

The Revolt of Grass

The gasping heat of summer, damp and debilitating, clung to the men like a shroud, sapping what remained of their energy. They had done their day and the stench from their bodies testified to their exertions. They longed for their evening meal and the accompanying bottles of chilled beer. They thought mostly of the beer and its refreshing coldness rushing down their gullets. The unaccountable absence of both confounded them, filling them with a niggling uneasiness.

They began cursing and fidgeting outside the ramshackle wooden shed that had passed as their dormitory for the last six weeks. Its amenities, provided beneath a corrugated metal roof, consisted of a number of wooden bunks covered with frayed rattan mats and two kerosene lamps. Because it had seen earlier service as a pigsty, it now played host to colonies of flies, mosquitoes, ants and other insects.

The men were dressed alike in tee-shirts, denim jeans and joggers or tennis shoes, the standard uniform of the Hong Kong proletariat. Their clothes, supplied by their recruiters to disguise their China origins, were now torn and soiled by cement dust, paint, rust and sawdust. The ravages of six weeks of unloading steel bars, hauling building materials and other brutal labour had taken their toll.

Yun sat a little way away from the rest of the men, strangers all except for Kwong, who had been a friend and colleague for a number of years. They formed a group of ten, a number dictated solely by what could be crammed into the concealed compartment of a junk without occasioning panic or suffocation. But having shared a perilous nocturnal sea journey and several weeks of cruel toil, a budding comradeship had begun to develop among them, so that their fates now seemed intertwined.

As minutes went by without any sign of the food and drinks, Yun was reminded of the dangers and uncertainties confronting him and the rest of the men. They had knowingly embarked upon an enterprise considered illegal on both sides of the border. If things really went wrong, a stint in a Hong Kong prison stared them in the face. At the end of their sentences, reform camps still awaited them back home, to purge them of any bourgeois contagion they might have picked up. Thereafter, the stigmas of social and political unreliability would mark them for the rest of their days.

Yun pitied the rest of the group their recklessness and naivety. He had been driven by desperation. But the rest, mostly peasants from the small towns and villages in Kwangtung, had been lured by prospects of earning more in a day than they could in a month back in their socialist Fatherland. Even Kwong had been motivated by little more than the desire to acquire modern household appliances that

would attract him a wife. To risk death and imprisonment for so little seemed the height of foolishness.

It was now too late for regrets. They had delivered themselves into the hands of a shadowy organisation trading in human resources and had been shipped to a place condemned by Party cadres as decadent and iniquitous. They could only hope their luck would hold out.

Yun recalled their meeting with the head of the organisation at an out-of-the-way farm after their arrival. He was a man known as Fatty Fung, a veritable mountain of flesh, from which protruded a round, shaven head, two heavily tattooed arms and a pair of stumpy legs. He wore only a pair of undersized blue cotton shorts, so that the vast, unsightly dome of his stomach spilt over the waistband of his trousers. Flanked by several surly underlings, he looked every bit the caricature of the Chinese underworld boss that he was.

Fatty Fung had a habit of smiling frequently and when he did so, a queer ripple of flesh would wash slowly up his bloated face, causing his eyes to become engulfed between his cheeks and his low, puffy brow. Although he possessed certain comic aspects, they were insufficient to redeem the malevolence and shiftiness in his eyes. The mythical beasts tattooed on his arms also added a touch of menace.

"So you want to get rich," Fatty Fung had said, upon introducing himself. "You've come to the right man. A benefactor of humanity, that's what I am. But if you want my help, you'll have to obey orders. You ain't got a chance on your own, so don't get ideas. You're in the dark on local customs and the lie of the land. If you get nicked, it'll be fifteen to eighteen months inside. A third of prisoners here are illegal workers. Without me, you'll get nicked for sure.

"When that happens, don't think it helps to finger me. You'll get off easier claiming you got here on your own, to look for work. So long as you're with me, however, I decide what you'll do and where you'll work. It'll mainly be at building sites, unloading building materials and stuff like that. My men'll take you there and bring you back. I sub-contract you out, you see. When you're handed over, you'll take orders from those who have hired you. Work hard. I don't want complaints. I've got a reputation to keep. If I get a complaint, I'll throw the culprit to the wolves.

