

北島：幸福街13號

13 Happiness Street

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I

A LATE autumn morning. The street was bleak and desolate. A gust of wind rustled the withered yellow leaves on the pavement. The dreary, monotonous cry of an old woman selling ices could be heard in the distance. Fang Cheng pulled his old black woollen coat tightly around himself and kicked a stone on the ground. It wedged itself in the iron grate in the gutter with a clunk. The call from his sister just now had been really too fantastic: young Jun had been flying his kite in this street yesterday afternoon, yes, this same bloody street, when all of a sudden, he had disappeared without a trace; in broad daylight! His sister's sobs, followed by the beep signalling the line was disconnected, had upset him so much that his head was still ringing. Sun, the section head, was sitting opposite him at the time, and had given him an inquisitive glance, so he had put down the receiver and done his utmost to look normal.

Across the road, a row of locust-trees had been sawn down to the roots, the trunks lying across the pavement. A yellow Japanese forklift was parked by the side of the road. Four or five men were busy attaching hooks to the sawn-off trees and loading them onto a large truck to the tooting of a whistle.

Fang Cheng approached the old woman selling ices. "Such fine locust-trees, how come"

"Ices, three cents and five cents." The shrivelled mouth snapped shut.

"Comrade"



The old woman's strident voice robbed him of the courage to repeat his question. He crossed the road to the truck. A young fellow who looked like the driver was leaning against the front mudguard smoking.

"Excuse me, what's going on here?"

"Don't you have eyes in your head?"

"I mean, what are you sawing the trees down for?"

"Who do you think you are, going round poking your nose into everything? Are you building a house, and you want us to leave you a log for the roof beam? I'll tell you straight, I can't even get one for myself." Flicking away his cigarette butt, the driver turned round and climbed into the driver's cab, slamming the door behind him.

Fang Cheng bit his lip. A middle-aged woman carrying a string bag was walking past. He caught up with her. "Excuse me, where did you get those turnips?"

"At the greengrocer's over the way."

"Oh." He smiled politely and walked with her for a few steps. "How come these trees have been cut down? Such a shame."

"Who knows? I heard that yesterday a kite got caught in the trees, and some young rascal climbed up to get it" She suddenly fell silent and hurried off nervously.

A long shadow slipped across the ground.

Fang Cheng swung around. A man wearing a leather jacket pulled a green army cap over his eyes, gave him a swift glance and walked past.

It was only then that Fang Cheng noticed the high outside wall exposed behind the stumps of the felled locust-trees. The plaster was so old that it had peeled off in places, showing the large solid bricks underneath. He took a deep breath, inhaling petrol fumes mixed with the sweet scent of locust-wood, and walked back along the wall. Before long he came upon a recess in the wall enclosing a gateway guarded by two stone lions. The red paint on the door had faded and was covered with a layer of dust, as if it hadn't been opened for a long time. On it was a very ordinary plaque with the words "13 Happiness Street", and beneath it a cream-coloured buzzer. Fang Cheng went to press it, but it wouldn't budge. On closer inspection he realized it was moulded from a single piece of plastic and was purely decorative. He stood there bewildered.

As he drew back a few paces, trying to get a clearer view of the whole gate, he bumped into an old man who happened to be passing by.

"Sorry. Excuse me, who lives here?"

He stopped short. The terror that welled up from the depths of the old man's eyes made Fang Cheng's legs go weak. The old man stumbled away, his walking stick beating an urgent and irregular rhythm as he disappeared into the distance.

A young boy walked by, absorbed in whittling a branch from one of the locust-trees with a pen-knife.

"Hey, where's the neighbourhood committee office, young man?"

"Turn at the lane over there," the boy sniffled, pointing with the branch.

The narrow lane twisted its way through the shoddy makeshift houses. From time to time Fang Cheng had to walk sideways in order to prevent the boards and exposed nails from catching and tearing his overcoat. At the entrance to what looked like a rather spacious courtyard at the far end of the lane two sign boards were hanging side by side: Neighbourhood Committee and Red Medical Station. Both were covered with the muddy fingerprints of children.

He pushed open the door of the room on the north side of the courtyard and stuck his head inside.

"Did you bring the certificate?" asked a girl busy knitting a jumper.

"What certificate?"

"The death certificate!" she said impatiently.

Everything in the room was white: the sheet, the folding screen, the table, the chairs, and also the girl's lab-coat and pallid face. Fang Cheng shivered. "No, no, I've"

"Listen, if we don't sign it nobody's going to let you hold the funeral service!"

"I'm looking for someone."

