

Screwed

by Han Dong

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In 1968, Xiaofei, like millions of other high-school students ('educated youth') is sent down, on Chairman Mao Zedong's orders, to a remote village to 'learn from the poor and lower middle peasants'. The village has just one ox, Girlie, faithfully cared for by a peasant so poor that he can't afford to marry and shares the ox's accommodation, the cowshed. Bored by the monotony of country life, the students start mischievous rumours that they have been screwing Girlie the ox. This schoolboy joke goes wrong when Girlie falls sick: the 'educated youth' are accused of sabotaging production by raping the animal and causing her to break down. The blame is pinned on Xiaofei...

Chapter 13

When I woke up, it was broad daylight and the door of the clan hall¹ was wide open. I discovered I had slipped down from the heavy, wooden chair, though my hands were still tied behind me, suspended from the high chair back. They had gone completely numb. I carefully inched my way up off the brick floor, till I was sitting on the chair. Agonising pains shot up my arms as the sensation started to come back. Number Two Orderly was squatting in the doorway, propping himself on a bolt-action Type 38 rifle which he held in front of him. He looked round and regarded me with keen interest. Outside, Deputy Wang stood under the eaves of the east-side building, holding an enamel mug and cleaning his teeth. He tipped his head back and gargled noisily. Then he bent forward and spat the water forcefully onto the ground in front of him. It was his loud spitting noise which had woken me up.

The big sandy dog was pottering round the compound. He cocked one hind leg and there was a hiss of urine on the grating which covered the old well. Then he trotted out through the gate.

The clan hall where I was being held was a brick-built, tiled building in a square compound. The hall faced the entrance gate and was slightly raised, so I could see right down through the gate to the village street. Shadows bobbed back and forth across the doorway; Deputy Wang's Civil Defence Team must have been strolling around, enjoying the freshness of early morning in the countryside. There was nothing peaceful about the cowsheds, however. Girlie appeared to be too sick to get up, and anyone could see she wouldn't be pulling the plough this morning.

Suddenly it occurred to me I wouldn't be spending today in the fields either, bent double cutting the wheat. I felt a little surge of happiness, but it quickly vanished. My aches and pains and tiredness reminded me that, for some unknown reason, I was tied to this chair instead. Dammit, reaping would have been a lot better.

The interrogation took place in the same room. One end of the rope was untied and then re-tied to one leg of the big, heavy offerings table. I was put on a bench and the chair (there was only one) was given back to Deputy Wang. He sat down, facing the entrance. Beside him sat the scrawny orderly who had waited on Deputy Wang the evening before. A stack of papers lay on the table in front of them. There was a scraping of fountain pen on ink bottle. A big, burly orderly stood behind Wang, his swarthy arms folded across his chest, muscles rippling. Every now and then during the interrogation, he would twist the fingers of both hands together making the bones

¹This is a traditional rural square courtyard with a main building on the north side (the clan hall in this case), and rooms on the east side and west side (the cowsheds in this case). The south side has an entrance gate onto the village street.

crack loudly. Orderlies numbers Two and Three, guns slung over their shoulders, were outside and could be seen passing back and forth in front of the window. Sandy the dog lay under the table, joined to it by a length of rope. No, it wasn't rope, it was a leather belt.

Deputy Wang asked me if I'd thought things through and was ready to confess. I asked him why he'd arrested me. What crime had I committed?

'Why would we arrest you if you hadn't committed a crime?' Wang answered.

'I don't know. Why have you arrested me?'

I asked him, then he asked me... It was like guessing a riddle. Backwards and forwards we went. And at the end, I still didn't know why they'd arrested me.

In those days, trouble could erupt over just about anything. While I was alone the night before, I'd been over and over it in my mind. The possibilities were endless. The most likely one was that they'd got the wrong person.

Deputy Wang lost patience and banged the table. 'I'm giving you a chance and you're throwing it back in my face!' he roared, making me jump out of my skin. Then he went on: 'You're a hard nut to crack! If you won't say what you did, I will. What made the Production Team cow break down?'