"With me, you've nothing to worry about. My men will supply your meals. Good healthy stuff, with lots of meat. And beer too in the evenings. You get your wages once every two weeks, minus deductions, unless you get nicked before pay day. In that case, I can't pay you, can I? My advice is to send your money home soon as you're paid. It can be disguised as a remittance from a rich uncle. Everybody's got someone here whose name can be used. If not, I can be your rich uncle!"

Fatty Fung had paused and smiled, waiting for the murmur of nervous laughter to subside. His delivery had been smooth and fluent, like a well-practised speech. "I charge ten per cent for remittances," he had continued. "You can, of course, do it yourself, if you had identification and knew the right banks. Carrying money around is risky. It can disappear, get lost or be stolen. Don't cry to me if that happens. Besides, you know the security bureau confiscates foreign currency when you cross the border. So that's another risk. But this is a free society. You can do what you like.

"Another piece of advice is not to chatter in public. Your village accents will give you away. Keep to yourselves. You're safest at your work place or back here at your dormitory. You can get water from the public standpipes near the village. The villagers won't bother you. I have an understanding with them. But don't go gawking at the shops in town. That, too, will give you away. If you want to buy cigarettes or other things, tell one of my men. It will be attended to. Most things can be on account."

In recalling Fatty Fung's words, Yun felt a sudden surge of apprehension. What he had earned so far was now wrapped in thin plastic and sewn into the lining of his leather belt. He had made up his mind to return to China, to Sau Har and their children, once he got the next payment. That was due tomorrow. But the non-appearance of the meal was worrying. He could hardly bear the thought of things going wrong at the eleventh hour.

He did not allow his coarse-grained, weather-beaten face to betray his worries, however. He had long ago trained himself to shut his feelings from the world, to drain his face of expression and to hood his eyes into two dull, dark pebbles. He had set his mouth tightly and uncommunicatively and had developed a loose-jointed gait to give his wiry body a suggestion of tameness and indolence. The cast of his head, too, conveyed an impression of docility. The appearance he presented to the world was a disguise, a camouflage first suggested by his father.

His father, a teacher, had married a peasant girl from a remote village where he had once taught. One sombre morning in winter, without any warning, men from the Public Security Bureau came for him. Before he was led away, his father had taken him aside and said: "We live in times unfit for the exercise of intelligence or serious thought. Go with your mother and your younger brother to the village of your maternal grandparents. Learn to work with your hands. Live like a peasant. It's safer that way. Remember a blade of grass survives storms better than a tree braving the wind. Preserve yourself for better times. Look after your brother and your mother. I can no longer do so. I can only bring you harm. Forgive me."

He was ten years' old at the time.

He did not realise till later that his father was considered a reactionary. Being so regarded invited punishment. His father was duly sent to one of those ubiquitous camps for thought reform. His mother was allowed a visit once in a while but all she ever said on her return was: "He is in good spirits." or "He has lost a little weight." Later still, he learnt that even more severe punishments were dealt out to those labelled as capitalist-roaders, lackeys of imperialism, counter-revolutionaries and enemies of the people. He was never clear what those terms meant, except that people so designated were doomed.

He soon discovered that power resided with petty men with fixed ideas. They might speak of service and betterment of society but their hearts cared only for private benefits and personal advancement. They seemed to corrupt everything they touched, turning even the revolution into a system of lies, hypocrisy, treachery and vindictiveness. He could detect in their eyes such an obscene enjoyment of power that it made them indifferent to human suffering. He began avoiding their eyes for fear his own might betray his true feelings.

Being powerless to resist, he adjusted as best he could. He questioned nothing and mouthed whatever happened to be the official line. He found outlets for his energies in farming and, later, bricklaying. His innermost thoughts he shared with no one. He merged himself into the anonymity of the masses.

His younger brother, a weak and sickly boy, soon died of a liver disease. By the time he was twenty his grandparents too were dead. He was thus left only with his mother to follow a peasant's existence. The sowing and reaping came with stultifying regularity. Likewise the political discussions and the pressure to exceed production quotas. Working in the fields enabled him to grow tough and strong and the incessant exhortations to serve socialism taught him to become wary of slogans.

