

TWENTY-EIGHT

Sunset on Barren Mountain

I.

To the north of Dunhuang are Yiwu, Jiji Mesa, Akesai; to the east Yumen, Jiuquan, Jiayuguan; to the south, after crossing the Shule River, are the perennially snow-capped Qilian Mountains; and to the west there are Loulan, Luntai, and Bailongdui, while farther west there's Luobibo. The seven- to eight-day journey by camelback from any of these areas to an adjacent one goes through a desolate landscape, over endless flowing gravel and sand without a trace of a human being.

The world-famous treasure house, Mogao Caves, commonly known as the Thousand Buddha Caves, is located in a tiny oasis occupying less than half a square mile within that expansive desert. There were no work units in the area except for the Dunhuang Cultural Relics Research Institute, and no inhabitants except for the Institute's families. During the Cultural Revolution, the forty-nine people of the Institute were put in and out of detention in the Cowshed, and at the Revolution's peak more than twenty were confined. Those who remained outside split into two clashing factions. Later, they told us, the two factions reconciled and the Institute planned to establish a "May 7 Cadre School." ¹ In the winter of

1968 they sent seven of us from the Cowshed into the mountains to clear land for cultivation.

Having a burdensome work quota while facing the severe northern cold of these desolate, deep, and uninhabited mountains would of course be harsh, but we who had been assigned were inwardly delighted. The struggle sessions, exhortations, confession rituals, supervised labor, and late-night study sessions, where we tore at and ripped into each other, had left us exhausted, but once in the mountains we had the hope that these conditions would change, or at least that for a time we could free ourselves from anxiety and settle our overly strained nerves. Those left in the Cowshed already looked at us with envy.

There were seven in our group. One was an illiterate, forthright gardener named Wu Xingshan, who, since he was a Daoist priest at the Thousand Buddha Caves before Liberation, was naturally considered one of the “monsters and demons.” Another was Zhou Dexiong, who was illiterate but intelligent, capable, and had first-class cooking skills, but because he had once opened a restaurant, had “flirted” with capitalism. The other five were professionals within the research section. Mr. Huo Xiliang specialized in cave and temple research and was the archaeology section leader. Mr. Shi Weixiang was an expert in the regional history of Gua Zhou and Sha Zhou and a knowledgeable authority on Central Asian civilization. His excellent calligraphy in the classical Jingti style had the flavor of that of the Wei and Jin dynasties. Mr. Duan Wenjie was my direct superior at the Institute. Before he was “exposed,” he was deputy director of the research department and group leader of the fine arts department, and afterward became leader of the “exposed” group. After the Cultural Revolution, he replaced Chang Shuhong as the Institute’s director. These three had followed Mr. Chang to Dunhuang before the Liberation and never left. Because they were erudite Dunhuang scholars, they were all well equipped to be my teachers. Mr. Li Zhenbo, originally an instructor at Central Conservatory of the Arts, had been at the Institute for over ten years. That year I was thirty-one. I had just

come in '62, and was the youngest and the least qualified of this group.

At the Institute, we seldom had anything to do with one another and, except for the weekly political study sessions, rarely met. Even after we were “exposed” and were under the “dictatorship of the proletariat” by day and huddled in one bed by night, we didn’t share our thoughts. On the contrary, due to the continual close contact, we were afraid that someone might grab onto something and use it against us, so we shut ourselves off, and each one of us, always fearful and scrupulously attentive, couldn’t find rest even in sleep. I was the same: frightened I’d say something in my dreams that would betray me.

Ten or more people slept on one long platform bed; Chang Shuhong was on my left and Shi Weixiang on my right. As soon as Shi Weixiang lay down, he started to snore. I was envious but later found out that it was an act to show he felt at ease and harbored no contrariness. And he did give that impression. I wanted to follow his example but found it difficult. First, it was exhausting; second, I couldn’t imitate my own snoring because I never heard it; third, I couldn’t stop unless I pretended to wake up again; and fourth, I had to assume that someone in the dark was paying attention, otherwise the effort would have been for nothing. I tried a few times but it was extremely taxing, extremely uncomfortable, and I gave it up. One midnight, Shi Weixiang, Sun Rujian, and I were ordered to unload coal. When we returned, we heard Duan Wenjie cry out in his sleep, “Chairman Mao! Long Life!” We thought it was curious, but not until the next day during labor, when Old Duan tried all sorts of tricks to get a reaction from us, did we realize it was a ruse. We knew pretending to talk while asleep was harder than pretending to snore, but we wouldn’t play along, and without consulting each other, we all told him we heard nothing.

