight-lipped and ignored her questions. Instead they constantly spied on her through a

peephole in the steel door. Shouted orders and the periodic clanging of the cell doors told her the gaol held other prisoners. But she could not catch sight of any of them. She wondered what accusations they faced and whether they were as hapless and innocent as herself. She longed to exchange a few words with them.

Once she tried to reach them, so as to share her suffering with them. She shouted from the peephole in her door: "I am innocent! I have committed no crime! I want to go home!"

All she got for that attempt was a beating by two stout, middle-aged guards. The way they went about it -- and the curses they uttered in the process -- suggested they resented her youth, her beauty and her spirit more than the disturbance she had created.

She kept her peace thereafter. Gradually, the boredom of solitary confinement became intolerable. She yearned for something to read but all she had were the works of Chairman Mao. After a while she actually looked forward to the next interrogation. The Interrogator, malevolent though he might be, was at least a talking, breathing human being. Answering his questions was better than just facing four blank walls.

During the sessions the Interrogator kept hammering away at the accusation of espionage. "You were paid by Lamb. We know of packages changing hands," he declared. "No doubt they contained money. Were they in payment for information?"

"No, never! The packages contained no money."

"What did they contain then?"

"Bars of Cadbury's chocolate."

"What? You expect us to believe that? You received payments in chocolate?"

"They were not payments. They were gifts. Miss Lamb knew

I had a weakness for chocolate.”

“If you have such a weakness, why can’t you simply buy all the chocolates you want? They don’t cost much and you have plenty of money.”

“They were Cadbury’s, not available on the market.”

“Are you implying that the chocolates of Socialist China are inferior to those from the West?”

“No. They’re just different. I’m fond of Cadbury’s.”

“And because of that fondness you sold out your country?” the Interrogator sneered. He had the knack for turning every question into both an accusation and a sneer.

“I did not sell out my country. I’ve told you, the chocolates were gifts.”

“You cannot fool a child with a story like that. The chocolates must have been at least a signal. Possibly that money had been deposited in a foreign bank account? Or perhaps confirming that some arrangement had been set in place? What was it?”

“I have received no money. My foreign bank account had been set up by my late father to provide for my future education and living expenses. The authorities had known about that all along.”

“Then perhaps money has been paid into your mother’s account. She has one too, hasn’t she? Perhaps she is the real spy in the family. She knew the agent Lamb too. Did your mother get you involved in this?”

“My mother’s not a spy. Neither did she receive any money from anyone.”

“I know it must be difficult for you. A young girl can be easily misled by a mother. Now is the time to save yourself, to turn over a new leaf, to show your love for the Motherland. Why not denounce your

mother and the others involved? Your mother is known as a loose woman, a social butterfly, fluttering around in decadent foreign circles. It would not be surprising if she were a spy.”

“My mother’s an honourable woman, a patriot. She’s not a spy. She has chosen to stay in China when she could have left.”

“Yes, she stayed for the purpose of spying.”

“No.”

“And what about you? Did you choose to stay?”

“Yes.”

“To spy for the British?”

“No! I’ve never spied for anyone.”

“You can deny all you want but we know what you’ve been up to. As the old saying goes, when the tide recedes treacherous rocks will expose themselves. When the time comes your crimes will be similarly exposed. Go and write out your biography again. Leave nothing out this time. It may help you understand your situation better. We can talk again when you’re ready.”

The interrogations and the meagreness of the diet gradually took their toll. She could feel her flesh wasting away and her skin turning dry and rough. She was thankful there was no mirror, for she was afraid to catch sight of what her sunless prison cell must have done to her complexion. It depressed her to think that, if her imprisonment continued much longer, neither good food nor sunshine could ever repair the damage.

Those worries were compounded by concerns for her mother. Following the initial delivery of clothes and bedding, nothing else came. She wondered whether further deliveries had been forbidden or whether her mother had been arrested too. The Interrogator had accused both of them of spying and had offered to allow them to meet after she confessed. That could be a clue or a ruse.

During the next interrogation, she attempted to smoke out the Interrogator's position by demanding to see her mother. "It's wrong to keep me here on trumped up charges," she said. "I demand to see my mother."

