

## Voices in the Heart

Keung was seized by a strange sense of purpose as he placed his letter of resignation into the envelope. It amazed him that such a simple act could make him feel so curiously alive, as if he had woken at last from a long and unsatisfactory sleep. He had not felt such lightness of heart, such fullness of resolve, for many a decade. Somewhere on the far edges of his consciousness lurked an awareness of where his action might lead. But he did not want to think about that. He only wanted that freshly revived sensation to wash over him, to cleanse him and to bring back the forgotten flavours of youth.

But what he felt found no expression in his smooth, waxen face. The agelessness of his features was remarkable, even for a Chinese, for he was not far from sixty. His unlined skin was unusually sallow, however, as if a long nocturnal or subterranean existence had deprived him of the sun. Thick spectacles distorted his eyes, rendering them grotesque, like those of a toy mechanical monster or some space age robot. Nonetheless, the play of light upon the lenses provided a sparkle of animation to his otherwise deadpan face.

Keung was a common enough name. It meant strength. But everything about him belied it. His youngish face rested upon an aged neck, wrinkled with loose folds of skin like a turtle's. His flabby figure, dressed in a white singlet, navy blue shorts and a pair of rubber sandals, emphasised the fatigue of his muscles and the want of vigour in his bearing.

As he fingered his letter of resignation he allowed his mind to drift over the bitter-sweet memories of his youth. They came back haltingly, in sepia, out of sequence and in slow-motion, like bits of film badly spliced. First came the enriching tutelage of Uncle Poon, then the many-faceted love of Red Hope. The recollection of his first mission brought a rush of exhilaration, as did the messages exchanged with those now either dead or basking in institutionalised glory. Those had been the times of innocence and splendour! So much daring and commitment because of so much ignorance, so much love received and so much goodness unrequited.

Uncle Poon had ordered him to Hong Kong just before the momentous happenings only hinted at. He was to help set up clandestine supply lines, just in case the British intervened to support the reactionaries. His cover was that of an apprentice type-setter with a friendly newspaper. Thus he had left Canton, filled with high resolve and dreams of glory.

As his thoughts trekked back towards that bleak December in 1927, he shivered in spite of the warmth of the night. The real meaning of his mission and the faces of those he never saw again came back sickeningly. The images of those

who had loved and nurtured him, who had praised his intelligence, his audacity and his ambitions, who had manoeuvred him out of harm's way, came back like a flood. In saving him they had sought to make him the heir to their dreams. What a fool he had been not to realise it, even though he was only fifteen at the time!

When a Canton Soviet was proclaimed, he went wild with excitement. But his elation was short-lived. The Canton Soviet lasted only two and a half days, between December 11 and 13. By the time it was over more than two thousand comrades and Red Guards had perished and countless others had been arrested. Both Uncle Poon and Red Hope had been among the dead.

He remembered the report had caused him to beat his head with his fists in disbelief. But even physical abuse could not still that nameless anguish in his heart. "Winning does not always equate with success, nor defeat, failure," he remembered Uncle Poon teaching him. "One has to take a long view. Defeat is not defeat if it can teach those coming afterwards not to commit the same mistakes. Only the ultimate success of the revolution is important. A revolutionary has to dedicate everything, including his life, to that goal."

Who, but true believers, could hold so detached a view? He had tried to follow Uncle Poon's example, to ignite his faith into a magnificent flame. But it was useless. His desire for a better social order, for justice and brotherhood, had been superficial. His idealism had no inner sustenance. His bravado had grown out of a childish pride, to impress those who doted on him. Isolated in a part of the Motherland already ceded to foreigners, he saw his whole future poisoned and his past turned into a sham. From that moment he disconnected himself, switched off mentally, and buried himself and his unfinished dreams in the composing room where he had been assigned.