Everyone was happy now that we were about to enter the mountains, but happiness depended on the fact that they were sending one of the “revolutionary masses” to escort, oversee, and manage us. Otherwise it would have gone badly, because we would have been forced to spy on and judge one another, to supervise, guard, and tear at one another, and the torment

we inflicted on ourselves would have been far crueler than at the Institute.

Our team leader, Fan Hua, was about fifty. A poor peasant from birth, he had done odd jobs at the Institute for more than thirty years. He was honest his entire life, worked with unwavering diligence and cordiality, and never said more than a few words. Following Liberation the political movements were unrelenting, but he, a destitute working-class peasant who never harmed anyone, attracted no attention. During the famine five years earlier, he had come upon an ugly starving cur abandoned by a shepherd; he fed it a few times but never thought the dog would follow him. People were starving and he fed a dog. Everyone advised him to slaughter it to supplement his diet, but he couldn't; he just kept complaining as he fed the dog. It was a big joke.

Assigning Fan Hua to be team leader was purely serendipitous: since it was a strenuous job that no one else was willing to take, it fell to him. It was fortunate for us, because only he wouldn't tyrannize us, only he would be able to work with us on an equal basis, and only he would *dare* work with us on an equal basis. When he told us to prepare to depart, we enthusiastically, happily obliged and quickly gathered up the tools needed to clear the land. However, there were no personal belongings: our homes had been "sealed off" and all each of us had was chopsticks, a bowl, and a bedroll.

The next morning we set out.

2.

A stream surges from the earth and flows through the Thousand Buddha Caves area, forming a small desert oasis, before it disappears underground again. The source of this water is in the southern mountains. These smaller mountains, which are the foothills of the Qilian Range, billow up and down into the Gobi Desert until they disappear into the infinite dry ocean of sand. Our task was to climb to the water source, clear the land, and lay the foundations for the Institute's May 7 Cadre School.

Wang Jiesan drove the eight of us in a Liberation model truck to the mountain pass, where we unloaded hoes, spades, saws, provisions, cooking utensils, and eight bedrolls. After we packed everything onto a handcart, we entered the mountains. I pulled the cart while the others pushed; in this way we forged ahead, stepping over gray-yellow gravel, following the gray-yellow ravine. The big sky and vast earth made us feel insignificant. Because of the gentle grade I didn't notice we were climbing, until I incidentally turned my head and saw how high we were. No one spoke; only the gravel pressed beneath our feet made a sound—*xi suo, xi suo*—while the wheels emitted tenuous, rhythmic noises, as if saying *ee-nuff, ee-nuff*.

That evening we spread our bedrolls at Bitter Mouth Spring, and by the afternoon of the second day we entered a comparatively broad ravine. Beneath the cliffs, variegated with grayish yellow, rust brown, light coffee colors, and deep reds, reedy, soil-covered knolls appeared. As we walked, the terrain became open, the cliffs and rock outcroppings fewer and the rolling hills more. At dusk we arrived at our destination, Big Spring.

Big Spring was a flat, broad riverbed deep in the desolate, chaotic range of mountains. Clumps of red willow grew along the riverbank; their branches intertwined into a vast flat sheet that meandered along slopes swarming with an endless fluff of golden rushes. From a distance in the summer, the willows looked like a blue ocean of trees beneath the brush of the Russian painter Shishkin. In autumn, blossoming flowers turned everything pink. But then it was winter; the flowers and leaves had withered and fallen, and beneath the reflecting evening sun, the slender, pliant, and densely packed red-willow stems turned a silver-gray blended with gold and red, light, soft as a cloud of smoke. Seen from afar, the willows mingled with each other, then merged with the hills and ridges into a purple haze. Suspended above, the distant unbroken silhouette of snow-blanketed mountains sparkled amber within the dusk.

