

A Flowered Rag

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Goubuli Alley had a 10:05 curfew after which only one light was permitted, a light belonging to the Neighborhood Watch whose duty was to stay on the lookout for a counter-revolutionary who might stray into the alleyway in a backwater district in a second-tier city in the shadow of the National Capital. But only two residents of the alleyway remained fully awake throughout the curfew, the younger daughter of the Liu family, posted at a loose diagonal from the dumpling house, and a dog snug inside the expansive front pocket of the Neighborhood Watch's uniform.

At first, Li could see only two shiny pupils that seemed cut from the sharp edges of her mother's flowered rag. Then, the younger daughter of the Liu family watched the dog's whiskers form a partial goatee at 2:23 AM. Later in the 4:00 hour, Li felt the dog emerging from the vine-crossed apron: its rump a cheerful ball despite having to cling to a knob-shaped tail. And when the various kitchen lights were permitted on at 5:24 precisely, Li noted a pinkish belly as wrinkled and bloated as an old man's belly. At 5:25 AM, the dog was snoring. Afterwards, Li's mom prepared congee, the thick rice

porridge settling in the lining of her younger daughter's stomach like a warm brick.

Much later though before our kid was born, Li said the vigilance of the dog came from a deep-seated insecurity (my translation): the dog having first belonged to the Lead Cadre's family until the official and family were bussed to a town near the Siberian border; then, afterwards, given over to a Lead Cadre living in a gated community until the bachelor was hauled off to a village bordering a western desert. As such, the dog clung near the throat of the Neighborhood Watch or remained at the start of curfew in a vine-crossed apron of a cadre down enough on the pecking order to be more or less secure from the political troubles.

The origins of Li's loss (Li had been unable to finish a full night's sleep until we rescued the dog) had a less than clear cut source, a rice-papered document titled, "Surpassing Leeds, England, in Elevator Production," a document that noted in a wandering postscript that *the Liu, Zhou, Lin, Xu, Deng families* had roots in the landowning class. And true enough, Li's father's great-grandfather once owned a plot near Hangzhou, but the plot barely sufficed to sprout a cluster of sweet rice, not that the Neighborhood Watch was concerned with the size of a plot, less than a *li* in diameter, or its tragic history—lost by Li's grandfather as an afterthought in an all night mahjong game, a gambling habit that would eventually leave the Lius as broke as any red class family. A committee from the mid south of the country had forwarded a document glossed with the typical seal: "Long Live the Chairman!" certifying that the Liu family was an associate of the "black gangster class" or black classers for short. Mrs. Chiang (she kept her maiden name as was typical) was sent on the first bus out of the District.

Mr. Liu stayed behind with a work unit digging out the outdoor toilets. Li's elder sister had polio and was permitted to stay with her father. Li started packing her duffle, folding a winter and spring coat so that enough room remained for some change of shirts while her mom set about scrubbing the hardwood floor, not an easy task during curfew. Mrs. Chiang though was a resolute housekeeper and after succeeding in scratching away several layers of gray film in the total dark, made some congee, thick rice cereal feeling like a warm brick in her Li's stomach.

Mr. Liu carried his younger daughter's duffle out to Li's 19-year-

old cousin, Xiao Xiao, who strapped the bag onto the top of the bus while being careful to avoid greeting his black class relations. Mrs. Chiang grabbed her daughter by a palm sealed by a birthmark and pushed the younger daughter of the Liu-Chiang family to the back where Li was forced to stand while her mother scrubbed the glass with a flowered rag, and when the younger daughter of the Liu-Chiang family was able to look back, she saw her elder sister trying to dislodge a stone with a metal crutch, then when the bus crossed the post office, her father appearing asleep on his feet. The bus pulled out onto an avenue flooded with bicycles, and Li fell asleep, only later realizing that she had forgotten the dog.