One evening, after his mother had returned from one of her visits to his father and reported on his failing health, he had asked: "When are they going to let him out?"

"When his thoughts have been reformed," his mother had replied.

"They have had him for ten years! If they cannot change his thinking in all that time, how can they ever change it? What is wrong with his thoughts anyway?"

But his mother immediately cautioned him into silence by saying that walls had ears.

He felt utterly useless, unable to see or to offer succour to a father who was becoming increasingly a childhood memory. The thoughts that constituted his father's crime remained a mystery. He wished someone would explain what they were and why such thoughts should be regarded as criminal. But no one ever did. Two years later, his father died, unfreed but also unreformed. He saw ahead of him

the narrow rut of his own existence stretching to infinity and it seemed like just another form of death.

At twenty-six, for want of anything better to do, he married Sau Har, a quiet and companionable girl from the same village. After a while, as the political atmosphere in the country became more relaxed, he gained permission to return to his original town because his aging mother needed medical attention not readily available in the village. There he found employment as a bricklayer while Sau Har worked in a textile factory. They eventually had a son, a bright, cheerful lad, and they passed their days in relative happiness and contentment.

Then, one evening, after they had retired to bed, Sau Har remarked wistfully: "Wouldn't it be nice if we could also have a girl?"

All night, and the following nights as well, he thought over Sau Har's remark and kept asking himself: "Why not?"

He knew full well the authorities were enforcing a one-child policy. But why had everybody to be a slave to decrees? Chairman Mao had once declared a large population a national asset. Now that Chairman Mao was gone, it was being held that excessive population was the cause of China's poverty. He was no expert on such matters but it stood to reason both propositions could not be right. Perhaps neither was right and next year some other policy would be proclaimed. If those in authority knew no better than himself, why should he follow them?

The prevailing policy grated against his instincts. A policy which forced people to murder baby daughters if they wanted to preserve family lineage had to be wrong. Besides, it was unnatural to grow up without brothers and sisters or uncles and aunts. He thought of his dead brother and the love he had felt when he tended him in sickness. He thought of his father's vague crime that called for twelve years of imprisonment, his mother's quiet endurance and his own diminished existence. Then he thought of his son and what lay in store for him and for the countless generations after him. All of a sudden life seemed intolerable. There and then he decided on a second child, regardless of consequences!

It took no effort to persuade Sau Har and his mother to join the conspiracy. They had always deferred to him. He had to plan carefully, however. First of all, a doctor had to be bribed to remove the contraceptive device implanted in Sau Har after their first child. Then, he had to ensure no informer in the neighbourhood or at Sau Har's factory suspected a pregnancy. Otherwise, Sau Har would be dragged off for an abortion.

That meant conception had to be carefully timed so that Sau Har's belly would not swell until after the advent of winter, when her figure could be obscured by padded garments. The need for a justification for Sau Har to receive prolonged leave came next. If the illness of one of her parents was sufficient, she could have the child

at her native village. Controls there would be less strict and the birth could be passed off as that of a first child.

Their second child turned out not to be a daughter but another son. When the child was brought back to the town, the whole neighbourhood was stunned by such a blatant challenge to authority.

Yun and Sau Har steeled themselves for retribution and it came soon enough. Fines were imposed, equivalent to their joint wages for years to come, to be deducted each month from their pay until fully settled. Annual increments, bonuses and long service awards were forfeited and their second child was deprived of state rations and other social benefits till the age of fourteen. Not even his aged mother was spared. All three adults were condemned to undergo public self-criticism. The crime of his father was dredged up again. Neighbours and fellow workers were advised to shun them.

At the beginning, Yun endured the punishments with a secret relish. However severe they might be, the family had succeeded in defying the system and that brought a perverse satisfaction.

But as time wore on, the effects of the punishments began to tell. Deductions from their wages left barely enough to live on. Meat became a rarity. Each time the younger child fell ill, the family had to make sacrifices to pay for medical attention. Though Sau Har and his mother bore their lot without complaining, Yun felt sorry for the misery he had caused. His heart ached most when he saw the thinness of the children and whenever he heard Sau Har explaining to them why they could not have their favourite dishes.

