

Fu Hai and Xiao Jie

Lhang Fu Hai awoke as the train lurched violently on a switch-back turn, then rattled and groaned down the east face of the Tianshan range, the huge Mountains of Heaven in northwest China. Shortly after he was awake, a middle-aged woman moved unsteadily down the crowded aisle of the car. She was carrying a steaming thermos of *kai shui* and knocked on the board he was lying on with her knuckles, asking in Mandarin if he wanted tea. He nodded and she poured him a steaming cup, which he paid a few *fen* for, then she moved on. Fu Hai was traveling "hard sleeper," which, on Chinese trains, meant second class. Only high-ranking political figures, foreign tourists, and wealthy company chiefs could afford "soft sleeper," or first class. He had spent extra money to avoid the uncomfortable "hard seat," or third class, where he would be cramped and have to sleep sitting up. It was worth it. This escape from the Taklamakan Desert had been his goal for almost fourteen years, since he'd been exiled to the boiler room of the No. 3 Silkworm Factory in Khotan for political crimes his father had committed.

His father, Zhang Wei Dong, had been a calligrapher in Beijing and had been turned in by Fu Hai's older brother, Lu Ping, for practicing the "Four Olds," which were forbidden by Chairman Mao. The Four Olds—Old Thoughts, Old Habits, Old Customs, and Old Ideas—were difficult to defend against because they were so general. His father had been taken from their house in Beijing twenty years ago when Zhang Fu Hai had been only seven. He had watched in sorrow as his father had been made to daub his face with black ink and wear the dunce cap of social degradation. He cried as Zhang Wei Dong was led from the house while an angry mob of Communists shouted, "Leniency for those who confess, severity for those who do not!" He had never seen his father again. His older brother, Lu Ping, was rewarded for his act of patriotism with a commission in the Chinese Army and was stationed at a secret nuclear base somewhere in northern China. In one letter to his little sister, Xiao Jie, his brother had bragged that he was helping to develop a nuclear arsenal that would bring great glory to Mother China.

Fu Hai was taken from his mother's house shortly after the letter arrived. It was determined that he was a product of bad parenting by his politically corrupt father—that his mother had fallen into the trap of the "Four Over-dones": Over-indulgence, Over-protection, Over-caring, and Over-interference. It was decided that he was a candidate for "reeducation," so Fu Hai was shipped to Khotan, which was a place as close to hell as he could imagine.

Khotan was in the northwestern section of China, near the Pakistan border. The Turkic-speaking natives called Uighurs hated the Chinese. The dusty desert town sat on the east face of Khafa Gumbaz, the Domes of Wrath Mountains, on the edge of the vast Taklamakan Desert. *Taklamakan* meant "You go in, you don't come out." Fu Hai was never tempted to try.

He had been assigned to work in the black, windowless boiler rooms of the silk factory there. The intense heat was almost unbearable. Fu Hai's job was to make sure the boiling water continued to flow across the huge metal trays on which the silk cocoons

were soaked before being spun. The working conditions were slimy and dank, and Fu Hai spent almost fourteen miserable years sweating in that hell-hole. He soon realized that he could not stay in that place much longer. He had seen older laborers who had been in the boiler rooms for fifteen or more years slowly go blind; a blindness, he learned, caused by being made to stare at the white cocoons in the inky blackness, hour after mind-numbing hour, surrounded by steaming silk, screaming spindles, and unbearable heat. In a sense, the boiler room had become a cocoon of political hatred for Fu Hai . . . hatred for Mother China, which, as an innocent child in Beijing, he had once adored. He decided he would find a way, not only to leave Khotan, but to leave China. He would find a way to "Ride the Snake" to America. "Riding the Snake" was the dangerous practice of illegal immigration out of China. The criminal Tongs in Guangzhou and the newly repatriated Colony of Hong Kong provided this service for anyone willing to pay the price. Fu Hai had heard it was exorbitant, over thirty thousand American dollars. A figure so vast he could barely conceive of it. The only way a penniless worker like Zhang Fu Hai could afford it would be to sell himself into slavery to the Tongs.

He knew this would be frightening and dangerous and that he would have to put his life at risk, but he had already decided that if he stayed in the silk factory, he would soon die from the abysmal conditions.