Though Li had come across a few (we'll come to that), Li did not see a chance for her rescue until coming across a somewhat blotchy photo showing a large-boned dog that nevertheless looked like a Holocaust survivor. The photo covered the entire back page of *The Advocate*, a free weekly, and had the headline *dogs gassed in foreign places like Virginia, Puerto Rico, and Texas: 75 dollars, not incl. taxes and fee for the chance to save a transient*.

The ad seemed at first a bad joke. We were not the ideal candidates to undertake such a rescue. Li, I, and the kid resided in cramped government-subsidized housing, which we had just moved to after being three years on a waiting list. Still, Li seemed to be considering adding on a new dependent: her slender fingertips moving on autopilot over the blotched survivor. Then I left her in the midst of a rescue and made the walk down the hill to a library tower where I had a windowless cubicle on the 21st floor and stayed there until the closing bell went off at regular 15-minute intervals—before returning up the hill, the red searchlight from the library tower following until reaching a brief patch of woods in front of the complex. The back seat of our bluish green Nissan was already coated with a blanket and pillow. Our three-year-old was already dressed in her woolen sweater and asleep beside my wife on our futon. I took out the quilt, went to the couch in the living room and listened through the paper-thin walls to a neighborhood scrubbing the floor with what must have been a flowered rag. At 5:24, the end of curfew on Goubuli Alley, the alarm went off. I warmed up the car while my wife made congee, the thick rice cereal a warm brick

in my stomach. We drove down the main street into the Pelham hills, the red searchlight from the library tower following us until disappearing at a post office.

Li Liu didn't wake up from her travel until a couple of hours later when the bus crossed a single span bridge in Shanhaiguan at the eastern rim of the Great Wall. The bus became flooded with the Red Guards, *we were in a sea of red and green, it was too much for a girl only a twelve, a younger daughter on top; so I buried my head in my mom's belly and tried to sleep more. I'd never seen so many strangers but soon I found most were teens a few years older. The boys carefree, the girls like frogs, flipping from seat to seat. I wanted to be also, but who would have a twelve year tag along, so I hung back with my mom. Watched, then the bus stopped, and I followed my mom to one side.*

A whole row of us squatted. The bus driver was on a cigarette break and looked directly at us. It wasn't pleasant, but my mom put down a flowered rag to protect me while I took full advantage of the convenience. We got on. A girl was chattering away with a kid with thick glasses, the scratching sound of her voice making me forget, first my father's thick eyelids, then, the red blemish circling my elder sister's chin, then the dog itself, the two slits staring out from the pocket of a vine-crossed apron.

I was groggy when the bus stopped and my mom pushed me out the bus. It was late afternoon, not that cold, but whatever was cold pushed up against my throat along with the stones from an unpaved road. One of them snapped in my eyes, and when I looked again, the bus was gone. We were up against a post office.

I wasn't sure if it was one really. The roof sunk into the stone and mud, but it had a sign with a scratched out letter meaning post office, so I found a couple of stones to kick up from the road. My mom fell asleep against the slanted walls. The work leader showed up; took my backpack while flashing a toothy grin. Off we went up a rim and across a line of trees. The path was littered with some sticky green seeds, and I slipped a couple of times, trying to keep up but no one bothered to slow up, my mom included. The work leader met up with a friend, the two of them chatting in some local speech where you had to spit a lot. It was pretty hopeless to

figure what they were saying, but I remembered that the friend of the work leader could carry a bucket of rice, without spilling anything. That was amazing.

Once it got dark, the friend dropped off the map, the three of us going on until our work leader pointed to a barn. I didn't go in right away, they didn't give us a candle, but my mom yanked me in, put me against a wall and told me to stay, while she used her palm on a flowered rag before pushing her coat up my neck and pushing my head down. I woke up to face that flowered rag. My mom had already left; later she told me she worked as a maid for a Lead Cadre.

