

Q. M. ZHANG

Accomplice to Memory

THE WAY THE FATHER TELLS IT—the way the Daughter tries to write it—he was just an unwitting bystander. A passerby, always on his way to something better. Never saw a Japanese. Never knew a Communist. Never even a witness to the civil and world wars that just happened to coincide with the first three decades of his life in China.

He only had eyes for the Americans.

Never sent to the front. Never touched an exploding pencil. Never privy to the meaning of the radio messages he received in his post at the Bureau of Investigation and Statistics nor the violent ends to which they were put. Never saw the bloated bodies that piled up on the streets of Chongqing over three years of bombing.

The Daughter comes to the Father's bedside lugging photos, books, maps, videos, hoping to resurrect whatever traces of the past are left in him. She drops names—the head of a department, a city gate—trying to determine whether the carefully wrought meanings she has arrived at line up with his experience. Trying to separate historical fact from hospital hallucination. A good story from a true one.

The Father has been telling stories his whole life in America. The One about the Chinese Boy Scout. The One about the Quartered Passport. Just a few months prior to his fall down the stairs, bursting three blood vessels in his left temporal lobe and landing him in this hospital, he told her another one, a story she'd never heard before. A story he'd never told anyone this side of the Pacific. A story that unraveled all his previous stories.

Now the Father is unraveling before the Daughter's eyes. Past and present bleed into each other. What seems clear to him one day turns cloudy the next. Each time she shows him the photo of the bodies on the steps, he looks as if seeing it for the first time. Mostly he just shakes his head when she presents him with these historical artifacts.

Still the Father looks forward to the Daughter's visits, what she will bring him, where she will take him. In his hospital bed, he drifts dispassionately from bygone port to bygone port. Nanjing. Hankou. Chongqing. He speaks politely to the doctors and nurses, their faces and names floating away from him before he has a chance to ask them what they are doing on this boat.

"Who are the other passengers?" he asks his daughter.

He is curious about what she is writing and asks her to read her stories

to him. He is mesmerized by her voice speaking his life backwards to him. He recognizes himself in her stories, but is confused by his proximity to History.

“Some of this is not in my favor,” he says.

It was a wireless shortwave radio that first seduced Wang Kun. An American-made AN/PRC-1 model tucked into a small leather suitcase that could be easily carried to the front and back. Compact and quick to travel, just like him. Intelligence on the go. The leather case had a rich redolent scent and the well-oiled brass latches released with just the right pressure from his thumbs, sending a shudder of delight through him each time he opened it. Inside the case, soft leather straps held a set of headphones and a black and chrome machine with silver knobs that his fingers quickly learned to fine-tune in synchrony with the waves of sound pulsing through the headset. He plugged himself in and sat perfectly still, thumb and forefinger making barely perceptible turns of the dial, waiting and listening until the sounds took the form that his ear had been trained to hear. The long and the short waves beating like an arrhythmic heart.

/ Dah-dit-dit-dah-dah-dah / Dah-dit-dah-dah-dah-dah-dah-dit-dit-dah / Dit-dah-dit-dit-dah-dah-dah-dit-dit-dit-dah-dit / Dah-dah-dit?/

Do you love me?

He played this game with her at the training camp whenever they were lucky enough to be paired up. He'd noticed her immediately that first day when they lined up in front of the gymnasium for morning exercises, a tall girl with a peach-shaped face, clearly a Northerner, standing with her heels together, hands on hips, back arched, eyes closed, and nose upturned to the winter sun with a look of beautiful contempt on her mouth. She wore her uniform tightly belted around her waist and her cloth leggings so closely wrapped around her calves that from a distance it looked like she was wearing stockings.

“We must beautify ourselves in order to beautify the country,” she retorted when he teased her about her vanity. “And what about you, pretty boy? Do you part and oil your hair before you get into bed?”

During the days, they marched through the streets singing their youthful optimism to the throngs of refugees that were pouring into Hankou:

*Revolutionary youth, quickly prepare,
Be wise, humane, and brave!
Grasp the pulse of this stage.
Stand before this great age.*

Wang Kun didn't care much for the lyrics, but he liked the rousing German tune as it accompanied their goose-steps up and down the city streets. As the duizhang of their group, it was his job to keep them moving and he made it a point to march alongside her row, calling out commands and showing off his studied Northern pronunciation.