He wanted to remonstrate with the cadres, to point out the injustice of making children suffer for the acts of adults. But he knew protests would be useless. It would merely accord those in authority another chance to gloat. So he swallowed his bitterness and left it festering inside.

Some fellow workers, moved by the plight of the family, sometimes surreptitiously slipped Yun a few fens from their own meagre earnings. It hurt Yun's pride to accept charity but he had no choice.

One of the regular contributors was Kwong, another bricklayer in the same work unit. He was several years older than Yun and was a whimsical bachelor who made no secret of his ambition to find a wife. But he had a weakness for wine, so the years went by without his ever accumulating enough money to realise his goal. Yun liked Kwong's devil-may-care attitude and they soon became friends.

One evening, after Yun and his family had been enduring their privations for three years, Kwong brought news of a recruiting agent in the neighbourhood, seeking labourers for Hong Kong. Yun accompanied Kwong to see the agent, who held out prospects of vast fortunes in a matter of months. There were risks, of course,

but the rewards seemed to offer Yun a way out of his predicament. He signed up, as he was already a social outcast. Kwong did likewise.

Yun watched the men growing increasingly restive outside the shed. He, too, was becoming more apprehensive. He hoped for a simple explanation to the missing dinner, for all their sakes. Then he saw Kwong striding agitatedly towards him. The usual cheerfulness was missing from his friend's dark round face.

"Some of the men want to make a run for it," Kwong whispered, on reaching Yun. "Do you think we have been betrayed? Fatty Fung looks the type to sell his own mother for a quick dollar, let alone poor sods like us. Are we in trouble? Have I got to kiss my bride good-bye?"

"I don't know," Yun replied. "There's no sign of trouble yet. It could be just a hitch somewhere. Is anyone keeping a lookout?"

"Yes, Ah Fai. He's at the head of the path."

"Good. Let's wait a few more minutes. Something should happen soon. If nothing does, we can decide what to do."

"You've got more to lose than the rest of us. At least we've remitted money home. You've kept yours. Can't understand why you want to take such chances."

"I don't like giving Fatty Fung ten per cent. He is bleeding us enough already. Besides, anything remitted will be seized to pay my fines. I'll be no better off. No, I want to keep the money to buy food on the black market. Once I've enough, I'm leaving. I'm not going to wait around for my luck to run out."

"But how will you get your money back? You'll be searched at the border. Foreign currencies will be confiscated. You'll end up with nothing."

"I don't intend to cross at the border. There'll be no labour camp for me either. If I can be smuggled out, I can be smuggled in. I have a plan."

Just then a collective cry rose from the men as Ah Fai waved from his lookout. The van carrying their meal sputtered into view and the men gathered quickly around it. The driver was apologetic as he handed out the meals, blaming a faulty engine for his late arrival. The men snatched their boxes of food and bottles of beer like children grabbing at unexpected presents. They ate and drank with gusto, laughing and chatting, overflowing with happiness that their good fortune had not deserted them.

The next morning, Yun worked as usual at a site where a thirty-storey block of domestic flats was being constructed. He had been there for the past three weeks. The shell of the building had been virtually completed. Traditional Chinese bamboo scaffolding, using only bamboo poles and strips of rattan, had been erected around the structure in preparation for external finishing.

The site was a hive of activity, filled with the noise and bustle of unremitting toil. Illegal labourers were engaged on the most onerous tasks while skilled local workers handled gantry cranes, cement trucks and the more sophisticated equipment. Precautions against industrial accidents were minimal, however, and protective clothing and safety harnesses were nowhere in evidence. Workers were generally left to their own devices. If someone got killed or crippled, that was just the price for cost efficiency and free enterprise.

Because of their skill at bricklaying, Yun and Kwong had been given the task of erecting internal partition walls. They worked on adjacent floors. As Yun slapped the mortar around with his trowel he experienced a mixed sense of anticipation and foreboding. His wages for the last two weeks would come at the end of the day and he could then make a run for it. However, the delay in the delivery of dinner the previous evening still lingered in his mind like a bad omen and he felt teased by a vague anxiety.