"The People's Government will be the judge of what is right and what is wrong. You're in no position to make demands."

"I have rights under the Chinese constitution."

"Rights are for citizens. Rights are forfeited by criminals."

"Even criminals are allowed family visits. I want to see my mother."

"Family visits are for criminals who have been sentenced. You have not been sentenced because you have refused to confess. Yet you have failed to prove your innocence. Therefore you are not entitled to family visits."

"I'm innocent. I've committed no crime."

"The question is: Can you prove it?"

"How can I prove what I have not done?"

"A person accused of murder can produce witnesses to prove he was somewhere else at the time of the crime. You have produced nothing except empty denials. The evidence against you is overwhelming. We have a complete dossier on your activities."

"Miss Lamb can tell you I have done nothing wrong."

"Then ask her to come forward with her testimony."

"She has gone back to England."

"How convenient! Perhaps you are still not ready to face the truth. We will give you time to reflect. We're in no hurry. We will get to the bottom of this one way or another."

Her initiative, far from smoking out the Interrogator's game, had merely underlined her weakness. A hot film of frustration misted over

her eyes. She felt utterly trapped. If she confessed, she would be sentenced to prison or perhaps even to death. If she did not confess, she would be held and questioned interminably. There was no escape.

Towards the end of another long session, she became so exhausted and depressed that she shouted: “All right, all right, I confess! I’ll confess everything. Let’s get it over with.” Then she broke down in tears.

“Now tell us the secrets you have passed to the spy Lamb,” the Interrogator said. His reptilian eyes were hard and without pity.

Secrets? What secrets had she ever passed to Monica except those womanly secrets of love and desires and yearnings? It would be too shameful to confess such things before crude, uncomprehending men. The bitterness of her lot caused her to wail convulsively with tears.

The Interrogator, seeing that no sense could be got out of her, ordered her to set out her confession in writing. He then told the guards to remove her.

After she had been returned to her cell, humiliated, she recognized the unwisdom of her outburst. Reckless words might end up implicating her mother. She was innocent, and yet her protestations of innocence seemed to count for nothing before her accusers.

Before her ordeal, she had never given much thought to politics. She had assumed that politics were for older people. Scoring aces on the tennis court and executing dazzling steps on the dance floor were about the extent of her ambition.

When she had declined to join Kee in America, her mother had warned she might have to put up with some loss of personal freedom. But she thought nothing really bad could happen in a society humanized by thousands of years of civilization. It never occurred to her she could be locked up for crimes she had not committed.

What kind of government would subject one of its own citizens to such treatment for no apparent reason, she wondered. Why had she been singled out? She was only a secretary, a nobody, someone without power or influence. Why waste so much time and effort on her? Was she being used as a pawn in some bigger game, to warn people against fraternizing with foreigners, to send a warning to Imperial Chemicals or to express displeasure with British diplomacy? And why the persistent demand for a confession? She could not figure things out.

When she eventually got down to writing her confession, she assumed responsibility for the obvious failings -- of following a bourgeois lifestyle, of consorting with Westerners, of working for Imperial Chemicals and maintaining a foreign bank account. She then went on to express her willingness to confess to whatever other failings the People's Government considered reprehensible so that she could be released. The thread that remained through her narrative was that she had not knowingly committed any crime.

The Interrogator was furious when she presented the confession. "This is rubbish!" he cried, and threw it back at her. His eyes blazed with fury. "You are trying the patience of the People's Government. If you want to play games, I promise you will regret it."

The interrogations continued.

During the third year of her confinement, she contracted hepatitis and had to be hospitalized. Her illness provided a respite from the interrogations. Shortly thereafter her gums began to bleed and she grew more listless and depressed. Her menstrual cycle became irregular. She ascribed her physical woes to insufficient nutrition but there was nothing she could do except to hope for release.

Then, a year later, the first of her teeth fell out and a dry, helpless rage possessed her again. It was bad enough that she had been

reduced to a mere number, that she could be starved and have her freedom taken away. But to lose a tooth was to receive a permanent injury, an unhealable wound. It seemed worse than a rape. She wanted to hit out at her tormentors but that was impossible. All she could do was to beat the walls of her cell till her fists ached.