So that was it! I felt tremendously relieved. They must be thinking that a class enemy had sabotaged Girlie. But even if someone had, it couldn't possibly be me. I said confidently: 'The cow broke down because it got sick.'

'What did it get sick from?'

'How do I know? I'm not a vet,' I said.

Wang banged the table again with such fury this time that the ink bottle jumped. Scrawny, who was taking notes, hurriedly steadied it.

'I'll tell you why,' he shouted. 'You fucked it!'

Before I could recover from my astonishment, he spelled out the accusation: 'It was you, Luo Xiaofei, who raped the Production Team's cow!'

A snort of laughter exploded from my nostrils. I couldn't help myself. 'Deputy Wang, you are joking. Do humans do it with farm beasts? Girlie was poisoned by eating yam stalks. If you don't believe me ask Lijiu.'

'Then why did you just say you didn't know?'

Now I was completely confused... I was still wondering how to answer when Ren Jun came in carrying an enamel wash bowl. Clouds of fragrant steam rose from it. What a good smell. Baldie was behind him holding a stack of bowls in one hand and chopsticks in the other. 'Deputy Wang,' Ren Jun began. 'The Production Team is so poor, we haven't got anything good to offer you. The Team Leader just said to do some noodles. They're freshly made from this year's wheat.'

'Put them down here,' Wang said.

Ren Jun put the wash bowl down on the offerings table and Baldie put down the bowls and chopsticks. I counted six bowls. Ren Jun divided up the noodles with a pair of chopsticks. Number Two and Number Three had come in behind him. Everyone watched Ren Jun intently, the only sound the clicking of the chopsticks against the bowls.

Suddenly Wang said: 'There's a bowl too many.'

Ren Jun looked over to where I sat tied to the table leg.

'He's not eating,' said Wang. 'He hasn't owned up to what he's done yet.'

At that, Baldie stretched out a filthy hand and thrust it into one of the bowls of noodles. He twiddled a strand of the noodles around his fingers, lifted it out and sucked it into his mouth, so quickly it was like watching an anteater. Ren Jun whacked him hard on the back of the head and swore at him: 'You dumb guzzler!'

Baldie ignored the blow and made a grab for the bowl. Ren Jun put out an arm to block him. Wang said: 'Give half the bowl to the police guard dog and let him take the other half away!'

Police guard dog? I couldn't think what he was talking about until I realised he meant the sandy dog. But Sandy was nothing more than an ordinary mongrel, just a bit bigger and fatter than the village mongrels because he got plenty to eat. (We'd even heard he got his own grain rations.)

Ren Jun took the bowl to the doorway and tipped a generous half onto the bricks. Number Two undid the belt, and the dog sprang out from under the table and skidded to a halt by the door. He opened his mouth and started to gulp the noodles down. Ren Jun thrust the bowl with the remaining noodles into Baldie's hands. Baldie rushed out of the door, pushing the bowl into his face and sucking up the noodles as he went. Ren Jun picked up the wash bowl and followed him out.

There was gentle slurping sound as everyone, from Deputy Wang and the orderlies to the sandy dog, ate with enjoyment. I couldn't tear my eyes away from them. My stomach rumbled in spite of myself and I did two long, pattering farts.

Wang picked up some noodles with his chopsticks, blew on them and said to me: 'Don't think I don't know what's been going on in the village. Fan Lijiu goes off begging every winter and you were the one who fed the cow when he was away last time.'

'You're right I fed her, but I never did it with her.'

Wang sucked up the noodles. 'Theft is often an inside job,' he said.

'But I didn't steal Girlie. She's still in the cowshed, isn't she?'

'I was just giving an example. So you're not going to own up to what you did?'

'How can I, when I didn't do it?'

'Well, if you didn't do it, did Xu Shaohua do it?' He used Big Xu's formal name.

'No, he didn't either.'

‘And Wu Gang? Did he do it?’

‘Wu Gang didn’t do it either.’

Deputy Wang finished his food and pushed the bowl away. Then he opened his mouth, inserted two fingers as thick and stubby as candle-ends, and picked his teeth. With a ‘pah’ he spat out invisible shreds of the meat and vegetables. Scrawny promptly passed him a cigarette and the swarthy hulk struck a match and lit it for him.