The work leader spoke a little Mandarin, enough to say to tell me to get a bucket from the well nearest the cooperative; then led me up some limestone faces, the first had a face of a turtle, the next the outlines of an elephant trunk, the third a tiger just about swallowed me before I was overlooking a few sticks as well as an offshoot of the Yellow River. The Work Guard said it was a dam. I looked again: one stick fell into the water and disappeared behind the elephant trunk. The rest I caught from a boy in the village; the Red Guard was called off to fight some black classer monks. As soon as the Guard was done with beating the shit out of those dogs, they would finish off the dam. The Work Leader turned: gave me a couple of sesame crackers; that was it, I was alone, watching a group of sticks come apart when I felt in my pocket and found a flowered rag.

My wife also brought a flowered rag on the drive. I didn't notice the dishrag till my wife took out the cloth dotted with rubbed-off stems and wiped the saliva away from the sides of my daughter's lips before Li fell asleep. After crossing an overlook, we got on Rte 2, a major highway with a few billboards, one announcing the beginning of apple picking season, another board advertising the existence of fresh pie. Once, we got past the Leominster Mall, we turned onto a side road, which emptied onto a smaller back road which emptied into a smaller back road until narrowing into a rutted path which our Nissan miraculously managed to transverse until we passed through a barbed wire gate into a cinder lot containing an array of vehicles including a long end row forming an informal trailer park.

The headquarters for *The Animal Rescue Committee* [ARC] was surrounded by a second tier of electrified fencing. The collies, a retriever, an appealing husky, even a poodle were all about as close as possible to that fence without cutting (or possibly frying up) their noses on the barbed wire. The dogs took regular turns yelping in varying pitch at the crowd of animal rescuers, me included. An ARC guy started arranging a line up to the front of the gate. I got near the head, enough to study the details of his ARC muscle shirt and to observe the yellow rubber band holding his glasses in place. My wife and daughter had remained well off to the side but had somehow managed to wiggle ahead to an especially homely cage in the back of the pound. Some German shepherds, a collier, plus a beagle were poking their nostrils out the rusted bars. The beagle was an extraordinarily astute observer and spotted a comfortable looking family (not us). The dog, then, stretched out on its belly, playing dead. Soon, several families were gathered around the beagle, the beagle taking in the action from its back.

But after having spent any number of curfews watching a dog at rest in the pocket of a vine-crossed apron, Li was not taken in by the strictly amateur performance of the beagle and stood with my daughter off to the side of the steel barred cage. An elm tree was leaning into Li's back and was (so it seemed) forcing her and my daughter to their knees. I followed, at first spotting a thin vine tangled up in a cluster of discolored leaves. My daughter (a Chiang also) planted her elbow into my shoulder, and I recognized a pair of narrow slits peeking out followed by a chunky frame flooded with gray sparks; the dog shook off a dislodged stem: went up to my wife's left sneaker and fell. The senior citizen was ours.

The transaction was simple. The ARC guy punched in all the items including a fold-up cage whose titanium bars were able to withstand a well placed earthquake; after, he hoisted up several bags of IAM dog food scientifically tested to ease digestion. Our dog had *advanced* gum disease. The ARC guy placed special emphasis on the adjective, *advanced*. Then, the dog, my wife, and kid got into the front seat. Off we went on a dirt road that our bluish-green Nissan again managed to navigate without enduring a flat. Li and our kid went back to sleep while the dog breathed cautiously against my throat, distrustful of my ability to guide our entourage home.

This wasn't Li's first dog. It wasn't even her second. She had owned a previous companion before renouncing that so as to study in America. Her first—well, she didn't own that. It might be more accurate to say that she belonged to that dog, which, from what she said, might have been a German Shepherd though certainly the cut-off tail might have been taken from a hound. Li had no explanation for how the dog came to rescue her. The rescue might have been the Work Leader's idea. The Work Leader, after a few weeks, evidently had second thoughts about leaving a 12-year-old with only sesame seeds and, whenever possible, made the steep climb ten kilos from the village post office, though the Leader only stayed long enough to drop off some sticky rice wrapped in bamboo leaf. But then again, there was no way of finding how the dog came to rescue Li from her solitary post. The Work Leader spoke a barely functional Mandarin, and her mom wouldn't have taken credit for equipping a younger daughter with a companion that was plainly *unhygienic*, Mrs. Chiang's own description for the dog that had once treaded somewhat in view of the front door of the barn.