She wept bitter tears. She would never look the same again. She had never been guilty of anything except making friends with an English girl and eating Cadbury chocolates. It was all so ludicrous and unbelievable. It made no sense.

She vacillated for a time between rage and abject despair. In the end she concluded that if she ever hoped to see her mother again she would have to convince whoever had ordered her arrest of her innocence.

But to establish her innocence required reasonable health and a clear mind to steer her through the traps built into the questions. She therefore had to preserve both. She recalled having money in her purse at the time of her arrest and an idea came to her. She banged on her cell door to attract the attention of the guards.

A sour-faced guard in her mid-forties duly appeared. “Stop the racket!” she snapped.

“I had some money when I was arrested,” she began and attempted to show her the dislodged tooth.

“You have more serious matters than money to think about. So stop the noise,” the guard replied, and returned to her office.

When she persisted in banging on her cell door, the guard came back, entered her cell and slapped her.

“I told you to stop the noise,” the guard said, angrily. “Are you deaf or stupid? You’re disturbing everybody.”

“I only want to ask for permission to buy some vitamins with my own money,” she explained, again displaying her dislodged tooth.

“Now you are maligning the quality of our food. Who do you think you are? You think you’re a princess? You are an enemy of the people, a spy for the imperialists. Any more noise out of you and you will wish you were dead.”

Some weeks later, when her physical deterioration became more apparent, she repeated her request to another guard. This time, to her surprise, the request was granted. The vitamin pills checked her decline for a time and enabled her to begin simple daily exercises to tone up her muscles.

To keep her mind from her predicament she dredged up from memory all the poems learnt during childhood, as well as passages from Shakespeare and other writers instilled during literature and religious knowledge classes. The words of the Beatitudes came back and she laughed with irony over their sentiments. Nevertheless, whenever she could recall the complete text of a poem or a passage, she felt a secret surge of satisfaction. Reciting to herself those remembered passages enabled her to escape to another world, far removed from the grimness of her cell.

After funds for vitamins ran out her physical and mental decline resumed. It became more difficult to recall complete passages and to keep track of the various spells in solitary confinement. When she lost another tooth, it became another unhealable wound and she began abandoning hope.

Then one day, out of the blue, guards came and ordered her to pack her belongings.

“Where am I going?” she asked, puzzled by the unexpected order.

“You’re being released,” one of the guards replied.

“How long have I been inside?”

“Eight years and twenty-three days, if you must know.”

“Does this mean it’s all over, that I can go home?” A momentary note of elation crept into her voice.

“It means you are still filled with reactionary attitudes. In spite of the patient efforts of the People’s Government, you still do not see the error of your ways. Since your heart remains opposed to our Socialist revolution, you are required to undergo reform through labour. Perhaps that can turn you into a useful citizen.”

“For how long must I undergo reform?”

“Initially, ten years.”

“How can that be? I have already served a long imprisonment.”

“You’ve served nothing. You’ve merely been detained for questioning.”

“But I am innocent!”

“Just look at how stubborn you are! You are still refusing to confess your crimes! If you don’t want your sentence extended you had better change your attitude.”

“Can I see my mother?”

“Your mother is dead. She killed herself. She could not endure the shame of having a spy and a traitor for a daughter.”

The news struck her like a sudden blow to the solar plexus, taking her breath away. She let out a feeble wail and collapsed into a dead faint.

#### IV

Wen-Yee woke up to an announcement that refreshments would shortly be served. She realized she must have fallen asleep again during the course of her reverie. Through the haze of semi-consciousness she

picked up again the thread of her past. She recalled the vast camp in the remotest part of Sinkiang to which she had been sent and from which she had been released after almost seventeen years.

During the long truck journey there she caught sight of her own face in the vehicle's rear vision mirror and recoiled. She did not recognise herself. The reflected image had sunken eyes, hollow cheeks and skin was as dry and as yellow as parchment. A number of missing teeth made her look like a frightful hag.