The food was like nothing that he had ever before encountered: horrible concoctions that he could barely force down. Flatbread and stinking gray mutton with raisins that, it was rumored, the Uighurs blew their noses in to show their contempt for the Chinese workers.

By the age of sixteen, Fu Hai had already begun to save the majority of his meager wages. He lived in a one-room hovel with five other men, and at night he would sneak out of the one-street town of Khotan to the edge of the desert. There he would hide his savings in an old pot that he buried in a Muslim cemetery, under a cracked clay dome whose interior was strewn with

dry bones. Twice a month, he would make deposits in his "bank of freedom."

The captured years moved as slowly as the silkworms crawling from their annual cocoons. The boredom and wretchedness of his life stretched out behind him like a ribbon of snail slime that he could barely believe was his own personal history. When he was twenty-seven, he finally got his chance to escape in the person of a greedy, contemptuously corrupt Assistant Communist Party Secretary named Wang Ming Yang. Strangely enough, in Chinese, that name meant Bright Force. Wang had charged him three thousand *yuan* to sign a Party Relocation Permission slip, allowing Fu Hai to return to Beijing. The money was almost everything that Fu Hai had saved during the entire fourteen years he had been in Khotan. He gladly gave it over and watched in the Party Secretary's one-room apartment as the slip was signed and stamped with the official Chinese red government seal.

He traveled by rattletrap bus from Khotan to Kashgar, then through the dusty oasis town of Aksu, finally arriving after three long days at Urumqi, the provincial capital.

He waited at the train station, with his heart pounding, as the "Iron Rooster" pulled into Urumqi. The train was covered with black dust. The windows were impossible to see through, having been pelted relentlessly by the *Kara Buran*, the "Black Hurricanes," that blow apocalyptically out of the western deserts, starting and cracking the glass with flying rocks and gravel.

Carrying his one knapsack of meager belongings, Fu Hai boarded the "Iron Rooster" and found his bed in hard sleeper on the first tier. After one day on the train, they were winding down the east face of the huge Tianshan range. Then they would head east on the five-day journey toward Beijing.

After waking, his fellow passengers started their morning ritual, coughing and spitting globs of phlegm down on the floor of the car. Then they would jump out of bed, making sure to step on their own glob, much as one would step on a cigarette. It was considered impolite to omit this "step on it" courtesy, despite the

fact that all of the train cars had signs that demanded: NO SPITTING. HELP BUILD SPIRITUAL CIVILIZATION.

There was a festive atmosphere aboard the train. People spoke freely, laughing, even making fun of things political. It was talk that would have gotten you locked up or even shot during the Cultural Revolution. Fu Hai discovered that trains were the only place in China where people could speak freely, because the passengers knew they would never see each other again. The moving, rattling conveyance provided a sense of safety that temporarily allowed them unheard-of freedom of speech. This free-flowing speech was also helped by liquor called *kaoliang*, which was made from sorghum and was as powerful as moonshine and plentiful as beer.

It was almost New Year's, 1998, the Year of the Tiger. Fu Hai was excited to be on his way to America.

The soldier who was sitting across from Fu Hai on the hard sleeper was from the Lop Nor nuclear proving ground in far northwest China. Fu Hai asked him if he'd ever heard of his brother, Zhang Lu Ping, but the soldier had not. The soldier had a medal on his uniform that he showed to everyone he talked to. It had been awarded to him for "Excellence of Political Thought," and Fu Hai decided not to say anything more to him. By noon, the soldier got very, very drunk and vomited in the aisle. Fu Hai and the other passengers screamed and yelled at him until he cleaned it up. The incident made Fu Hai feel stronger. They had made the soldier bend to their collective will. Fu Hai had become one of the group.

Two days later, Zhang Fu Hai was a practiced traveler. He had learned to get off at the stations they encountered and buy sunflower seeds and hot dumplings from the traveling station vendors, whose prices were much cheaper than at the shops in the station kiosk. He would quickly reboard and climb back on the first-level board bed. The train would lurch out of the station and he would ride in silence, spitting sunflower seeds on the floor and smiling as they headed to Beijing.