Of course, the dog could have just found its way to Li on its own. It certainly did appear to Li that way. Li hadn't heard its paws; instead some scratching, so Li searched out the valley for a flowered rag, possibly her mother's. But there was none in sight: only a series of half rims lined with some flowering cork trees. It occurred then to the twelve-year old that the Work Leader might be correct; the dam had been targeted by a clique of black class gangsters, but before Li could calculate the tactical wisdom of sprinting towards a village ten kilometers away, Li watched a dog struggling up the hillside.

It puts its paw on the monkey's stomach: licked off the elephant's trunk before getting to the limestone just above and looking down directly. There we watched one another. Then I came on my strategy, took out a sticky bun, it wasn't interested, so I changed my strategy, brought out a sesame cracker, scrapped off the sesame. It licked my palm before letting the seeds swarm in the muddy stream. The dog bent down, sniffed at the cracker, watched to see if I would take it back.

I didn't, so the dog nibbled on the cracker before slipping over onto a plump belly. I lay down, giving the dog the chance to skirt

away. It didn't. I planted my head against an acorn nub on its belly and came on Shuanpil, the Chinese for acorn, for its name but settled on Zhima, sesame: figuring it was what was in the foam before slipping into a pool downstream. That became our day over the next year: I shed the sesame into the stream, the dog ate while I lay awake on the dog's belly; then, the dog took over, watching the few sticks slip into a pool like they were a flowered rag.

Then, our work unit was called away. Zhima was next to me, but she must have known and wasn't too friendly, not her usual self, she had a short tail that could do windmills, but that day, for whatever, she took off though it might have been for a squirrel. Zhima wasn't the loyal type. My mom was standing in front of a post office, the tin roof about ready to collapse. She was scrubbing off the back seat with a rag so that when I finally could sit down, I could watch for the Work Leader. She flashed me a toothy smile and waved with one hand, her laundry, looking like a flowered rag, in the other but still nothing of the dog.

When we finally arrived at our government-subsidized low income housing, our new senior citizen didn't look too happy. The dog started barking when it saw the metal trash bin in the front of the mailboxes blocking our window and when the dog spotted a dilapidated swing, the senior citizen let out a toothless howl. I wanted to apologize for taking the dog away from an oven in Virginia, Puerto Rico or Texas but instead, dusted off the same speech I had parceled out to my wife and kid. The important thing wasn't that we were in low cost housing but that our family was together—before adding that sometime in the very distant but practically visible future I would find a secure post while acknowledging (very practically) the present tragic state of the job market for entry-level scholars.

But unlike my wife and daughter, the dog did not pretend to be politely hopeful: planting its gums onto the steering wheel and refusing to budge despite every attempt to reason with it; *your food is on the other side, food that has been scientifically designed by the anal retentive expert at IAMS for senior citizens from inhospitable foreign places such as Virginia, Puerto Rico and Texas*, an argument that I repeated in various incarnations for the

next half-hour next to a rear window that could not be fully shut until the kid returned with a sesame cracker in one hand and the sesames in the other. The dog studied my daughter's palm as well as the faintly traced birthmark on her wrist. The dog didn't take the sesames or the crackers. Instead, it shrugged, slid its nose down the side of the passenger door before wandering into our low cost housing: stopping to inhale the newly painted frame on our mini-porch before collapsing by a wide screen television and snoring easily.

Li's journey had not been that straightforward. She did not see her father and elder sister for another eighteen months or so before visiting a village somewhere further in the west, though not at all near the Yellow River. Then, her mother and she became separated for several months. The Red Guard was in need of an extra hand, and its leader said that Li might be forgiven on a provisional basis for her parents' backgrounds as *black classers*. Mrs. Chiang stuffed a warm coat into her younger daughter's duffel, and within a few minutes, Li was down a path. Her mother turned her back and left with the other black classers before her second daughter could wave back.