She let out a low, dry sound that was half way between a gasp and a sob. To be reduced to looking like that at thirty! She was filled with an unspeakable misery at the loss of her beauty. What was left for her to live for, to hope for? Her life had been ruined. Her gentle mother was dead. She certainly was not the kind of person to take her own life. That had to be a lie. But without access to friends and family retainers, there was no way of uncovering the truth.

That truth gradually assumed an overwhelming importance. She felt she had to uncover it for her own peace of mind and, if possible, to convey it to Kee. She had heard nothing from Kee since her arrest. That was not surprising. His letters must have been intercepted, for all foreign connections were suspect in the eyes of Communists. She was glad Kee was beyond their clutches, living in a saner world far removed from the horrors of a nation in bondage.

The labour camp was located in a wilderness where flying insects seemed to attack in squadrons. Her fellow inmates were "rightists", counter-revolutionaries and erstwhile supporters of the defeated Nationalist regime.

At an induction gathering for fresh inmates, a supervisor set out the conditions for her new existence. "You're here because you've committed crimes against the people," he said. "This is your new home.

You have no other. Do not think of returning to your old life or rejoining your families. As criminals, your registration with your old work units and your old residential units have all been cancelled. You no longer exist so far as they are concerned.

“You will see there are no walls, fences or barbed wire enclosures. Guards are few and far between. But that does not mean life will be easy. The People’s Government has given you a chance to reform yourselves through labour, so that you can understand the suffering of the masses whom you, as class enemies, have heartlessly exploited in the past.

“Do not entertain thoughts of escape. You are in a remote part of Sinkiang, surrounding by desert and impenetrable mountains. The desert is empty and the mountains are inhabited by wolf packs and wild beasts. The camp is linked to the rest of the country only by the road on which you came. The nearest settlement is a hundred miles to the south. You have already seen the security checkpoints and military patrols on the way. If you go on that road, you will be picked up in no time and the punishment will be severe. To avoid the road means braving the desert or the mountains. That is to invite death through thirst or cold. Many have already perished in such attempts.

“You will be assigned to production teams. The best advice I can give you is to obey the rules and to work diligently to repay your debt to our great Socialist republic. If you do as you’re told, we’ll get along. Otherwise your sentences can be extended indefinitely and your days will be bleak indeed. It’s all up to you.”

She soon discovered that each production team comprised about a hundred persons. Each team was allotted a site of approximately seventy-five acres to bring under cultivation. The team, however, had first to mark out its site by constructing boundaries and access paths, both of which had to be planted with poplars, willows, elms or other trees.

Irrigation canals also had to be dug, before a crop could be designated. The most common ones were wheat, corn and cotton.

Living quarters, clustering around offices, meeting rooms, dining halls and other communal facilities, consisted of a series of mud huts measuring approximately eight feet by twenty-two feet. They had thatched roofs and fixed windows, designed to admit light rather than fresh air. Each hut slept six.

The normal working day lasted ten hours, not counting meal breaks, a mandatory hour for “political studies” and the time taken to walk the three miles separating the living quarters from the allotment.

Water was at a premium. Drinking water had to be tapped from deep artesian wells while impure water for agriculture had to be collected from melting mountain snows and other sources and piped in from more than a hundred miles away. Hence there were no bathing facilities. Those who wanted to clean themselves were allowed to draw half a tin basin of hot water from the cauldrons used for steaming bread to sponge-wipe their bodies.

For someone with Wen-Yee’s inclination towards cleanliness, the weekly showers previously allowed in prison seemed heaven-sent by comparison. The odours and the raucous snoring of those sharing her poorly ventilated hut became nightly oppressions.

Wen-Yee’s physical and mental condition upon transfer was such as to render her unfit for strenuous labour. Eight years of enforced idleness had enfeebled her limbs. The itching from insect bites and the conditions in her quarters made for fitful sleep.

Unfit though she might be, there was no avoiding the mandatory toil. By the end of each day she was close to collapse. Her slowness in carrying out her tasks was taken as failure to display “Socialist enthusiasm for labour”. That drew dire warnings that further malingering

would invite an increase in sentence.

By the end of her first month, the sinew-tearing work and the psychological stress had reached a point where she missed her period. When a further three months passed without it resuming, she became desperate. She knew instinctively that it meant she had lost the ability to bear children. That fresh wound might be less visible than missing teeth but it was unhealable just the same.