Three days later, Fu Hai looked out the cracked train windows as they passed the huge chemical smokestacks of Lanzhou.

In Gansu Province, the landscape gradually turned greener and he saw the terraced hillsides and green rice paddies he vaguely remembered from his youth. He had a surge of homesickness for his father and mother and his beloved little sister, to whom he had written once a month for fourteen years, without ever receiving a reply. He wondered if she was alive or if his letters had been stopped by the party officials in Khotan. Or perhaps, if they ever got through, maybe her return letters had been opened, read, and just thrown away. He had been told by Government Communication ten years before that his mother had died of tuberculosis. Fu Hai would never forgive Chairman Mao for what he had done to his family. He remembered his father, forced to leave home wearing a dunce cap in shame and humiliation. He remembered the days after, the anger building in him as he sat in his classroom singing the Mao anthem. The lyrics were repugnant to him: "Mother is dear and Father is dear, but Chairman Mao is dearest of all." It had been the beginning of a political dissatisfaction that had ended with his exile to Khotan.

The train rattled on, a lurching, winding metal snake, taking him back to the city of his birth.

After five days, the train finally pulled into Beijing's bustling "Fire Cart Station." Zhang Fu Hai got off and looked around in awe at the same railroad station he had left fourteen years before. Only the building remained the same. Its twin clocks chimed in watch-towers above the station roof. Red flags were flapping in the late winter breeze from silver poles at the end of the huge new concrete concourse. Outside lay a wonderland of capitalism. There were shiny American and German-made taxis lined up, waiting for rich travelers. Fu Hai couldn't afford one of these, so he hired a three-

wheeled trishaw with a pedal-boy to take him back to his old neighborhood.

Beijing was totally transformed. No more dark colors and drab clothing. The city was alive with activity. It was February 8, 1998, the day before Chinese New Year, which would mark the beginning of the Year of the Ox. The national bird of China had become the construction crane. The steel-armed monstrosities seemed to be perched on top of every other building. There were department stores with plate-glass windows filled with modern appliances, which more and more people could afford: "Snowflake" refrigerators and "Great Wall" color TVs. Record stores advertised Aiwa stereos. A huge McDonald's restaurant was right on the edge of Tiananmen Square. Fu Hai passed the old Forbidden City and Bei Hai Park with its placid, beautifully landscaped lake. They peddled past Coal Hill with its five gold-roofed pavilions.

Beijing seemed money-mad. He could barely believe Wang Fu Jing, the big shopping street with its T-shirt shops and music stores. He gawked at the Chinese shoppers in bright clothing and western blue jeans. He marveled at the fancy bars, restaurants, and karaoke clubs.

All of this had been happening while he'd been in a dank, dark room sweating over steaming silk cocoons. Instead of being thrilled by the changes, he became even more bitter. Because of the "Four Olds," he had lost his chance to be a part of it all. And even worse, he knew he never would be. He was no longer from Beijing. He was now a hated refugee from the Western Provinces. A peasant scorned for his very presence here, forced to constantly show his relocation permission slip.

Fu Hai finally arrived at his father's old house. It was as he remembered: a large gray brick building with an ornate carved wooden door, which had been freshly painted red. After asking for his sister at the second-floor apartment where he was born, he was told by an old woman that Wang Xiao Jie was now living in the abandoned porter's room near the street entrance of the house with her husband, a night soil collector named Wang Ping An. His

sister, the old woman said, had one child, a girl. It was said with contempt, girls being of little value in New China. Fu Hai walked slowly across the tiny courtyard, passing coal bricks drying in the sun. The bricks were made by scraping coal dust out of the stoves, mixing it with water, and pouring it in wood molds to dry. Later, it would be cut into bricks and reused. Everything in China was reused—even old wood matches were saved. A wood splinter could still carry a flame from one fire to another. Eggshells could be sprinkled on potted plants as fertilizer. Old Ping-Pong balls got faces painted on them and with a little cloth became finger puppets to entertain children.