Thus for forty years he gave himself over to setting type like an automaton, without feeling or involvement. This continued even throughout the years of Japanese occupation when, out of necessity, the newspaper took on a different persuasion. He was indifferent to such expediencies and unmoved by accounts of recurring catastrophes around the world. Everything passed over him like abstractions he did not care to grasp. Even when Chairman Mao proclaimed the establishment of a new socialist China from a podium at Tienanmen, he felt nothing. He could not share in that triumph because he had played no part in it. It had nothing to do with him because it had been paid for by the blood of others.

So far as he was concerned, life was over and done with; there was nothing to look forward to save death. And yet, there remained in him a kernel of something that refused to die. Every now and then it triggered strange, indistinct murmurings in his heart.

In spite of those murmurings, he might have ended his days peacefully in the composing room, amidst the foul odours of printing ink, unremitting toil and cheap cigarettes, if his eyesight had not deteriorated. That led to repeated mistakes and an eventual invitation to retire. Retirement, of course, was an euphemism. A pittance from the company's provident fund and a token for long service were all he could count on.

So alternative means of livelihood had to be found. Given his advancing years and failing eyesight, he had to settle for a job as night watchman at an injection moulding factory. That proved to be the beginning of the end of his existence in limbo.

The lot of a night watchman consisted largely of idling away the empty hours of darkness. There were no newspaper deadlines or sudden exigencies to keep him busy. The sheer tedium of waiting for sunrise invited reflection and once he gave way to that, he was lost. Reflection caused the murmurings to become more distinct. When he recognised them as the voices of his beloved ones formulating those old propositions about truth and justice, courage and honour, love and comradeship, faith, sacrifice, death and redemption, he knew his past was being disinterred. The vows he had not kept, the debts he had not repaid and the dreams he had not cherished were being dredged up willy-nilly to haunt and shame him.

Keung picked up his electric torch to start his rounds in a vain attempt to escape from the ache of remembering. The factory was steeped in shadows and silences. It was so easy to turn into a shadow, he thought, to lose one's individual significance in the great silences of the world. How heroic had been those who rose up during that distant December! They had believed in nourishing ideals with blood and had affirmed that belief with their own. But apart from himself, how many remembered them now? Pathetically few. And of those few, how many had stood up to bear witness for them? How many had shut their eyes instead, stuffed their ears and stilled their tongues in capitulation? But weaknesses in others did not excuse his own. However belatedly, he had to insist on having his day, both for his own sake and to do honour to those who had charged him with their dreams.

Keung moved confidently in the semi-darkness in spite of his poor eyesight. After two years of making the same rounds, he knew the routing by heart. He did not expect his pathetic figure to instill any fear in thieves or burglars. In any event, none was expected because the raw materials were cheap and the machinery too heavy to cart away. He flashed his torch at dark corners merely for the sake of form.

As he went about his rounds, Keung felt a twinge of hunger and that triggered thoughts of his initial encounter with Uncle Poon. It seemed hardly possible that half a century had passed!

He remembered the occasion vividly. He was eight years' old and had been wandering the streets of Canton without food for two days. He had meant to find a restaurant to beg for scraps. But being a stranger in the city, he had wandered into Wing Hon Road, which was filled with book stores. As he searched vainly for a restaurant, he suddenly spotted a plate of barbecued pork buns on the counter of a book store. A man behind the counter was eating one of them. The sight caused him to stare open-mouthed and transfixed, with his eyes upturned like begging bowls.

The man was about forty, with a frank, open face and a head of unruly hair flaked with dandruff. He wore a pair of steel-rimmed glasses and a scraggy beard. The man, noticing his stare, had offered him a bun, saying: "Would you care for one, Little One? You look hungry."

He had grabbed the bun and wolfed it down without a word. He had polished it off so quickly the man offered him another and then yet another. The man then held out a large bowl of tea. "You'll need something to wash all that down," he said. The man's voice had sounded so kind and good-natured that his instinctive fear of city folk melted away. It was only after he had had his fill that he found voice to utter his thanks.