A deep despair washed over her. They had starved, tormented and abused her. They had killed her mother and robbed her of youth, beauty and freedom. Now they had deprived her of motherhood. She wanted to scream to the heavens but the scream collapsed in her throat, leaving only an exhausted whimper to reach the hushed desert air.

A few days later, when she was trudging back from the fields after the day's work, she saw in the distance the autumnal sunset bathing the cyan skies in shades of red and orange. The scattered clouds appeared fluffy and devoid of turmoil. The leaves on the trees planted to mark each allotment were beginning to turn and beyond the allotments lay an unmitigated virgin emptiness. In the far distance the primeval mountains loomed in savage solitude. Everything seemed so stark, majestic, elemental and indifferent to human strivings.

The scene stirred her in a way she could not express. It seemed that all the beautiful expectations in her life had also turned as dry and dusty as the empty desert. So many things dreamt of and laughed over had remained unfulfilled. Odd fragments from happier days with her family and with Monica Lamb drifted back, as in a half-remembered dream. So did the haunting ache for her mother and her unexplained death.

All at once she became overwhelmed by an immense weariness. She did not want to struggle any more, to make sense of her predicament, to nurture hope of being vindicated and released. Some

subconscious part of her told her that all strivings were in vain. Her whole life had been to a terrible waste and would forever remain that way. She might as well end it and fade away like the retreating sunlight into the sweet oblivion of night. So thinking, she stopped in her tracks and sank listlessly onto the roadside.

“What are you doing? You have no time to rest,” one of her team mates said, sharply. She was a woman of about forty-five, a political detainee. “Political studies are next. You’ll get into trouble if you don’t report in time.”

“I don’t care any more,” Wen-Yee replied. “What have I to live for? I’ll never see out ten years. If they’re aiming to destroy me, let them do it now. I’m ready to die.”

Her team mate hauled her roughly to her feet. “Don’t be a fool!” she hissed, between clenched teeth. “We’re all in the same boat. Do you think any of us is enjoying it here? We’ve all suffered, every bit as much as you. Dying is easy. No one cares whether we live or die. Refusing to die is our only revenge, can’t you see? We must also think of others before indulging in theatrics. We’re held collectively responsible here.”

“I’m sorry,” Wen-Yee said, dazed, trying to catch the import of the words being thrown at her. “I had no idea. What have our people turned into?”

The woman gave her a sympathetic smile and steadied her on her feet. “I’d keep my opinions to myself, if I were you,” she said in a half-whisper. “This place is filled with those who would inform on you for a minor privilege or a small remission.”

As Wen-Yee resumed her journey she felt as hopelessly trapped as during her interrogation. In prison she alone had to suffer for any transgression or act of defiance. Here she could not even die without

inflicting harm on others. She could neither escape nor secure justice. Guilt or innocence had lost all meaning. Now she had lost even her freedom to die.

Perhaps her new-found companion was right. Refusing to die offered the only revenge. Something resolute crept into the cast of her thin mouth and she knuckled down to the requirements of the labour camp.

Unlike prison, the camp provided reasonable quantities of grain and greens, though meat of poor quality was still restricted to four ounces a month. There was fresh air and sunshine, however. Most important of all, there was human contact. The ability to exchange a few words or a sympathetic gesture with fellow inmates cheered her more than words could describe. In time her body partially restored itself. But because the diet remained inadequate for hard labour, her menstrual cycle never resumed.

When harvest came around, she actually found a degree of satisfaction in having wrestled rich, life-sustaining food out of the hitherto barren earth. She learned to follow the rhythm of the seasons and the imperatives to plough, sow and reap. She understood for the first time the harshness of life among the peasants, for their lot in the communes could only be marginally better than hers.

Camp life, however, was worse than prison in other respects. The daily indoctrination of Maoist ideas was stultifying. The need to commit to memory the half-platitudes and near-nonsenses ascribed to the Great Helmsman drove her to distraction. By then it had become mandatory for each inmate to be issued with a small volume of Mao's quotations. Each was expected to carry that volume with a red plastic cover constantly, like some holy manual. It seemed the height of absurdity. Her repeated failures to recite quotations correctly earned her a two-year extension in sentence.