Wang inhaled comfortably and said: ‘You say they didn’t do it, but they say you did do it.’

I thought I must have mis-heard him, ‘What? What did they say I’ve done?’

‘Raped the Production Team’s cow.’

‘Big Xu and Wu Gang said that?’

‘Well, the cow couldn’t have said it, could it?’

How had we got to this point, I wondered. I remembered the dog’s melancholy howling in the night and Big Xu and Wu Gang’s comings and goings. We hadn’t actually done it with the cow, I thought, but we had joked about it. But even that was Big Xu and Wu Gang’s joke, wasn’t it? I couldn’t get my head around it at all, and things were going from bad to worse. I heard myself say: ‘I’m the victim of injustice, Deputy Wang, injustice...’

Wang perked up at this. ‘OK, tell us, why are you the victim of injustice?’ He looked at me expectantly.

‘Deputy Wang, I’m reporting that someone did do it with the cow,’ I said, ‘but it wasn’t me.’

‘Well, if it wasn’t you, who was it?’

‘Big Xu and Wu Gang did it, I didn’t do it.’

‘But didn’t you just say they didn’t do it?’ he asked, his eyes full of mockery.

I couldn’t answer that one. I just muttered ‘The guilty person points the finger first’ and other nonsense that even I didn’t understand.

Deputy Wang cleared his throat. ‘I conclude,’ he said, ‘that the rape of the cow did take place, that part is true, there’s cast-iron proof. All three of you have admitted that. The next question is who actually did it, aren’t I right?’

‘Well I didn’t do it,’ I said. ‘They did it.’

‘You say they did it, they say you did it. Now I’m really bamboozled!’

‘Whatever. I didn’t do it.’

‘There are two of them and one of you. Who should I believe, tell me that? Or maybe all three of you did it.’

‘I didn’t do it.’

‘Well, I shouldn’t let the minority overrule the majority, should I?’

‘I didn’t do it.’

Chapter 14

We didn't get much further that afternoon, because I refused to admit that I'd done it with Girlie. Wang seemed quite put out. As he said, though the first battle had been won the rest was going to take a bit longer. But anyway, time was something they had plenty of, they just had to keep working away at it.

We finished before it got dark and I was taken to the cowsheds and thrown onto a pile of new straw in a stall at the north end. Here I could finally lie out flat. The straw smelled good. I was unbearably hungry and my hands were still tied behind my back but I was so happy my eyes filled with tears. After a bit I was overcome by exhaustion and fell fast asleep.

When I woke up, it was getting dark. There was a window in the east wall, overlooking the compound, through which a pale sky could be seen. The lattice over the window made it look like in a prison. A rustling sound came from the main cowshed next door and I recognised it immediately as Girlie. Probably, like me, she was lying on a heap of straw. Man on one side of the wall, beast on the other. One sick, the other in an extremity of torment. I couldn't help sympathising with Girlie. Somehow we were drawn together in suffering. I even began to feel that mating with a cow wasn't such an unspeakable crime after all. My thoughts were getting jumbled again.

Someone in the courtyard was calling people to dinner. Not me, of course. I heard footsteps and voices, and someone asked: 'Where do we go to eat?'

'To Fan Weiqiao, the book-keeper's house.'

'Someone's got to stay and guard the cow-rapist.'

'When we've eaten, we'll come and take over.'

Silence fell in the courtyard again. It was completely dark outside the window now, as if a lid had been put on a box.

When I woke up next, a lamp had been lit in the main cowshed and its dim glow crept under the door. Lijiu the cowman was talking to someone. After a bit I realised it was Girlie. 'We peasants are rooted in our fields,' he was saying, 'and the fields need a cow's strength. You're a cow so you've got to give your strength. You can't go on skiving off work and lying around like this all the time. Cows are almost human, they can speak the language of the Six Kingdoms. Don't pretend you don't understand. If you'll just get up, I'll go straight down to the Ox King's Temple and burn some thanksgiving incense. Don't look at me like that! I've never eaten a bit of beef in my whole life. If I did, I couldn't die in peace and in the next life I'd be re-born as a cow...'