The leader was an older teenager but was shorter than Li, coming up to her chest and having the same indrawn eyes that her cousin, Xiao Xiao, had. The Guard explained *the monks were black classers; we were not supposed to kill black classers. We were only to go to the monastery: burn a temple, crack open a statue, stamp one trinket into a path—knock out the teeth of an apprentice monk. Then, our leader demonstrated as any dance instructor would how to kick a black classer in the back without breaking the spine.*

The temples were up a stone case and with the lower one, we did as best we could, turning the arms of one assistant into a jet plane while taking a hammer to an elephant with gold painted teeth. But when we got up, it took about five minutes up a few broken stone steps, we found a temple, but when we were about to light it up with a mix of charcoal and a touch of fuel oil just according to our leader's recipe, an old monk came running out. He had a rounded skull like a German Shepherd with two narrow eyes like the slits of a Neighborhood Watch dog and started pointing at some letters

carved into a tin roof,

LONG LIVE THE CHAIRMAN!

This was a problem, we couldn't depart; we would be weak-kneed black classers and might have our own backbones damaged, but we couldn't damage the letter; that might be damaging the Chair, that would be worse, so we had to wait three days, in the meantime, the lead monk made us some thick rice that was like a warm brick in our stomachs. We slept most of the time. A document came back marked with the official stamp. It said that we couldn't touch the temple. We could damage the monk, and we did a bit, not as hard as our work leader taught us. We liked the monk or his congee, both gave out a warm feeling. Later, climbing down a stone case, we looked back. The monk had a toothless smile and was waving, happy possibly to get off with a little beating. We also cheered up, some of us singing "The East is Red" like a nursery song. Others went off behind some stones for a convenience. We had done our work, and I felt certain we would take over the watch from a dog with an almond on the belly standing on an elephant face over a few sticks. That never happened. Instead, we traveled a few more months, burning down a few more temples, that sort of thing.

It was dark; still our senior citizen hadn't woken up though the dog did have a bad case of indigestion and would burp, causing its hard fur to heave like a body undergoing shock treatment. About 10:05 PM, our senior citizen roused, and Li commenced to boiling water, which I lifted in a conveyer belt style and filled the tub. After the water cooled enough, Li had me drag the dog across the living room, then block the dog's exit while Li tried to push the dog into a somewhat lukewarm body of water, the dog scrambling between my legs while scratching away at the wooden door before my wife finally yanked it by the neck over a ceramic boundary, the senior citizen trying toothlessly to defend its right to remain clothed in the cruel foreign lands of Virginia, Puerto Rico or Texas.

But Li started in with a flowered rag until she had removed several layers of the deeply ingrained dirt plus a few stray pebbles. And when she was done, I lifted up our senior citizen—by now it trusted my grip—and carried the dog into the kitchen, stuffing it

in a titanium-barred cage and slamming and locking the door. It looked at my wife—she glared back—then, towards my daughter’s bedroom where the kid was probably asleep until finally settling on me. As the husband of a black classer, the senior citizen must have realized that I was the suitably pliant candidate and started whining through its gummed mouth, the whining sounding more like a coughing noise. At first though, I was determined not to let a dog control my life, but after an hour or so of the dog demonstrating an amazing variety of whines, Li placed her knee in the manner that she had been taught, in the knob of my vertebrae. I jerked up and went to the kitchen where I lay down next to a cage constructed with a sufficiently durable metal to survive an earthquake; then, listened to our senior citizen breathe very odiferous breath into my eyelids until I felt a flowered rag over my forehead and palms.

After finishing scrubbing off a layer of my skin, no doubt releasing more than a few grains of dirt, my wife brought me and the dog to the bedroom. The kid heard us and jumped in between me and the dog, crawling over the dog’s scraggly neck until she couldn’t get any closer to her mom. Then, the dog put its hind legs over my daughter’s right shoulder leveled with a birthmark—leaving me to face a flowered rag.

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