Six months later, she would be sent to the front and he to Chongqing, where he would spend many long nights caressing those radio dials, trying to find her out there. The radio would be his first modern lover, arousing him at night with whispered secrets in his ear.

/ Hankou has fallen / Changsha has been burned to the ground / The Japanese will begin bombing Chongqing as soon as the winter fog lifts / Be prepared / Do you miss me?/

In the rehabilitation hospital on the unit for traumatic head injuries, the Father is leaking history.

He's just finished another round of testing. What year is this? Who is the president of the United States? Kitten is to cat, as calf is to what? Same questions he was asked yesterday by the same baby-face in a white lab coat with the same humiliating results.

"Who does that guy think he is?" he grumbles as the Daughter wheels him back to his room.

"Never mind him." She is eager to talk to her father about what he can remember. As the blood slowly dissipates from his brain, words tumble from his mouth. "Tell me about Chongqing."

"Oooh," he groans and rubs the hollow in his chest, "why do you want to talk about that? Such a dirty dirty city."

"What did you do there?"

"I work for the Chinese FBI," he blurts out. "There are two branches, military and civil, *jun tong* and *min tong*. I am *min tong*, the civil branch, no, *jun tong*, *min tong*, *jun tong*, which is it?"

He closes his eyes, muttering in Chinese to himself. Just when the Daughter thinks he has fallen asleep, his eyes snap open and he hisses at her, "Have you heard of Dai Li?" He looks around the room, then leans forward in the bed. "I operate secret radio stations," he whispers. "I am so good at it, I become part of the inner circle. Such a dirty dirty job, but I survived." He falls back on the pillow and closes his eyes again.

As she is leaving the room, she hears him chuckle and say, "I don't think you can find another one like me, so American but still so Chinese." When she looks back, he appears to be sleeping.

Daming Temple sat on a bluff overlooking the river. Villagers came daily to the temple to burn incense, lay fruit, supplicate themselves before the statues of various deities, the fierce and the compassionate, as needed. The fruit piled up brown and desiccated among the ashes on the altar tables. Ash was everywhere. It kicked up under the feet of the recruits and stuck in their throats, causing them to cough as they stepped over the gate and filed silently into the Great Hall. Dark green lanterns had been hung

to light their way, casting a demonic glow over the relief-carved faces of the eighteen bodhisattvas that lined the hall, benevolent witnesses to this midnight ceremony. At the front altar, a portrait of the Generalissimo was mounted in the place where the Sakyamuni Buddha should have sat. Or maybe the Buddha was still there and the Generalissimo was sitting on its lap. In this light, Wang Kun's eyes played tricks on him.

Standing in front of the altar were three men. His dear friend Luomin was nearly unrecognizable, wearing a mask of a face that Wang Kun had never seen before. The training camp director was there, looking oily and arrogant as always. And a man whom Wang Kun didn't recognize but would not forget after that night. This man was the shortest of the three, but solidly built with a neck like a horse. He had a wide nose with flaring nostrils, steely eyes set unnaturally far apart, and a grim determined mouth. When he opened it and began to speak, his mouth was full of gold. His voice was coarse and sugary, his words all praise and welcome for them.

"You are the first class of recruits for the Bureau of Investigation and Statistics. This work is not for ordinary people. Each of you has been selected for your high cultural levels and your special talents. You will serve the Generalissimo and your country."

Out of nowhere, a cock appeared on the altar table. A beautiful brindle-colored cock, with flecks of orange in its feathers and a crown and wattle of brilliant red. It strutted across the table, jabbing its head this way and that as if trying to figure out who was responsible for putting it in this predicament. The man with the mouth of gold reached for the cock and stroked it, all the while making soothing little clucking sounds. The cock arched its back with obvious pleasure and allowed the man to wrap surprisingly delicate fingers around its lovely neck. Still clucking softly, the man raised a sword that had magically appeared in his left hand and severed the cock's head from its body in one smooth stroke. The cock's head fell onto the altar table, a look of astonishment frozen on its face. A stream of blood spurted from the cock's neck, still held tenderly in those feminine hands, and Luomin was there to catch it in a hollowed-out gourd.

At Luomin's signal, the inductees formed a line in front of the altar. One by one they stepped forward to take the gourd and drink the freshly spilled blood, which had been sweetened with plum wine.

"Don't breathe when you drink," she whispered as she returned from the table, lips glistening, high Northern cheekbones flushed.