He rambled on and on. What a lot of feudal superstitious nonsense. No answer from Girlie, of course.

At that moment, I heard voices outside the window and switched my attention to

them. It was the orderlies, Two and Three. One said: 'Who'd want to screw a cow? It's not a dog after all.'

'There's a lock in a bitch's cunt and fire in a cat's cunt,' said the other.

'A cow cunt's so big, how could you screw it?' asked the first.

'You lean to one side!' said the other.

And they both gave a dirty laugh.

What a strange conversation. I could hardly believe my ears. Even stranger was the fact that they hadn't mentioned me or the case against me. It seemed like everyone had forgotten me. I lay in the darkness with only the straw for company. If I lay there till I died, probably no one would notice. Maybe that would be just as well.

After a while, Two and Three moved away from the window. Something flew over the partition from next door and landed on the straw. My hands were still tied so I couldn't pick it up. I had to put my face down instead. It turned out to be a brown-flour mantou, a steamed bun. I called out: 'Lijiu...' He stayed where he was but I heard him say: 'Keep quiet. Eat it quickly.'

I gobbled it down so fast it seemed to hit my belly without ever going through my gullet. As soon as I'd finished, another mantou was lobbed in. 'Eat it more slowly,' said Lijiu, 'or you'll choke.'

Those two mantou made tears start to my eyes – even though I wasn't feeling any emotion at all.

Chapter 15

The next day, the interrogation started before breakfast again. Deputy Wang opening words were simple: 'If you own up, we'll be lenient. If you resist, you'll be treated severely.' This was the customary slogan then. For my part, I declared I 'relied on the masses and the Communist Party'. Wang's response was that 'a dead pig doesn't fear the pot' and that I couldn't put off confessing for much longer.

'Own up now,' he urged me. 'Stop beating round the bush! Otherwise you're digging your own grave.'

'I've got nothing to own up to.'

As I spoke, Ren Jun came in carrying the wash bowl. Steam rose from it just like yesterday, only the smell was different. Baldie came behind with the bowls and the chopsticks.

'The Production Team is so poor, we haven't got anything good to offer you,' Ren Jun began. 'The Team Leader just said to do some soup. The dough strips are made from this year's wheat.'

'Put it down here.'

Ren Jun put the wash bowl down and Baldie put the bowls and chopsticks down. Unlike yesterday, Baldie had only brought five bowls. Ren Jun stirred the soup with a copper ladle and divided it out between the five bowls. I could see it was thick, and full of lumps of dough. There were lots of green vegetables too.

'We're a bowl short,' said Wang.

I was surprised. Was he really going to let me have some soup? Ren Jun must have thought the same, and looked over to me.

'Isn't the police dog eating?' said Wang.

Ren Jun slapped his head with his hand and said: 'Of course. How could I have forgotten?' He gave Baldie a shove: 'Go and get another bowl.'

Baldie dashed over to the east-side building; this was where Wang and the rest of the team were staying and where the soup had been prepared. He was soon back with an empty bowl. Ren Jun filled it with soup and ordered Baldie to put it down by the door. The dog bounded over and sniffed. Baldie stood transfixed until Ren Jun shouted: 'What the hell are you looking at? Scarper!' And he picked up the empty wash bowl and shoved the boy out in front of him.

A gentle slurping sound filled the room. Deputy Wang smacked his lips appreciatively as he ate and said: 'Delicious. There's nothing like noodles made from new wheat!'

'Delicious!' chorused the orderlies.

'Delicious!'

'Almost better than meat!'

'Definitely beats eating meat!'

I thought it smelled delicious too but didn't get a chance to say so.

Wang put down his chopsticks and tapped the edge of his bowl. 'Your old man's got plenty of time,' he said to me. After all, the Production Team are providing three meals a day, meat and fish, lots of variety. Would you like to try some?'

Before I could answer, he turned to Scrawny: 'Young Seven, pick up that bowl off the ground and give it to him.'