He had taken his bearings during the daily journeys to and from work and he knew where the fishing junks congregated. He felt confident of being able, for a modest fee, to parley his way home. He would tell Kwong of his plan after they had been paid. It would then be up to his friend to decide whether to leave or to stay.

As it was to be his final day, he did not want to do a slapdash job. Since he was alone on the twenty-sixth floor, he did not anticipate anyone checking on him. So he took pains to align the bricks and smooth out the mortar. It was the first time since arriving in Hong Kong he had taken any real pride in his work. He was so absorbed in it he did not notice the supervisor's arrival. He therefore started when he heard a voice shouting: "Get a move on! Time is money, you know! You're not building the Great Wall of China!"

"The gaps between the bricks need filling," Yun replied.

"Who notices gaps when the plaster is on?"

"Sound will travel through gaps, even after plastering."

"You going to live here? Do you know the cost of time, the cost of cement?"

Yun remained silent because the supervisor sounded irritated. But he continued to work at his own pace.

The supervisor glared and cursed: "Stupid country bumpkin!" When that produced no effect, he demanded roughly: "You're one of Fatty Fung's crew, aren't you?"

Yun nodded and the supervisor strode away.

The encounter left Yun feeling angry and ashamed. It was not the thought of being reported to Fatty Fung that upset him. He could not care less since he was leaving. But he had not dared to look the supervisor full in the face, to throw

down his trowel and tell him to go to hell, as every fibre in his being wanted to. He had answered back after a fashion, it was true, but how pathetic a response it was! He felt disgusted with his habitual subservience.

His father had taught him to survive by bending like a blade of grass but each time he did so he felt reduced, with a bit more of his dignity stripped away. What a horrible place the world was! Why must it be filled with men who would grind down other men, creating suffering for the sake of some insignificant advantage? Back home there were revolutionaries of convenience and cadres with dried-up hearts. Here there were the merciless blood-suckers and brazen cheats. Life seemed nothing but a trap.

The encounter with the supervisor left a bitter taste in his mouth which made the afternoon intolerable. He broke off working more than once to share a cigarette with Kwong. His mind was in turmoil. He wanted to explain his wretchedness to his friend but he could not find the words. He half-hoped the supervisor would come back so he might be given a fresh chance to vent his frustrations. But the supervisor did not return. All afternoon he calculated the time remaining before the payment of his wages. Somehow time seemed to be creeping along with nerve-racking slowness.

Suddenly, the sound of a commotion filtered up to him. He went to one of the openings in the wall meant for windows, though frames had still to be installed. His heart immediately skipped a beat. Khaki-clad figures in blue berets were disgorging from trucks and workers were yelling and scattering like agitated ants. Policemen were in hot pursuit. He felt a hard, burning sensation in his chest, which made breathing difficult. He was trapped, and so was Kwong on the floor above him. Both were too high up for escape.

The next moment Kwong came rushing down the stairs. "We've been betrayed!" Kwong cried, his face pale. "What do we do? We have bricks. Let's make a fight of it."

Yun shook his head. "What good are bricks against guns?"

"Someone has ratted. It must be Fatty Fung! Who else would stoop so low? And all for the sake of two weeks' wages! What is the world coming to? Why should people harm us when we've done them no wrong?"

"It's the times we live in."

"Yes, it's the times we live in. They are baffling. You try to make an honest dollar and you are hounded like a criminal."

The next moment, a loud-hailer blared out from below. "This is the Police. The site has been surrounded. Present your identifications for checking. Those not engaged in illegal activities have nothing to fear."

After the message had been repeated two or three times, Yun said: "We have no choice. We had better go down. It'll be the worse for us if we stay here. They'll soon sweep the building floor by floor. There's no place to hide."

The two friends made their way down the stairs dispiritedly, each preoccupied with his own thoughts. Yun thought of his aged mother, his wife and his children and how they must be suffering with him gone. How much more they must suffer still once he has been locked away. There was no telling if he could even send word of his fate from prison. Then there would be the further spell in labour camp after being handed back to the Chinese authorities. Even if nobody discovered the money sewn inside his belt, it would be years before he could make use of it. And what would have happened to his family by then?