When it was Wang Kun's turn, he held his breath and managed not to gag as the warm viscous substance passed down his throat. He returned the gourd to its master, seeing the look of approval in the man's wide-set eyes. But it was the man's neck that fascinated him, so thick and sinewy. He couldn't help but wonder how hard it would be to pass a blade through that neck. A wave of nausea suddenly overcame him. Still holding his breath, he quickly returned to the anonymity of the line.

As the newly inducted members of the Bureau of Investigation and Statistics pledged their allegiance, Wang Kun tried to breathe deeply and forget the sweet taste of the blood. He was confused by the feelings that this man and this ceremony had stirred in him. Pride. Revulsion. And Something Else. He felt as if a chain had been slipped over his head, a chain made entirely of silk knots so soft and so light that it would be easy to forget that the chain was there. He must take care not to move too fast or too far in any one direction. He loosened his collar, fighting the urge to run.

Trying to get his bearings, he looked at her. She was glowing in the green light with a radiance that Wang Kun wished had been reserved for him.

Lunar New Year's Eve.

The Daughter wheels the Father through the hospital hallways, empty now except for the night-shift nurses and those few family members who do not dare to leave. A small paper lantern hangs from the IV pole attached to his wheelchair. Her brother walks in front of them rolling a pellet drum between the palms of his hands, the steady beating of the wooden pellet on the membranes of the two-faced drum bouncing off the walls like popcorn. Her mother follows, smiling and nodding and offering candy to those who turn to watch this impromptu parade. The Father has a dazed look on his face, the corners of his mouth twisted upwards in a grin or a grimace, the Daughter can't tell which, like he knows he's supposed to be happy but can't remember why.

Earlier that evening, he had poked suspiciously at the pork dumplings she'd made, seeming to recognize their shape but refusing to put them in his mouth.

"You made these?" he asked her.

"Yes, Ba, for the Chinese New Year."

He nodded knowingly, but a minute later was asking again: "You made these?"

The book on head injuries that she was reading advised that when a person starts going in circles like this, it's best to either redirect or ignore him. But it was impossible to do either with her father. No matter the nonsense spilling from his mouth, it was impossible to treat him as if his brain was injured. When he asked her questions like this, she was a child all over again being ordered to explain herself.

"You made these?"

Where was the emphasis of his question? Was he commenting on her foreignness, as he always did with her mother? Or was he expressing his surprise over the fact that they were homemade dumplings rather than the store-bought variety that usually filled their freezer? Or was he worried that someone else had made them and, perhaps, used bad ingredients or

even poisoned them?

“Yes, Ba, I made them myself, with my own hands, in my own kitchen, and brought them directly to the hospital for you.”

But he still refused to eat them. The association of the dumplings with the lunar new year, with lanterns and noisemakers to scare away evil spirits, with all the elaborate stories he used to spin for his American audiences and the equally elaborate parties and performances their family had given over the years—all these associations were broken for him now, the Daughter realizes. The dumplings were now free-floating in a soupy concoction in which Past, Present, and Future were indistinguishable. They were potentially dangerous dumplings, as likely to be made of human flesh as of pork.

“You made these?”

In the spring of 1939, a lone American arrived in Chongqing. He was a famous cryptologist, Luomin told Wang Kun. He'd broken the Japanese diplomatic codes, then pissed off the Americans by publishing the ciphers. He was coming to Chongqing to teach a new training class called the Chinese Black Chamber. Wang Kun, newly licensed to drive, would be his chauffeur and translator.

Three days a week, Wang Kun drove this large, effusive, red-faced man back and forth between his chateau overlooking the Jialing River in the diplomatic section of the city and the Bureau headquarters just outside the West Gate. “Call me Harry,” he said, winking at Wang Kun. On these drives, Harry winked and talked about truth serums and incendiary pencils, about how the American government didn't appreciate his special talents, about how much he missed his girlfriend and, by the way, could Wang Kun help him to find some pussy? He winked and sweated and swigged from a blue glass bottle that he carried in his briefcase.

“I'm a maverick,” Harry said to Wang Kun. “You know what that is, boy?”

At first, Wang Kun thought Harry was confiding in him, but soon realized that this was the way he talked to everyone. Treating everyone as his personal confidant. Posing questions and then answering them himself.

“A horse that don't belong to no one. Unbranded, that's me. I don't take orders from no one.”