Fu Hai walked across the yard feeling the harsh stares of the families now clustered in the building. He walked down the stairs into the dark porter's room. A cloth hung over the threshold of a ten-foot-square windowless space that was now his beloved little sister's home. When he saw her, he could barely believe it was her. She looked ancient. A twenty-six-year-old crone. Her teeth were rotted, her body stooped, her spirit broken. After they hugged, their eyes filled with tears.

"Why are you living down here?" he finally said. "This is a place for an animal. Our rooms were in the second courtyard."

"After mother died, I had no choice," she told him. "I became pregnant with my second daughter, which was against Party regulations. I was forced to have an abortion and I was badly injured by the operation. I have never been the same."

That evening, he met his ten-year-old niece, who was extremely slender and said nothing, looking at Fu Hai with large black eyes. He also met Xiao Jie's husband, Ping An, the night soil collector. He was uneducated and couldn't read. Even worse, he stank from his work. He had the horrible job of scraping up human excrement from the public latrine catch basins and loading it in containers to be taken to the fields, a position so low that nobody challenged his sister's politics anymore. She had sunk below the radar.

Later, the Block Warden came into their room unannounced.

She was sixty years old, wearing a civilian uniform, and said she had heard from the neighbors that the Wongs had a visitor.

"I need to see your permit to be in Beijing," she demanded.

Fu Hai got the stamped permit out of his bag. He had already showed it many times as he crossed four provinces of China. He had never had a problem with the permit, so he was shocked when the woman first seemed puzzled by the document, then angered.

"Where did you get this?" she asked, harshly.

"It was issued by the Assistant Party Secretary in Khotan," Fu Hai said, his breath now in spurts, fear creeping up and grabbing his throat.

"This is a forgery," the Block Warden said, glowering at Fu Hai. "Did you buy this with money? Did you use Guan-Xi?" The remark was ludicrous. One look at Fu Hai said he had no influence. He had paid for it with fourteen years of drudgery. He was almost penniless.

"It is not a forgery!" he said. "It is a valid relocation document."

"It is not," the Block Warden said, and she turned to leave, carrying the permit with her.

"I need that permit!" Zhang Fu Hai cried out.

The old woman spun back on him. "We have peasants coming from inland China or the Western Provinces trying to take our jobs, jobs that belong to the citizens of Beijing. You flood our markets. You work for peasant wages that we can't live on. You steal. We don't want you here."

"I'm from Beijing. I was born here. This is my sister."

"A night soil collector's wife is not going to save you from this crime of deception," the Block Warden said angrily, then left.

"You must go," Xiao Jie said softly to her brother. They both knew the woman would be back quickly with the police to arrest Fu Hai. Without his permission slip, he would be sent to jail. Wang Xiao Jie hugged her big brother.

He could feel the bones in her back. "I'm going to Ride the Snake," he told her. "If I get to America, I will work very hard

and I will pay to bring you there. In America, everybody has money, and everybody lives like a Party Secretary.”

“But the travel fee is very expensive. We have no money to help you.”

“I will sell myself. If I have to I will commit crimes for the Triads. I will do anything to get to America,” he said hotly, channeling his anger toward this goal. “I will bring you there to be with me,” he promised her again.

She cried and held his face between her hands. The fourteen years had completely reshaped both of them. They could barely recognize one another.

Despite the changes, with all of the new department stores and colored T-shirts, Beijing was still not a friendly town for a silk worker from the Western Provinces. It opened its arms only to the politically elite, or to people who could make money by their Guan-Xi with the politically elite.

He left his sister and walked quickly out of the courtyard of the old building. He moved up the narrow, teeming streets, soon losing himself in the crowd. Without his permit, he knew he wouldn’t last long. He had to find a “Snakehead,” who could organize illegal immigration to America. The Snakehead would tell him how to pay for a ticket.

With the loss of his relocation permit, he had become part of China’s huge floating population, a population of disenfranchised people that numbered in the millions.

He remembered studying a philosopher in school, long ago. “Turning toward the light,” the philosopher had written, “is initially confusing, painful, and even blinding. But if not now . . . when?”

Zhang Fu Hai had turned toward the light, and, as promised, he was blinded by it. His heart pounded with fear and uncertainty, but he had to keep going. He was going to Ride the Snake. He would save his little sister. He would somehow make it to America.

If not now . . . when?