"You appear famished. Who's looking after you?" the man asked.

"No one."

"No one? Where are your parents?"

"Dead."

"Oh! You poor boy! How did you get here?"

He had then told his story. His mother had died so long ago that he had no recollection of her. His father, previously a farm worker, had found employment as a coolie on the riverfront. His father had brought him to Canton a few days ago to enrol him in a missionary school. But before that could be done his father was killed by a falling crane. He had wandered the streets since then, not knowing where to turn. He knew no one in the city and had no kinfolk back at the village.

The man shook his head. After stroking his beard and pondering a while, he said: "Look, Little One, a lad like you cannot roam the streets. You're sure to fall into bad company. I can do one of two things; put you in an orphanage where you can be with boys like yourself or take you in as my helper. You'll have to earn your keep, however, if you stay with me. You'll have to do cleaning, run errands, make tea and other chores. Which do you prefer?"

The gentle way in which the man had spoken made his decision for him. "I would like to stay with you, Uncle."

"Good. What's your name?"

"Young Keung."

"Do you know characters, Young Keung?"

When he shook his head the man added: "Then you'll have to learn. That's another condition for staying here. If you don't know characters you'll never learn to treat books with caution and respect. I am a seller of books. Hidden in them are truths that can lead men out of darkness or sometimes into it. We can talk about such things later. For the present, have a good wash in the back while I get you some clean clothes. You can call me Uncle Poon."

The book store was located in a small two-storeyed building. The upper floor combined living quarters, office and storage facilities. The courtyard in the rear was flanked by an open kitchen and a latrine on the right and a storeroom for fuel and a bathroom on the left. The kitchen was used mainly for heating water for baths and brewing tea. Meals were usually purchased from outside because no one had time to cook. Much of the storeroom was taken up by a bed made up of four boards supported by two wooden benches. Those boards, covered by an old rattan mat, were to serve as his bed for several years.

A daily regime was quickly established. The chores were many but not onerous. At the end of the day, after the evening meal, lessons would begin. Uncle Poon started him on the *Three Character Classic*. If Uncle Poon had to go out or to receive guests, he would be given writing assignments. Those had been carefree days but now they seemed so far away.

Keung returned to the watchman's cubicle and clocked in his round. The night was stuffy and the small electric fan churning in a corner provided meagre relief. He opened his snack box and started on a chicken drumstick. Except for a missing molar he still had good teeth. As he chewed upon the snack it occurred to him that chicken nowadays never tasted so good as those he had with Uncle Poon and Red Hope.

Red Hope entered his life a few months after he had started at the book store. She was an amazon of a woman, whose body and limbs surpassed in size and strength those of the big women from the north. She towered over Uncle Poon by half a head and wore her hair short, in masculine fashion. Her eyes, however, remained limpid and full of compassion. It was that compassion that endowed her otherwise ordinary face with a certain attractiveness. She was a primary school teacher and could have been little more than twenty at the time.

She had turned up suddenly one winter's evening when the store was about to close. The moment Uncle Poon saw her he boarded up and instructed him to purchase a roast chicken and several other dishes for dinner. The two of them then disappeared upstairs.

Introductions were effected over dinner and as the meal progressed he realised why he had to buy so much food. Red Hope had an appetite befitting her size. She was friendly and talkative, however, and displayed a kindly interest in him.

The unaccustomed attention pleased him and by the end of the meal they had become firm friends.

Later that evening, Red Hope said to him: "Little Brother, I need a place to sleep. Could I share your mat for an evening or two? In exchange, I'll tell you about the exploits of the Monkey King and some of the deeds of the heroes in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. What do you say?"

Since he had never heard such tales before, he readily agreed. So, after Red Hope had bathed and changed into her night clothes, she climbed into bed with him. The room was unheated and as they had only one quilt between them, they had to huddle together for warmth. He had no recollection of sharing a bed with anyone except his father. His father always had a sweaty smell and never told him stories. Red Hope, on the other hand, not only smelt pleasant but gave him a wonderful sense of security, especially when she threw an arm around him while recounting her tales. That had caused him to wonder whether the mother he had never known would have provided as comforting a shelter as Red Hope.