"Looking for someone?" She looked up in surprise, lifting her hair back with one of her knitting needles. "Don't you know what's proper?"

"But this is"

"The Red Medical Station."

Retreating into the yard, Fang Cheng noticed a dense crowd of people in the room to the south. He walked over and knocked on the door.

"Come in," a voice said.

Inside about a dozen people were seated around a long wooden table, all staring at him in silence. The light inside the room was so dim that he couldn't make out their faces, but judging from their heavy bronchial wheezing, most of them were old women.

"Has it been signed?" The question came from a woman at the far end of the table. From her voice she seemed pretty young; she'd be the chairwoman or something.

"No, I"

"Then they're still alive and breathing," she broke in sharply.

A howl of laughter. One fat old woman laughed so much she started gagging, and someone thumped her on the back.

"I'm a reporter," Fang Cheng explained hastily.

Instantly the room fell deathly silent. They gazed stupidly at each other, as if they were not too sure what he meant.

The chairwoman was the first to break the silence. "Your papers."

Fang Cheng had barely taken out his press card when it was snatched away by the person nearest the door. The card in its red plastic cover was handed round the table for everyone to look at and comment on. As it passed from hand to hand, some of them shook their heads while others spat on their fingers and rubbed it. Finally it reached the chairwoman. Gripping the card, she studied it carefully, then got the old man in glasses beside her to read it aloud. At last she gave a nod.

"Hm. Have you come to take photos?"

A buzz of excited confusion filled the room. Dull eyes flashed, people nudged and tugged at each other, and one old woman who had fallen asleep propped against the table actually woke up. It was as if something that they had been waiting a lifetime for was finally about to happen.

"You can take our picture now, we're in the middle of our political study," the chairwoman said haughtily. "Sit up everyone, and don't look into the camera!"

They all sat up straight, and there was a loud rustle as they picked up the newspapers on the table.

"Hold on, I haven't brought my camera I'm here on another matter. I'm trying to find out who lives at Number 13 Happiness Street."

"How come you never breathed a word of this

earlier?" said the chairwoman, obviously quite put out.

"You didn't give me a chance"

"All right then, what do you want to know?"

"It's about Number 13 Happiness Street"

"Someone alive and kicking? That's none of our business. On your way then, and next time don't start gabbling away at us again, these old bones can't take all the excitement."

"Whose business is it?"

"Quite! Let's get on with our meeting. Now, where were we? Oh yes, this case involving Dumb Chen from over in the Fourth Xiangyang Courtyard. He'll live on in our hearts forever and all that, but people have started asking why he's still being issued with a face mask every winter"

"Maybe his corpse is still breathing."

"We'll issue you with a cauldron to lie in when it's your turn to go to heaven, so you won't have to straighten that hunched back of yours" A strange rasping sound came from the corner.

They started to quarrel, their voices getting louder and louder. Fang Cheng took advantage of the confusion to slip out. When he reached the gate he breathed a long sigh of relief, feeling that he had actually almost died himself.

He took a wrong turn. The buildings inside another compound were being pulled down, and clouds of dust filled the air. A crowd of children pressed around the entrance, peering inside. In the yard the workmen were chanting as they swung a wooden pole against the gable of the house to the east. A structure like a well was under construction in the middle of a stretch of rubble.

"What is this place?" Fang Cheng asked the children.

"The local housing authority," a young girl replied timidly.

Stepping over a pile of lime, Fang Cheng ran into a young fellow carrying a bucket of cement. "I'm a reporter, where is your foreman?"

"Hey, Wang"

A head popped out from a scaffold. "What is it?"

"The newspapers again."

Wang leapt down nimbly and put down his trowel, wiping his forehead and muscular neck with his sleeve. "Well, you lot are on the ball all right, it's our first go at this particular innovation"

"Innovation?"

"Sounds as if you're here about cadres doing manual labour again. Your paper's carried that news a good half dozen times already, and the only thing they ever change is my name. If you fellas keep it up it won't be long before I'll have trouble figuring out what I'm called. Take a look at this job. What d'you reckon?"

"What exactly is it?"

"A house, of course. The latest style."

"Actually, it looks like a" he bit the word "tomb".

"A blockhouse, right? But it doesn't have peep holes in the sides."

"What about windows?"

"They'll all be on the roof." Wang rubbed his hands in glee, flicking off small pellets of mud. "Ideal in case of war, keeps out robbers, protects you against both wind and the cold, it's got lots of advantages. It's something we learned from our ancestors."

Our cave-dwelling ancestors, Fang Cheng smiled wryly.