Wang Kun had never met anyone like Harry. He seemed to know no boundaries between private and public. He said whatever he liked whenever he liked without apparent consequence. He didn't seem to be working for anyone but himself. Yet in Chongqing, he was courted by everyone everywhere he went. Most notably by the man with the gold in his mouth, whom Harry jokingly called the “Hatchet Man.” Never to his face, of course, and always in English, winking at Wang Kun.

Wang Kun studied Harry in the rearview mirror. How does he do it? he marveled.

As a child, she watched her father play the Laughing Chinaman to American

audiences. He knew all the jokes about Chinamen, their inscrutable nature and their pidgin English, and always beat them to the punchline—"Why don't the Chinese have phones? Because there are so many Wings and Wongs they're afraid they'll wing the wong number!" Always strategically positioning himself as the butt of the joke. Upon request, he could recite Confucian proverbs to winking white men with red faces downing their drinks at cocktail parties. When all the men in town grew beards in honor of the bicentennial, and all he could manage were three long wispy tails sprouting from his chin that earned him the nickname Fu Manchu, he just laughed and pressed his palms together in a low bow. And when the town held its annual Ethnic Festival, he would don a silk smoking jacket, set up a booth, and wield his calligraphy brush with great flourish, smiling broadly as he offered sage advice to his fellow Americans in bold, black strokes on strips of auspicious red paper.

"Your father's a real character," people would come up and tell her.

He was well known and well liked, one of only three Chinese living in the town (the other two being restaurant owners who spoke little English). He was often asked to appear at public events, like the opening ceremony of the baseball season, his foreignness heightening the pleasure and excitement of the event. The local press where he worked considered him a "human interest story" and regularly ran articles or photographs of him and their family. In one photograph, he stands grinning on second base wearing a silk cap with a long black braid snaking over his shoulder, holding a sign on which one large Chinese character is written: "tou," meaning "to steal."

The Daughter hated these photographs with their ridiculous captions. This laughing buddha in a smoking jacket was not the man she knew as her father. A man with impossibly high expectations of himself and his children. Who worried constantly about money and the future. Who woke up shouting in the night. A man who trusted no one but desperately wanted the respect of others. A charming man who at times had a frightening temper.

She could not hold these dissonant images of her father together. She could not reconcile the Chinaman who had captivated the town with the proud angry man she thought she knew so well. She did not know what to do with her father's anger. How to hide it. Where to keep it. Much less to ask where it came from.

Between his stories and the History Books, the Daughter can place the Father almost exactly on the night the bombs began to fall. It was the third of May and there was a lunar eclipse—this much is indisputable. He was most likely in the office building where he worked, on a hill outside the city, in a place called Peaceful Mountain, where the Bureau had set up their

telecommunications department and where, thanks to Luomin, he had been assigned along with forty others. The Third Department, he called it, and the books confirmed it. Probably the most important department, she read, whose job it was to monitor all communications in and out of Chongqing.

They worked at night when the radio reception was better, so he was probably wide awake when he heard the planes. He must have known they were coming. Maybe he'd just received a warning message.

/ The Japanese have taken off from Hankou / The 8th Route Army is on the move / There are communist spies in the Third Department /

"But I'm just a small potato," he insists, "I never know what I am receiving." Just sounds that his ear learned to detect and his hand to transcribe, before turning it over to someone else to decode.

She imagines this small potato in his outpost on the steamy hillside. A skinny boy in a sleeveless white undershirt (the kind he wore until they were threadbare, the kind he is wearing at this very moment), earphones riding jauntily on his head, a fountain pen clenched in one hand and a sweat rag in the other, methodically transcribing each / dah / and / dit /, watching the smoke rise over the city and waiting to make his move.

But she gets stuck on this detail: What form did the sounds take on the page? Letters or numbers? English alphabet or Chinese characters?

"San-wu-ba," he drops the number casually into their conversation.

Incredibly, on the website of a Harvard mathematician whose hobby is cryptography, she finds and downloads the entire Chinese Telegraph Codebook. Each four-digit code corresponds to a Chinese character. Some of the codes are missing, but there are five that begin with that number.

3580: Iron.

3581: Boil.

3583: Hot.

3588: Break of day.

3589: Flaming.

A fire radical burns in each: 火

When she shows her father the codebook, he just shrugs. "Not my job," he says.