Red Hope visited three or four times a year and he fell into the habit of addressing her as "Elder Sister". On occasion she would bring him some small present. When she shared his bed, she would invariably tell him stories, sometimes of ancient ministers whose conduct put contemporary officials to shame and at other times matter-of-fact accounts of consumptive textile workers deprived of medical attention, peasants too impoverished to buy salt, women sold into bondage, children strangled at birth. The quiet way she related those misfortunes brought over the hardships of ordinary people more effectively than impassioned outbursts. She thus opened his heart to anger over the injustices in the world. She frequently urged him to study hard so that he might one day help alleviate suffering and restore dignity to human existence. He would unvaryingly respond with fervent promises to do so.

Keung set down his half-finished piece of chicken. Recalling his broken promises had taken the edge off his appetite. His throat felt dry, so he poured himself a cup of tea from a thermos flask. Ah, how good she was! How good they all were! And yet he had failed them. As he sipped his tea, he felt ashamed over his wasted training and his wasted life.

Uncle Poon had done for his mind what Red Hope had done for his heart. At the end of two years he had mastered enough characters to read newspapers. Gradually Uncle Poon introduced him to translations of writings by Dickens, Defoe and Mark Twain. Each writer offered fresh perspectives and the more he read the more he wanted to read. Uncle Poon was always there to guide him, now towards the biting stories of Lu Hsun, then towards magazines such as *New Youth* and pamphlets on socialism.

But what he enjoyed most was discussing with Uncle Poon the materials he had studied. Uncle Poon had a knack for opening up fresh angles of vision, so that what appeared at first sight to be simple propositions turned out to be complicated truths. Gradually he understood why China remained so impoverished and semi-feudal in outlook and why the ideals of the French Revolution, the American War of Independence and the Chinese Revolution of 1911 remained so out of reach. He learnt too that some rights could only be secured through the blood of the brave.

He had wanted passionately for a time to be counted among the brave. When he recalled the British police opened fire at striking workers at the Shanghai International Settlement and later massacred demonstrating students at Shakee, he had wanted to strike down the first foreigner he met.

But Uncle Poon restrained him from joining the crowds to vent his outrage, pointing out that raw emotion would not liberate the country nor bring about freedom and justice. To change a society required patience and planning. If he really wished to play a part in the process of change, then suitable tasks for him could be found.

After he had averred his commitment, Uncle Poon began teaching him new skills. They involved memorising codes and messages, habits of going to destinations by roundabout routes and ways of detecting whether one was being followed. He also learnt to feign ignorance or stupidity.

He remembered his excitement during his first assignment, though it was only to deliver a translation of *Paradise Lost* to an instructor at the Political Department of the Whampoa Military Academy by the name of Chou En-lai. "Just tell the gentleman *The Inferno* is on order. Nothing else," Uncle Poon had instructed.

That had turned out to be the first of many deliveries of books and apparently innocuous messages. Those tasks brought him into contact with Ho Chi-Minh, Heinz Neumann, Peng Pai, Mikhail Borodin, Chen Yi, Chang Tai-Lei and a number of teachers at the Farmers Movement Training Institute. None of the names had meant anything to him at the time. It was only later that he realised he had encountered some of the giants of the age.

His new responsibilities won the approval of Red Hope. Her concern for his safety became more manifest with every visit. "You must be careful," she would whisper as she cuddled him like a mother. "Revolution is not a game. The lives of many are in your hands. You must speak of your work to no one. The reactionaries are in a panic, lashing out blindly in all directions. Many have already been arrested and tortured. Scores have been shot. You must be vigilant and avoid unnecessary risks."