The most distasteful aspects of camp life were the latrines and the perpetual absence of toilet paper. The latrines were open pits, abuzz with bluebottles, and inmates had to squat on wooden planks to defecate. Toilet paper, when available, had to be paid for out of the monthly pittance given each inmate as “wages”. It was an extravagance no inmate could afford. Thus old newspapers, rags, grass and leaves were commonly used. When none of those was available, people used their hands and cleaned them afterwards by rubbing them in the soil during summer or in the snow in winter.

One day during the sixth year of her sentence, Wen-Yee met with an accident. While squatting over the latrine, her volume of Mao’s quotations slipped from her pocket and fell into the pit. She froze with indecision, not knowing whether to attempt to retrieve it or to allow it to disappear into the excrement where she had long felt it rightly belonged.

She knew that severe punishment awaited, for a record was carefully kept of the number of volumes of Chairman Mao’s writings and quotations bestowed upon each inmate. Apart from the regulation set, additional copies were awarded for “meritorious behaviour”, which usually meant informing on fellow inmates or conspicuous mastery of Maoist quotations.

Regular inspections were conducted to ensure that all volumes of the quotations, as well as the collected works, were kept in good condition. Soiled or damaged copies constituted conclusive evidence of irreverence or subversion. Failure to report a missing copy was a crime. To drop one into a latrine was probably considered outright treason.

Given the rules, Wen-Yee had no alternative to reporting the loss. The certainty of an increase in sentence did not exercise her. She had in any case nowhere to go. What more could anyone do to her?

It so happened that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution

was in full swing at the time and throughout the land people were outdoing one another in demonstrating their devotion to the Chairman and his teachings. Those in labour camps were no different. Mass meetings were called over the loss of her book of Mao quotations and she was accused of engaging in reactionary plots against the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It beggared belief to watch the normally listless and sullen inmates transforming themselves into baying mobs, loud in the praise of Chairman Mao and all his works. It seemed her fellow inmates had all turned into chanting automatons.

But she understood their imperative for self-preservation. In her heart she forgave those who had spoken out against her. She knew trying to explain would only make matters worse. Her whole background was against her. So, in accordance with the perverted etiquette of the camp, she confessed to carelessness in handling the sacred works of Chairman Mao and begged for a chance to turn over a new leaf.

The upshot was an additional sentence of five years. As further punishment, extra daily duties outside of her normal work had to be undertaken for a period of three years. The extra duties involved what she dreaded most -- cleaning her team's latrines.

During the first two weeks of her new duties she could not help gagging and vomiting. Maggots and worms seemed to seethe in the mess she had to ladle into buckets to carry to a great holding pit, for subsequent use as fertilizer in the fields and vegetable patches.

She could not prevent the filth from soiling her hands and clothes. The personal hygiene she had clung to as the final remnant of her human dignity became impossible. No matter how frequently she scrubbed and washed, a smell offensive to food and slumber lingered about her person. Constant use of freezing water or snow to clean her hands soon resulted in the arthritis which ultimately deformed several of her fingers.

As she ladled the filth during latrine duties a wild, implacable hatred festered inside her against everything Mao stood for. She swore if she ever regained freedom she would pay the Chairman back, by spending the rest of her life wiping her bottom with his stupid writings!

## V

The captain announced their arrival in San Francisco in twenty minutes.

Wen-Yee felt a strange confusion of emotions. Freedom was almost within her grasp. She could now go to New Orleans to listen to jazz or even travel to Wimbledon for the tennis season. But the desire to do those things had long deserted her. Even the possibility of once again eating Cadbury's fruit and nut chocolate left her unmoved. Her remaining teeth were no longer up to crunching nuts. The best she could manage was to swallow the chocolate after it had melted slowly in her mouth.

Of course there was the prospect of being reunited with Kee. Yet that, too, seemed wrapped in a skein of apprehensions. During their separation, Kee had taken out American citizenship and had risen to the rank of Senior Vice President in an international civil engineering firm with headquarters in San Francisco.