"The thing is that houses like these are cheap, you can build 'em by the dozen with pre-mixed concrete. They're easier to make than chicken coops, and they're more solid than a blockhouse. If this catches on, you and me'll both be famous. For starters I'll get a new house, and sit in an armchair at the bureau office. But don't put any of that in your story. Here, take a look at the blueprints. We're in the middle of a demolition job, so the air's not too clean. Hey, Li, are you taking that shovel's pulse or what? Look lively now and bring a stool over here"

Fang Cheng felt a bit dizzy. "It's all right, I'll look these over back at the office. By the way, do you happen to know who lives at Number 13 Happiness Street?"

"Dunno, that's not our business."

"Whose is it then? Whose business is it to know?"

"Don't blow your top, let me think about it for a second . . . you could try asking around at the bureau, they've got a big map there, it shows everything down to the last detail."

"Good, I'll try them."

"Do us a favour while you're at it, take this blueprint with you and give it to the director. We'll get a pedicab to take you."

"No need, but thanks all the same."

"This time be sure you don't get my name wrong," Wang shouted after him.

Fang Cheng staggered out and stood in the middle of the road, staring at the sky.

II

THE SECRETARY darted out from behind the door, her heels clicking. "Director Ding will be very happy to see you, Comrade Reporter. The other seventeen directors would also like to talk to you, at your convenience of course. Director Ma would like to give you his view on the question of the revolutionary succession; Director Tian wants to give you a run down on his war record; Director Wang would like to discuss the simplification of Chinese characters"

"Which one of them is the real director of the bureau?"

"Here we make no distinction between the director and assistant directors, we simply list them all in alphabetical order."

"I'm sorry, but I'm a bit pressed for time. I'm here on another matter. Anyway, how do all the directors know I'm here?"

"They were at a board meeting together just now."

"Am I breaking it up?"

"Don't give it another thought. They've been at it for nine days already. They're only too glad to take a break."

The director's office was thick with smoke. A pudgy old man with a healthy-looking complexion standing beside the conference table extended his hand to Fang Cheng with a broad smile. "Welcome, have a seat. Look at all this smoke, it's a form of collective murder"

"What?"

He waved his arms around in the air in an attempt to disperse the clouds of smoke. "The fact that I'm an optimist has been my salvation, let me tell you. Have you heard of a medicine called 'Anliben'?"

"No."

"It's a miracle drug used overseas for people with heart trouble. Does your paper ever send you abroad?"

"The chances are pretty slim."

"Then could you ask someone to help me get some?"

"I'll see what I can do. Do you have heart trouble?"

The director immediately looked glum. "I'm an old man, getting past it. Who knows, maybe the next time you come it'll be Director Wang sitting in this seat" He cleared his throat. "But let's get back to the matter in hand. Major political campaigns bring about major changes, and major changes promote further political campaigns. In the current quarter we've completed 158% of our work plan; compared with the same period last year"

"Excuse me, Director Ding, I haven't come here on a story."

"Oh?"

"I want to make some enquiries about a house. Who lives at Number 13 Happiness Street?"

Beads of sweat appeared on Ding's shiny red face. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his face. "You're not trying to trick me with some difficult question, are you? A big city like this, how could I know every house on every street by heart, like a production chart?"

"I heard that you've got a big map here"

"Yes, yes, I almost forgot." Groping for a small bottle in his pocket, he poured out a few pills and popped them into his mouth. "What do you think of the chicken-blood cure?"

"I haven't tried it."

He pressed a button on his desk and the red curtains on the wall parted slowly. He picked up a pointer, whipped the air with it energetically, and went up to the map. "How about the arm-swinging cure?"

"I'm sure it helps."

"Yes, it's very effective. Happiness Street Number 30 . . . ah, a coal depot."

"I'm after Number 13."

"13 . . . 13 . . . come and see for yourself, my friend."

It was a blank space.

"How come it's not marked?" Fang Cheng asked in surprise.

Director Ding patted him on the shoulder. "Look carefully, there are quite a lot of blank spots on this map. No one knows what these places are."

"No one knows?"

"Nothing to be surprised about. It's just like all the blank spots in our knowledge of medicine."

"Not even the Public Security Bureau people?"

"Why don't you go and see for yourself, we open out onto their back door; it's very handy. What do you think of gadgets like pacemakers, are they reliable?"

"Pacemakers? I don't know much about them." Fang Cheng felt around in his pockets and fished out the blueprint. "This morning I went to the local housing authority and Wang, the foreman, asked me to give this to you. It's the innovation they've been working on."