His heart felt like a canker within his breast. Bend! Bend! The advice of his father came back to him. "No more!" he wanted to cry out. "No more submission!"

Then, suddenly, it dawned on him that his father had refused to bend in spite of his own advice! He had chosen death rather than to bend! Those with power had destroyed him but they had not defeated him. That was why they had to keep him locked up for twelve years! Bending to survive was one thing, but surviving without dignity was pointless. His father had tried to show through example that each had to choose the terms of his own existence. He had rejected a life without dignity. How little he knew of his father or the nature of his beliefs! He had been misinterpreting his words all along. Those thoughts stopped him dead in his tracks.

"Go on down," Yun said to his friend, as he panted with excitement. "I want to think."

"Think?" Kwong echoed. "What is there to think about? We're trapped. They are waiting to cart us off to prison."

"Man is meant for pondering. I have lived too long without thinking. I have been trying to survive even at the price of becoming a yoked animal. But man is not meant to live like that ."

"You're up to something! I can tell. Whatever it is, let's do it together!"

"No. You're not like me. You've got a clean record. All this will blow over for you. Getting mixed up with me will do you no good. Just go down and tell them I'm here, waiting for them." With that, Yun smiled and the smile melted the hardness of his eyes and his whole face softened.

Kwong hesitated. "We've been through so much together. Let us stay together till the end. I don't give a damn any more."

"Go," Yun said, gently, and there was something in that single word which made Kwong obey.

Left to himself, Yun felt strangely liberated. The exhilaration he felt and the gathering heat of the afternoon made him sweat as if he were running a fever. He took off his tee-shirt to wipe his face and revealed the lean ridges of his muscles. He saw clearly his need to protest, to resist the oppression he had accepted for too long. He had to defy those abusing their power, just as his father had done. But what form should his defiance take? Certainly not the throwing of bricks, as Kwong had suggested. And to whom should he express his defiance? He had no audience. He was utterly alone in an empty room, twenty floors up the concrete shell of a building.

He went again to one of the unframed window openings. The bamboo scaffolding loomed outside. Below him the site was surrounded and sealed off. Identifications were being checked and those with proper papers were being allowed to leave. Others were being handcuffed and led away. Outside the site there was a small knot of onlookers and a few people taking pictures in a desultory fashion. No doubt the latter formed part of the press corps, covering yet another round-up of illegal workers.

Presently, the faint sound of shouting drifted up to him. One of the voices sounded like Kwong's. He leaned out of the building but could not locate the source of the noise. So he climbed out onto the scaffolding for a better view. He had no fear of height. He had worked from bamboo scaffolding before, so he was accustomed to the firm resilience of the poles. He straddled one of the cross bars and leaned out, holding onto one of the uprights. He then saw Kwong struggling with some policemen trying to handcuff him.

"Let him be!" Yun yelled. "He's not a criminal!" But he was too high up for his voice to carry. Eventually he saw his friend being subdued, fettered and led away.

However, one of the photographers seemed to have noticed Yun hanging from the scaffolding, for he aimed a camera in that direction. Soon other people were also pointing. After a while, an instruction issued from a loud hailer: "You on the scaffolding, come down with your identification."

"Come up and see it," Yun replied, lightheartedly, although he knew he could not be heard. The heat was making him thirsty. He was hungry too. But otherwise he was happy. At least somebody was paying attention to him.

Presently he heard the clatter of hobnailed boots and he quickly retreated along the scaffolding, away from the window openings. Police officers appeared.

"There is no need for this, my friend," one of the policemen said. "Come inside and talk things over."

Yun looked into the policeman's eyes. They were the eyes of a paid mercenary, full of the ennui and disinterest of minor officialdom going about its business. He detected a certain perfunctoriness in the tone of voice as well. He had

seen it all before, in the communes, in the factories and in every other place where men exercised authority over other men. Such people only wanted to complete their assignments and collect their pay. They were utterly indifferent to the suffering of others. He recalled his earlier humiliation before the supervisor and the sight of his friend being subdued. The years of bitterness bottled up inside burst forth. "Why should I talk to you?" he replied. "You want to handcuff me also?"