When Wang Kun was introduced to Pocky, his first thought was that he resembled a bitter melon. Smallpox had pitted his cheeks, forehead, and chin with ugly scars and his left eyelid was so ravaged he could no longer close it properly around his eye, which had gone blind. In some places, the scars had joined together to form ridges and troughs that crisscrossed his face, giving his skin a warty texture which when combined with the oblong shape of his head was remarkably like the gourd with the pungent bite that Wang Kun had never learned to eat. Just looking at him made Wang Kun's tongue recoil. He felt certain that Pocky must be equally bitter on the inside.

But Pocky defied Wang Kun's expectations. He greeted him affably with a smile that stretched his scars across his cheekbones like an army of tiny dimples. "My hundred pots of wine," he called them. Wang Kun was speechless.

On his first morning at the radio station, Pocky was the earliest to rise and could be heard singing exuberantly from the outhouse in a rich tenor's voice. He continued to sing as he did his morning exercises, squatting and jumping with amazing agility for such a stout man. "Come on," he shouted to a bleary-eyed Wang Kun, "let's see if you can do this!" And he proceeded to squat flatfooted on one leg with the other stretched straight out in front of him, toes pointed upward, and then with a sprightly hop, switched his legs. He did several of these in rapid succession, then stood beaming, his pots of wine glistening with sweat. "I learned this from a Russian in Shanghai!"

It turned out that Pocky had been a local opera singer in his hometown of Suzhou, where he was famous for his witty performances as the clown. He reprised this role at the station, providing comic relief whenever Wang Kun got too serious by making outlandish faces behind his back. Or bursting into song when their eyes grew heavy during the night shift. He kept awake by drinking strong black tea directly from the spout of a clay teapot. Each time he tilted the teapot toward his face to drink, a tiny clay dragon's head would spring out of its lair in the lid, at which Pocky would reciprocate by popping his one good eye and sticking out his tongue. The effect of this clownish countenance on such a disfigured face was so incongruous that Wang Kun found himself laughing nervously each time Pocky reached for his teapot.

Wang Kun observed that each day after lunch, a small group would gather and follow Pocky into the hills. Always in search of a good view, Wang Kun began tagging along on these afternoon expeditions and soon discovered the attraction. On these outings, Pocky would teach them songs from his beloved kunqu opera.

One day, Pocky hatched a plan. "We have so much time on our hands," he proposed, "let's perform an opera for the department!" He jumped up on a rock ledge and began to sing an aria that Wang Kun recognized immediately. The Song of Everlasting Sorrow. The tragic love story about the Tang emperor who was so enamored of his concubine that he forgot his duties to the kingdom and, facing revolt, was forced to watch as his soldiers put her to death, trampling her under their horses' hooves.

"Her golden hairpin fell to the ground and nobody picked it up," Pocky intoned,

his one good eye fixing Wang Kun with a mournful gaze.

But singing was not one of Wang Kun's talents. "I can play the erhu," he offered. "I'll be part of the orchestra."

"But we need a female lead." Pocky had clearly given thought to this problem. "And your chin is so smooth, and your lips so red!"

"I can't sing!" Wang Kun protested, though he was flattered to be singled out in this way.

"Anyone can sing. Just open your beautiful mouth." It was impossible to refuse Pocky when he said things like this.

In the end, Wang Kun didn't have to sing the part himself. The only woman in the department, a shy beauty who kept to herself, was persuaded by Pocky to sing the female arias from behind a curtain. Wang Kun merely had to wear the costume and strike the appropriate postures. Pocky would play the part of the love-struck emperor. Even Luomin was persuaded to play a minor role, that of the soldier who would lead the revolt. Wang Kun was amazed by Pocky's ability to induce people to do things that seemed out of character.

They built a stage in the clearing behind the radio station and strung a large red cloth between two poles. Pocky made a trip into Chongqing to borrow costumes, make-up, and instruments from a local opera troupe. He worked relentlessly behind the scenes to make sure that everyone learned their respective parts. He fussed over their costumes and fastidiously applied the makeup himself, contorting his own face accordingly as he painted on each of theirs. He taught them how to exaggerate their every movement in order to make their inner conflicts visible to the audience.

"Kunqu is opera with a moral!" he screeched at them from behind his emperor's mask.

He taught Wang Kun how to move across the stage like a woman who knows she's being watched. How to embody the difference between being shy and being coy. How to artfully pluck lychee from a branch that is dripping with blood.