He meant the dog's bowl. The soup was still hot and the sandy dog was shaking its jowls as it ate. It hadn't finished and, as Young Seven (Scrawny, that is), approached, it bared its teeth, growled and stood guard over the bowl. Young Seven hurriedly pulled back his outstretched hand.

'I don't want any,' I said.

'Yes you do, but the police guard dog won't give it up!' said Wang.

The orderlies all laughed loudly.

'People don't eat what dogs have been eating,' I said.

'You're having me on! You can screw a cow but you can't eat what a dog's been eating? When did you get to be so fussy?'

'I never screwed a dog either,' I retorted.

Wang said nothing, but glared at me. The orderlies all stopped eating. Now I'm really in trouble, I thought to myself. My next thought was that I was already in so much trouble, things couldn't get worse. Just as I was mulling this over, we heard footsteps and Shao Na burst into the room.

She must have come straight from the wheat fields - her sleeves were rolled up, she was carrying a sickle and wisps of straw stuck out of her hair. I was astonished and so, apparently, were the Civil Defence Team. We all looked at her in silence. In the few days since I'd saw her, her face had burned berry-brown. She had been running and her chest rose and fell under her thin jacket.

Without looking at me, Shao Na said loudly: 'I want to speak to Deputy Wang.'

Wang leaned back in his chair. 'Who are you?' he asked.

'I'm an educated youth from Number One Production Team, Da Fan Village. My name is Shao Na.'

'And why are you here?' said Wang.

'I've come to prove Luo Xiaofei's innocence.'

Wang said nothing, just looked her up and down intently. Suddenly realising she was still holding the sickle, Shao Na let it drop with a clang.

'How are you going to prove that?'

'I... I'm Luo Xiaofei's girlfriend. We're in love.'

Wang gave a grunt and began to look interested. He pushed his soup bowl to one side, and said: 'Carry on.'

'Xiaofei told me he didn't do those things you said,' said Shao Na.

'What things?'

'The, umm, the things with the cow.'

She was scarlet in the face, and it wasn't just sunburn.

Deputy Wang pressed her: 'What things with the cow?'

'The, umm, the...' She was choosing her words, or maybe giving herself courage.

'The, what?'

Shao Na seemed to make up her mind and said, raising her voice quite unnecessarily: 'Mating with the cow!'

Wang burst out laughing. 'Mating...!' he chortled. 'What's a young woman doing using language like that?'

The orderlies all followed suit, stamping their feet and guffawing with laughter. Two and Three thumped their rifle butts on the floor bricks in delight.

'Shao Na!' I shouted at her. I wanted to stop her, but she hadn't glanced in my direction once since coming into the room and refused to look at me now.

Shao Na was quiet. Their mocking laughter seemed in some strange way to have calmed her down. When Wang finished laughing, she repeated coolly: 'I'm just saying he didn't do it.'

Deputy Wang took a deep breath. The laughter had softened the lines on his face: 'Well, if he didn't do it,' he said, 'what made him mention to you about doing it, or rather "mating", with the cow? Isn't that like a thief leaving a note saying 'no silver buried here?'

You couldn't help admiring the man's cunning.

'He told me Big Xu and Wu Gang had done it, not him,' said Shao Na.

'Did you see them do it?'

'No, I didn't. It was Xiaofei who told me.'

'Well, of course, you're boyfriend and girlfriend, so you're going to protect him, aren't you!'

Wang raised his hand, and Young Seven quickly put a cigarette in it. Swarthy struck a match and lit it. Wang closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, opened them again and looked Shao Na up and down with an expression of undisguised lechery. Then he ordered Young Seven to get the bowls cleared. Young Seven went to the door and shouted: 'They've finished their dinner!'

Baldie ran in carrying a filthy cloth, piled the bowls up and wiped the table – he was pretty good at this by now. Then he clattered out with the bowls in his hands. Shao

Na, meanwhile, stood rooted to the spot, so silent and unmoving that she reminded me of our revolutionary heroine, Hulan.

Wang became thoughtful: 'Actually, there's an easy way you can save Xiaofei,' he said. 'Tell me, have you two mated?'