"That fellow's too active for his own good. He's like a bloody magician, always coming up with some new gimmick. There's still a lot of major business here we haven't had time to get round to yet." Ding frowned, rolled up the blueprint and threw it into a wastepaper basket in the corner. "It's thanks to people like him that there's never a moment's peace and quiet anywhere."

The secretary appeared at the door.

"A message for all directors. The meeting is about to resume."

Fang Cheng showed his press card to the guard standing at the opening in the iron fence which surrounded the Public Security Bureau. "I want to see the director of the bureau."

"Interrogation Room I."

"Uh?"

"Up the stairs, first door on the right."

"I'm a reporter."

The guard looked at him blankly, not bothering to reply.

Fang Cheng went up the stairs, and with the help of the faint light in the corridor found a door with a brass plaque nailed to it: Interrogation Room I. He knocked. No one answered so he pushed the door open and went in. It was sumptuously furnished, with a red carpet on the floor and some leather chairs set around a tea table. It was not in the least like an interrogation room. He heaved a sigh of relief and sat down.

Suddenly three or four policemen came in through a small side door escorting a man in a grey Mao suit. The man was of medium height, and his swarthy face was like an iron mask, cold and stern. A policeman wearing spectacles moved to his side and whispered something in his ear. He nodded.

"This is Director Liu," Spectacles said by way of introduction.

"Please be seated." The director's voice was deep and harsh. He and Spectacles moved to the chairs opposite and sat down. The other policemen stood at either side of them.

"Director Liu, there's something I would like to ask you," said Fang Cheng.

"Just a moment, first I've got a question for you." After a moment's pause, Liu proceeded. "If I gave you five matches to make a square, how would you do it?"

Fang Cheng stared at him in astonishment.

"Now, don't be nervous."

"I'm not nervous." He thought hard, but his mind was a complete blank.

Suddenly, Liu gave a harsh laugh, and turned smugly towards Spectacles. "This is typical of ideological criminals, they always try and find a way to use the extra match. Ordinary criminals are another case altogether . . ."

"You have a thorough grasp of the psychology of the criminal mind," offered Spectacles obsequiously.

"This is an outrage!" Fang Cheng protested.

"Don't get excited, young man, and don't interrupt me when I'm talking." Liu turned to Spectacles again. "The important thing to note here is that by using psychological tactics you can force the criminal's thinking into a very small space, or shall we say a surface, where he can't possibly conceal himself, and then he's easily overwhelmed. Do you see what I am saying?"

Spectacles nodded. "But . . . but how can you tell he's a criminal? From the look in his eyes?"

"No, no, that's all out-of-date. Ideological criminals can easily disguise their expressions. Listen, everyone you confront is a criminal, and don't you ever forget it."

"Everyone?"

"Yes. That's what class struggle is all about."

"But . . . then . . . that's . . ." Spectacles spluttered.

"All right, you ask too many questions, I have no alternative but to put you down as ideologically suspect." Rudely cutting Spectacles short, Liu turned and looked sternly at Fang Cheng. "State your business, young man."

"I . . . I want to make an enquiry about a house."

"Good, go on."

"Who lives at Number 13 Happiness Street?"

Director Liu froze, but in an instant a barely perceptible smile appeared on his lips. Spectacles, still looking crest-fallen, opened his briefcase and took out some paper, ready to take notes. The two policemen stood next to Fang Cheng. The atmosphere in the room became tense.

"Your name?" Liu asked sharply.

"Fang Cheng."

"Age?"

"What do you take me for? I'm a reporter."

"Hand over your papers."

Fang Cheng drew out his press card and passed it to one of the policemen at his side.

"Examine it and take his fingerprints. Also, find his file and check his ideological status," ordered the director.

"What am I being accused of?"

"Prying into state secrets."

"Is Number 13 Happiness Street a state secret?"

"Whatever no one knows is a secret."

"Including you? You mean, you don't know either?"

"Me? There's a certain continuity to your case, you won't even co-operate during interrogation."

Fang Cheng sighed.

"Next question . . ."

Towards evening, Fang Cheng was released.

III

THE MUNICIPAL library was empty except for the faint but pervasive odour of mould. Fang Cheng leafed through the catalogue, finally locating the book: *A Study of Grave-Robbing Techniques Through the Ages*. He noted down the call number and rushed upstairs to the reading room.

A middle-aged woman with prominent cheekbones standing behind the desk looked at the slip and then studied him. "Are you an archaeologist?"

"No, I'm a reporter."

"Are you planning to visit some tombs for a story?" she said half-jokingly.

"I want to uncover some secrets."

"What secrets can you possibly find in this

book?"

"A place where life has ended can still contain all kinds of secrets."

"Doesn't anyone know what they are?"