One evening Uncle Poon suddenly told him to make ready for a journey to Hong Kong. It was in the middle of winter and the skies were sombre. He

nevertheless felt elated because such a journey implied a mission of importance. Uncle Poon handed him a letter and said: "This is an introduction to a friend. He will find you work as an apprentice typesetter. You must leave within three days. Important things are about to happen and there is no time to lose. We need weapons and essential supplies and you are to get them here. Comrades in Hong Kong will tell you what has to be done. You will also have to get to know the safe houses and lead comrades there, in case things go wrong."

"But what could go wrong?" he remembered asking. "The people are seething with anger. Foreigners are carving up our country like a piece of pork. The people are ready to fight."

"You sound like our comrades from the Comintern. Frankly, I do not believe the situation is ripe. Our strength in the trade unions is an illusion. So too is the agitation of the people. Both stem from anti-foreign sentiments and not genuine consciousness of the realities in our nation. China is a land of peasants. They must be the backbone of any revolution. Without them, we are doomed. Never forget that."

"But if time is not ripe, why are we preparing for action?"

Uncle Poon smiled wryly. His eyes seemed awash with tears that refused to be shed. "Democracy is a wonderful thing but it cannot provide all the answers. The question of who is right and who is wrong cannot always be determined by numbers. The rules of the game require us to obey the will of the majority, right or wrong."

"Then I shall stay with you, come what may."

Uncle Poon smiled again, but without irony. "No. The work in Hong Kong is important. No one knows the situation on the ground here as well as you do. There is also no one else I can trust with this mission."

The day before his departure, Red Hope came. She seemed unnaturally lighthearted. After they had repaired to bed, she said: "You are now entering manhood. On this mission Uncle Poon and I can no longer be by your side. If fate is willing, we will all be together again soon. But whatever happens, remember what your life is meant to serve. Be true to the promises you have made."

"I will. I shall never forget them."

Red Hope then held his face in her hands and kissed him vehemently on the mouth. It had startled him for she had never done such a thing before. His adolescent innocence at once became shattered into a thousand pieces and a wild passion overcame him. His hands groped over her large, firm body to discover the rounded warmth of her breasts, the hard studs of her nipples and the moist, matted mound between her thighs. She yielded to his explorations. Indeed, she guided him into her and she became at once sister, mother, teacher, lover!

It was only later, after her death, that he realised she had presented him with a priceless gift, a gift rooted in the certainty of death.

"Red Hope! Red Hope!" Keung cried, with an anguish that burst forth from the depths of his being. His cries reverberated through the empty factory and shook the silences of the night.

He knew then what he had decided to do was the only course open to him. The madness of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was far from what Red Hope, Uncle Poon and the others had died for. Their ideals had been betrayed, both by those who were condoning the barbarities of the new age and by his own weakness and despair.

There was nothing left for him now but to redeem himself. He would go to Canton, go to Wing Hon Road and locate the store where he had spent the splendid years during his youth. He would stand outside and declare to all who would listen: "This used to be a book store run by a man who believed truths to be hidden in books. He was a man who believed in freedom, justice and brotherhood and he laid down his life for those beliefs. This store used to be visited by many who sought those truths or who were possessed by dreams. In particular, a young teacher with love and compassion enough to fill a whole city used to come here. She too laid down her life for her dreams. But today we are burning books, killing one another, laying waste to our heritage and mocking compassion. Is it not time to ask why we are so filled with hatreds and violence? Is it not time to demand of our leaders where cruelties and fratricides are leading us?"

No doubt crowds would gather. Security forces would be alerted. In the end a less principled generation of Red Guards would descend upon him to beat him to the ground, trample him underfoot and call him vile names. If they should smash his spectacles, that would be a blessing, for he would be spared their unsightly faces. They must eventually kill him as a traitor and an enemy of the people. But so long as breath remained within him he would shout his questions. If a single person could be moved to ponder, then hope would remain alive and he would have fulfilled his vows and his destiny.

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