"We won't handcuff you," the policeman said, soothingly. "Just come inside. We only want to see your identification. Don't make things hard for yourself and for us."

"Come out and see it!" Yun said, laughing, and deliberately bounced his weight on the bamboo to demonstrate its sturdiness.

The policeman glanced dubiously at the scaffolding and then at Yun. He held some whispered consultations with his colleagues and after a while, someone muttered: "Another crazy fool! Just let him sweat. He can't stay out there forever."

In the meantime, other officers took up positions on adjacent floors. Some renewed efforts to urge Yun to leave the scaffolding. A couple of them, more aggressive than the rest, cursed him for making trouble. They attempted to intimidate him by beating on the bamboo poles with their batons.

But Yun remained on his perch, out of reach, and something in their demeanour told him he had got the better of them. They, with their revolvers and batons, handcuffs and hobnailed boots, and all the other trappings of power, were afraid of confronting him on the scaffolding! A deep joy burst over him. Even those with might had their weaknesses. Their power was only derived from the fear of their victims. Take fear away and they would be powerless.

After a while the policemen retreated from their vantage points. But, in accordance with normal procedures, they no doubt maintained surveillance from less obvious locations. Yun balanced himself comfortably on a cross piece to watch the dying day.

Below him the whole area was buzzing with activity. Floodlights were being set up and machinery and building materials were being moved. Then came the wail of fire engines and presently firemen spread something out beneath him. It turned out to be a gigantic air cushion. Were the authorities fearful he might jump? Or perhaps they were hoping he would jump to end the stalemate. But he had no intention of doing that.

As the hours went by, the darkness thickened. The night was moonless, without even the comfort of a star. Lights hastily installed on the site cast eerie shadows on the deserted building and its bamboo cage. Red lamps atop the fire engines flashed monotonously, like a reiterated curse, and charged the gloom with an infernal glow. From time to time the faint hum of traffic and the cackle of police

radios broke through the inhabited silences of the night. Policemen loitered restlessly below, unable either to stand down or to bring an end to their tedious assignment.

Their predicament gave Yun a sense of accomplishment. So long as he remained there, unafraid, a part of the world's machinery for oppression would be brought to nought. No supervisor could bully workers because activity on the site would be at a standstill. Fatty Fung would lose part of his income. The police, the fire brigade, the ambulance service and the other government organs would have to remain on alert. The press would be kept on tenterhooks, like vultures being denied a grisly feast.

Somewhere in the far distance, deep in the heart of darkness, the concrete canyons of the city emitted flickering lights. Were they the lights of hope, Yun wondered, or were they a deception to snare the unwary, laid by the likes of Fatty Fung, the bullying work supervisor and the indifferent guardians of the law?

He looked down at the small crowd remaining outside the compound. He wanted to let them in on the secret he had discovered. Servitudes and tyrannies, police forces and security bureaux, barbed wires and prisons, did not have to be part of the natural order of things. All that was required was to shake off fear.

He surmised the authorities would not come for him before daybreak. In the meantime, he would need to move away from the spot where the great air cushion alluded to a degree of safety. He wanted to confront the authorities at the point of greatest danger. If he were to fall, let it be upon the good, naked earth he used to plough and from which he had drawn his nourishment. Nothing less would do honour to his father, to his family or to himself.

He moved along the scaffolding, circling the building twice to find a spot to his liking. After he had chosen it, he sat down on a cross bar to wait out the thick, treacherous blackness of night. He felt as if he were poised on the edge of the world, charged in some inexplicable way with defending his fellow men from some encroaching darkness. A gentle breeze lisped through the close, moisture-laden air and brushed his sweating body like a sweet caress. His tiredness fell away and he felt unaccountably refreshed.

He did not know what tomorrow would bring but he knew if he clung to his perch long enough he would be rewarded by the sight of a new dawn.

The Revolt of Grass has appeared in **Short Story International** in the United States.