"No, because even the living have become part of the secret."

"What?"

"No one knows anyone; no one understands anyone."

The woman with high cheekbones stared at him. "Good heavens, you must be mad."

"It's not me who's mad, it's heaven."

She turned away and ignored him after that. Nearly an hour later he heard the clickety-clack of the book trolley, and the book landed on the desk, raising a cloud of dust. Putting it under his arm, Fang Cheng went into the reading room and sat down at an empty desk in a corner. He leafed through the book, taking notes from time to time.

A pale square of sunlight moved slowly across the table. Fang Cheng stretched and looked at his watch. It was getting late. Before long he found himself surrounded by other readers. Strange, they were all concealing their faces behind thick books. Looking more carefully, Fang Cheng shuddered. They were all reading the same book: *A Study of Grave-Robbing Techniques Through the Ages*. He broke into a sweat, and stirred uneasily in his seat.

As he slipped out of the library he was aware of a shadowy figure following closely behind. He went into a small lane and then suddenly turned back. The man didn't have time to conceal himself and they met head-on: it was the fellow in the leather jacket he had bumped into the previous morning in Happiness Street. As soon as he emerged from the lane, Fang Cheng made a dash for a trolley bus at a nearby stop. He jumped on board, and the doors closed behind him with a squeal.

When he got off the bus he looked around anxiously and only relaxed when he felt sure he had not been followed. He thrust his hands into his overcoat pockets and did his best to regain his self-confidence and courage.

At a crossing a boy ran past flying a kite. The string in his hand was taut and the kite danced in the air. A high place, of course! Jun had disappeared while he was flying a kite. It must have been because he had seen something from a high

place. What an idiot I've been, he thought, why didn't I think of that earlier? How awful, he'd almost let himself be suffocated like a rat trapped in a hole.

He bought a pair of high-power binoculars at a second-hand store and set off in the direction of Happiness Street, working his way towards his target through a maze of lanes and alleyways. Finally he saw a tall chimney towering alone in a stretch of vacant ground, surrounded on all sides by broken bricks and rubbish.

He made for the boiler-room at the foot of the chimney. A wizened old man was stoking the boiler as an airblower droned in the background. His tattered sweat-stained work clothes were held together at the waist and swung back and forth in time with his monotonous movements.

"Can I interrupt you for a minute!" Fang Cheng called out.

The old man slowly straightened himself, turned his long, skinny body and walked over to the doorway. His face was covered with coal dust and ashes.

"Who're you looking for?" he asked.

"I wonder if you could tell me where this leads to?"

"Heaven."

"No, what I mean is who's the fire for?"

"How should I know. They pay me, I do the work, that's the way it is."

"If they pay you, there must be some evidence for it."

"Ah, yes. Now where's my pay slip got to?" he said, patting himself up and down. "Must've used it to roll a cigarette."

"What was written on it?"

"Let me think... seems it might have run something like this: 'Burn enough to make a thousand black clouds.' Hah!" The old man grinned, baring his teeth. Against his grimy face his broken and uneven teeth seemed extremely white.

Fang Cheng took off his black woollen overcoat. "Can I trouble you to keep an eye on this for me. I'm going up to take a look."

"You don't want to leave a note for your family?"

"What?"

"You're the twelfth so far. Just yesterday a girl jumped..."

The old man went back to stoking the boiler.

Tongues of flame shot forth.

Fang Cheng gazed up at the chimney, which seemed to lean slightly. He went to the foot of the iron ladder and started climbing. The houses grew smaller and smaller and it got so windy that his clothes flapped around him. When he reached the last rung, he steadied himself. Hooking one arm through the ladder, he turned around and began to survey the scene with his binoculars. Rooftops, date trees, courtyard walls . . . all came clearly into view. Suddenly he stiffened, and the hand holding the binoculars began shaking. He couldn't believe his eyes. Finally he managed to collect his thoughts and refocus the binoculars. He searched carefully in every corner, but didn't see even a single blade of grass.

"Oh bloody hell . . ." he muttered to himself.

As his feet touched ground he heard someone calling out sharply behind him, "Don't move.

Where do you think you're going now?" Not at all surprised, he brushed the dust off his clothes and turned around. The man in the leather jacket gave him a shove, and they walked towards a jeep parked some distance away.

Twisting his head, Fang Cheng saw the old man stoking the boiler while thick smoke continued to billow out of the tall chimney.

"Black clouds," he said.

IV

FANG CHENG was sent to the lunatic asylum.

When he looked at the people running in circles around the desolate grounds and the outside wall covered with weeds, he finally understood: so now he too was inside the wall.