On the night of the performance, Wang Kun glided across the stage in a gold embroidered robe and an elaborate headdress of sequins and pearls with long black plaits of hair draping over his shoulders. He moved with willowy deliberation, head tilting, lips parting, arms lifting, celestial sleeves floating backwards to reveal boyish fingers curving upwards as a haunting high-pitched aria issued from behind the red curtain.

According to the History Books, Dai Li had been watching her father's department closely for some time and in the winter of 1942 uncovered a communist espionage ring. The ringleader was described as a femme fatale who over several years managed to transfer all the department files, including personnel charts, radio frequencies, and codebooks, to CCP headquarters. The seven were arrested, tortured (using the latest American techniques), and buried alive in the infamous Happy Valley Prison.

“I don’t recall any women working in the department,” the Father says.

He does remember a man with a pockmarked face. “Nice guy, too bad about his face. We work all night, so during the day we have free time. We climb mountains and explore villages. We really have fun. Once we even put on a play and I am the female lead! Then one morning I wake up and the pockface is gone. His desk clean, his bunk empty. Some others are gone too. I never knew what happened to them.”

“Did you ask?”

“No, no one dares to speak of them.”

This is the closest his stories have ever lined up with History.

During the weeks immediately following the opera—which even General Dai attended, a tight little smile on his face the whole time—there was a flurry of communications coming at all hours of the night and the staff were asked to put in extra shifts. The runners, who delivered the radio messages from the station back to headquarters to be decoded, came more frequently and would wait in the corner of the room cracking spiced watermelon seeds and spitting out their shells. Their boorish presence only added to the pressure of a job that was becoming both more demanding and more tedious, and Wang Kun tried to ignore them as he concentrated on the sounds that were coming fast and furious through his headset.

After nearly three years at this job, Wang Kun had to invent ways to keep his mind from drifting. He’d given up searching the airwaves for his lost lover. There was no time for that now anyway. So he entertained himself by trying to see how many numbers he could recognize and decode. Recently, handwritten copies of codes had begun to circulate illicitly among the staff, transforming their mundane work into a game of skill. On hikes, they would talk in numbers and test each other’s decoding ability. They gave each other code names. Pocky even began to write an opera in code. Wang Kun was hooked. The codes stuck in his head, transforming monotonous lists of numbers into puzzles of meaning that he would try to work out on the page. Some numbers he recognized by sound and could immediately visualize the associated characters: Hankou. Chongqing. Japanese. Communist. When he met a number he didn’t know, he wrote it down to look up later.

In this way, he came to string together meanings that might better have been left apart.

The Daughter dreams she is digging through stacks of books searching for her father. She finally finds him in a sepia-tinted photograph, slightly out of focus. He is wearing a long wool coat with a fedora and stands dead center in the photo surrounded by a restive crowd. Behind them is a train. Steam spews simultaneously from the hot engine and their cold mouths.

Finally some tangible evidence.

She finds another volume with a fountain pen stuck between the pages about halfway through the book, as if someone had marked the place with the intention of coming right back, but never returned. The binding of the book is now permanently cracked open to that page. There is a passage underlined in blue ink. She can't read the words, but knows that they implicate him, name him.

He has been found out.

There are other passages marked throughout the book. Someone has been stealthily tracking him, noting his every move, his presence at This Time or That Place with These People.

She must hide the book, she thinks, she must protect him.

There is a slip of paper wrapped around the pen in the book and she carefully unrolls it. It's thin, like tissue paper. The same blue ink. The tracker has left herself a note. Dates and names line up perfectly in two incriminating columns labeled "World History" and "Wang Kun's Life."

That's just circumstantial, she wants to scream at the tracker, that doesn't prove anything!

But the tracker is long gone.

Two stalky plants stand side by side under a covered stall: 麻

A child with arms extended stands beside the stall: 子

The presence of the child ensures that the stall and its contents are not mistaken for flax or jute or any of the sturdy fibers that the hemp plant produces and from which the first character sometimes takes its meaning. The child's presence insists on the other meaning, turns the fiber into an adjective that describes a coarse, pitted texture like the plant and applies this texture to the face of the child: 麻子

Mazi.

Pockface.

/ The pockface is a spy /

Wang Kun knew the meaning even before he had written down the numbers. He heard the crack of watermelon seeds behind him and felt the eyes of the runners on the back of his head. Across the room, Pocky reached for his teapot, his seeing eye scanning the room for an audience. Wang Kun looked away.

He remembered a conversation he had had once as Pocky was applying his opera makeup.

"I feel lucky to have lost the face I was born with," Pocky had said solemnly.