Water gushed from the ground at different places along the riverbed, forming various-sized bogs and lakes that flashed sunlight among the red-willow shrubs. Because of the warm soil temperature, the water never

froze and remained limpid, clear, the year round. On the submerged egg-shaped rocks, slippery green moss grew thick as swans down, while flocks of waterfowl sported on the surface, sometimes startling and flying away making *ga, ga* calls.

A half-dilapidated clay brick adobe, without planks for door or floor, sat on the side of a rock-covered hill near a pond. Inside it was empty except for a long sleeping platform on the left and a broken-down cooking stove in the right corner. It had been a station house for camel drivers, but because a new highway had been built, it had been abandoned and had lain forgotten for many years.

We stopped the cart at the foot of the hill, transported our supplies item by item into the hut on the slope, and spent the night. The next day we fixed the cooking stove, set up the chopping board, cleaned ashes from the cavity beneath the sleeping platform, repaired holes in the walls and roof, and then split up to collect either firewood or camel dung. Wu Xingshan simply sealed the frameless window with clay, while Fan Hua draped burlap over the doorway. An opening was left in the roof for light and air and to vent smoke. The hemp string that suspended an oil lamp from the ceiling was rotted, so Zhou Dexiong ripped threads from a burlap bag and twisted a new cord. A brightly polished ink bottle served as a kerosene lamp, and by nighttime the room felt surprisingly cozy and orderly. We blew out the lamp, started a fire in the brazier, and without a word gathered round and warmed ourselves awhile. And then, as if it were entirely natural, we climbed onto the bed without “confessing to Chairman Mao” and fell asleep.

On the third day we started reclaiming the surrounding virgin land, which, due to several previous eruptions of floods, was alluvial: flat, loose-soiled, and not difficult to work. We only needed to excavate the willow shrubs, make furrows following the terrain, level the soil, and dig an irrigation ditch to draw in the bog water, and the land would then be ready for next spring’s plowing and seeding. According to Fan Hua’s “handed-down” message, this would be the Institute’s first achievement in carrying out Chairman Mao’s May 7 Directive.

With Fan Hua as team leader, Duan Wenjie wasn't in charge, so the whole system of daily political rituals, so stringently carried out at the Institute, wasn't mentioned at all. We worked hard by day, but during the dark, secluding nights, we warmed ourselves for a while by the brazier, climbed onto the platform bed, made snug by the burning camel manure beneath, and slept. When it was still too early and I couldn't sleep, I lay there, weighing things over in my mind or smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. Duan Wenjie didn't talk in his sleep. Shi Weixiang didn't pretend to snore. I felt that the almost audible silence meant we were truly liberated. And I thought about the fact that there were no study sessions in which we self-scrutinized and denounced each other; that no one could wake us at midnight to unload coal; that we didn't have to line up before daybreak, bow to an image of Chairman Mao, and self-confess; and that here there wasn't even an image of Chairman Mao. I was completely happy, especially when the wind's keening sounds above the hut reminded us of the freezing, gloomy night and we curled into our warm, dry quilts and couldn't help but thank our fate.

The only problem was a paucity of food. At the Institute we had fixed rations but could always supplement our diet with wild vegetables. However, the mountains had no wild vegetables and we couldn't even think of meat. Therefore the turnips we brought along became precious. We chopped small pieces into thin slivers and sprinkled them on top of soup to give it a little taste. A fixed ration of twenty-eight jin was hard to bear, but for people like us (I don't know what Fan Hua thought), if we didn't suffer one thing we suffered another, and who could be happy without a cost? We exchanged humiliation for hunger and felt it was worth it.

3.

At the Institute we worked every Sunday, but here we rested and washed or patched our clothes, blankets, shoes, and socks, or closed our eyes, folded our arms, and leaned against the south wall of the hut to take in