Following Nixon's visit to China in 1972, the death of Mao in 1976 and the subsequent detention of the Gang of Four, the new leadership gingerly opened up the nation to the world. Foreign investments were courted and Kee's company won a number of tenders for infrastructure projects. When he went to China to finalise contracts, he asked after his mother and sister.

He was informed his mother had died. No detail of the circumstances was available, however, because the files had been

reportedly destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. As for his sister, she was said to be engaging in patriotic Socialist reconstruction in Sinkiang. Arrangements would be made for her to be reunited with him in Peking.

Wen-Yee was into the last few months of her sentence. It apparently did not offend Socialist principles to remit what was left for the sake of securing American economic co-operation. The two of them met in Peking, in the presence of beaming Communist officials.

Wen-Yee recognized her brother at once. He had become a more matured version of the young man she remembered. But she could detect shock and astonishment in his eyes over her own appearance. Each stood speechlessly before the other for a long moment, with nostrils distending to fight back tears, before embracing and allowing the tears to flow.

“What have they done to you!” Kee whispered hoarsely in the course of their embrace.

“Mother is gone,” Wen-yee whimpered through her tears.

“Yes, I know. I will get you out of here.”

“I cannot believe you are here. I never thought I would see you again.”

Both were too charged with emotion during the next three days to speak much about what had transpired during their separation. Neither had definite information on how or when their mother died.

Kee had to return to America on business after three days. Before his departure he renewed his pledge to get Wen-Yee there. His promise, however, was easier made than implemented. It took more than two years of wrangling with bureaucracies on both side of the Pacific to obtain the necessary American Green Card, a Chinese passport and the vital exit visa.

Wen-Yee reflected upon the imminent reunion. It seemed to

present its own set of problems. How could they make up for the lost decades? What would they talk about? The death of their mother and her own incarceration had already been touched upon. The many unanswered questions were in any case too painful to keep asking. She also had little knowledge of how Kee had organized his life or what attitude he had towards the China he had left behind long ago. And what of his wife and his two grown-up children she had never met? How would they take to a strange, derelict relative being foisted upon them? After living for so long in controlled confinement, she doubted whether she could manage unstructured relationships in a strange land.

What of the suburban life awaiting her? Would she be merely exchanging one form of confinement for another? Kee and his family would no doubt do their utmost to make her feel welcomed. They would place at her disposal the best medical and dental attention money could buy. They would introduce her to friends and neighbours and throw parties in her honour. But what had she in common with those strangers? How could they ever relate to what she had lived through, to all the humiliations and debasements stitched like shameful patches upon the garment of her existence?

She must appear to them a freak, ugly, sterile and deformed. Her experiences, if she could bear to relate them, might evoke their pity. But she did not want pity. Neither did she want to share with anyone some of the hurtful things forever manacled to her consciousness.

It was not so much the interrogations, the privations and the disgusting latrines that stuck in her mind but rather the dark, excruciating loneliness, the voiceless longing for some human comfort and the loss of her youth. She and Monica had giggled helplessly while they told each other their fantasies. Who would have thought she would end up a withered virgin, never having experienced the love of a man nor even a

single embrace?

No, she would not find California congenial. She did not belong there. Nor could she really live in exile. There was unfinished business back in China. She still had to uncover the real cause of her mother's death and seek justice. How wonderful it must be to be born an American, to begin life with so many essential rights gift-wrapped. In China people were still fighting and dying for theirs.

For too long her notion of freedom had been simply to sit on the throne of a flush toilet and slowly tear off page after page of Mao's writings, as if they were strips of the hated man's skin. She would then wipe her bottom with them. She now saw that desire as utterly juvenile. What was needed was something more. In the camp in Sinkiang she had been taught to refuse to die. Now she must live to show others in that predicament they did not stand alone. As soon as she had her teeth fixed and regained some of her strength, she had to head back to China.

So thinking, Wen-Yee took the volume of Mao's collected works out of her handbag and slipped it quietly into the magazine pocket in front of her seat. She then took out the square of chocolate she had saved from the dinner tray, removed the foil and slipped it into her mouth.

The chocolate tasted sweeter than she remembered Cadbury's to be. That was probably because it was American.