"Why?" Wang Kun asked, walking straight into the trap.

"Because," he paused for effect, "I will never lose face again!"

Wang Kun marveled at Pocky's gift for turning tragedy into comedy. Even their opera had turned out to be more of a farce than a serious love story, much to everyone's relief. How could it be otherwise when the emperor was a clown!

But now even the clown was not who he appeared to be.

Who do I appear to be, Wang Kun wondered?

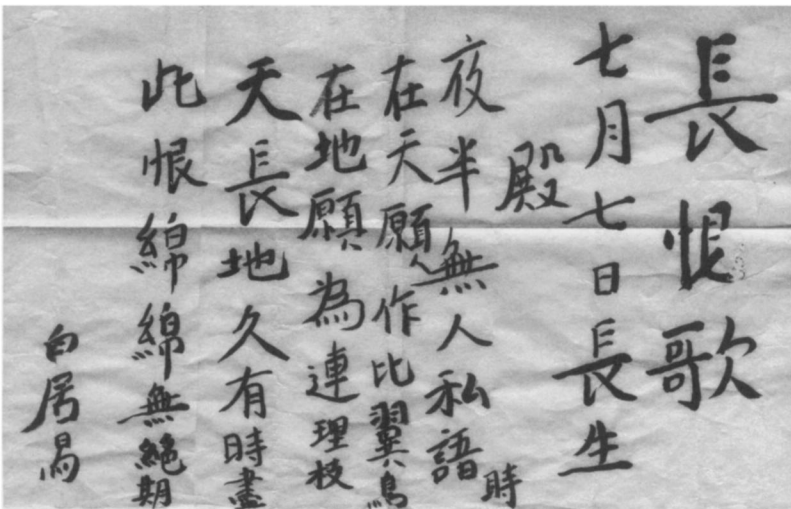
He felt lightheaded. His heart was pounding so hard he could barely make out the sounds that continued to pulse through his headset. He dared not look around the room. He kept his eyes fixed on his hand and watched in horror as the pulse in his ear ran like an electric current down his arm, moving the pen across the paper. A number emerged from the tip of his pen, then another, and another. The numbers swam before his eyes, transforming themselves on the page into pictographs. A covered stall. A child with outstretched arms. Go inside, he willed the child, hide behind the branches! But the child remained stubbornly planted in the open, unashamed to show his face. His pen continued to move, nailing the meaning like a coffin around the child.

/ The pockface is a spy /

His pen did not pause at this but continued to spit out the code names of others, their little opera group, the voice behind the curtain, his hand and heart racing until he came to the end of the transmission and knew with relief that his own name was not among them.

His pen stopped moving. He took off his headset and wiped his brow. The runner was there, half-eaten bits of shells and seeds stuck to his mouth and shoes, ready to deliver the message to headquarters.

After all these years, the Father still remembers the lyrics and writes the last verse of the poem, six lines, seven characters each, in shaky black strokes that roam top to bottom, right to left, over the surface of the rice paper.



He can't control the size of the characters or gauge the distance between them, and they grow and shrink with the changing space on the page. He has to rely on his daughter to reposition his arm each time he comes to the end of a line. She guides his brush back to the top of the page, pausing to dip at the ink stone as needed. After all these years, he still knows exactly how long his brush needs to drink so that he can lay down each character boldly and lift off the page with a flourish.

He puts his brush down and inspects his work. Not bad, he thinks, but not as good as I used to be. Still it is a relief to see the characters fixed there, absorbed into the fibers of the paper. They had been swimming in his head for so long.

He asks the Daughter to recite the poem for him.

Who do I appear to be? she wonders. But she dutifully obeys, struggling with the pronunciation as her mother and the nurses clap approvingly.

Seeing that he has an audience, the Father smiles broadly. "This is a famous Tang poem, an epic," he says, as if this would win them over, "very very famous."

He tells the story of the emperor and his concubine, the hairpin and the horses' hooves. He translates the poem, line by line, clearly at home and in control in his role as interpreter. He does not look or sound like a man who has just suffered a traumatic head injury. He does not falter or grope for words, but moves smoothly and judiciously between the Chinese pictograph and the English idiom, just as he has always done.

"Heaven endures, earth endures, someday both will end, but this everlasting sorrow goes on and on forever." He translates the last two lines, looks up expectantly, and is relieved to see his daughter still sitting there writing furiously in her notebook.