He put heavy emphasis on the word 'mated', deliberately mimicking Shao Na. The orderlies greeted his question with loud laughter. I couldn't let this go on. I pulled myself up straight and broke in: 'Deputy Wang, please don't bully her like this!' Wang looked round and said: 'Can't you see I'm doing this for your own good?' Then he turned back to Shao Na with an unpleasant leer.

'What do you mean?' asked Shao Na.

'If you and Luo Xiaofei have mated,' Wang explained, 'then obviously Xiaofei didn't do it with the cow. He couldn't possibly have if he had a fine, fair-skinned girl like you to mate with. I wouldn't, if I were in his place... But of course, if you haven't...'

Shao Na interrupted him crisply: 'We've mated.'

She'd stopped panting, her face was no longer red, and she spoke perfectly calmly. Wang and his orderlies burst into howls of hysterical laughter. 'Shit, oh shit...' chortled Wang slapping his bald head with his hand.

I heard myself shout in desperation: 'Shao Na, don't talk such rubbish!'

Amid the general din, Shao Na was the only one who was calm.

Wang stopped laughing and said: 'How did you mate? If you can convince me, I'll let Xiaofei go. I'm always as good as my word.'

This was really going too far.

Shao Na opened her mouth but no words came out. It wasn't that she was embarrassed, she simply didn't know what to say. After all, we hadn't 'mated'.

'I... we...' She avoided our eyes and looked up at the pitch-black roof beams and tenon joints, then around at the brickwork, as if the answer was written there.

'I...we, did it on top of Grandpa Fu's

'If you're too embarrassed to tell us, you can act it out,' said Wang. And he got up, and walked around the offerings table towards Shao Na. The orderlies fell back to let him through.

'Pretend I'm Xiaofei, and this table is the coffin of Grandpa ...Grandpa Whats-'is-face.'

Shao Na looked scared. She avoided Wang's gaze but stood her ground. Suddenly, she looked at me for the first time, and there was no mistaking the appeal in her eyes. But what could I do for her? I was tied to the table leg, as she knew quite well. That was why she'd rushed in to rescue me, after all. But in the face of danger, this was her instinctive reaction. Secretly, she'd always see me as her saviour.

She pulled herself together and looked away quickly. But her faith in me gave me a lightning jolt, and I shivered involuntarily.

Wang put his arms around Shao Na and began to fumble at her clothes. His hands were all over her. She resisted silently, her eyes swivelling back and forth across the beams above her head.

Beside myself, I shouted: 'You mother-fucker, Deputy Wang!' And I lunged forward. The offerings table gave a grating sound and moved a couple of inches before its weight pulled me back onto the bench. There was a searing pain in my wrists. I looked round and saw the hemp cord pulled taut and vibrating like the string of a violin. Orderlies Two and Three leapt on me, digging iron fingers into the flesh at the back of my neck and pressing me down into my seat.

Two grabbed his rifle and dealt me two heavy blows on the back with the butt for good measure. The force of the blows nearly pushed me off the bench, and only the offerings table saved me from collapsing in a heap on the floor.

But at least Wang stopped what he was doing - he turned round and said: 'What are you shouting about?'

So I'd saved Shao Na, even if I'd been injured in the attempt, and I felt happy. But what now? It wasn't going to stop here.

Shao Na, instead of making her escape, just stood there like a prize idiot. I cursed her silently: Stupid girl! What further indignities do you want me to go through? You're supposed to be my girlfriend! You must realise I can't do anything more to protect you now. You're just getting me into more trouble!

I took a few deep breaths and said to Wang as gently as I could: 'Don't listen to her nonsense, Deputy Wang, I haven't done it with her. I did it with the Production Team's cow.'

Wang let go of Shao Na and pushed a strand of hair back onto his bald pate. 'So you admit it?' he said. 'You really need to be pushed to the brink before you give

'Yes, yes, I give in.'

At this, Shao Na shouted: 'Xiaofei, you didn't do it with the cow!'

She looked at me piteously. What a stupid girl she was!

'Yes, I did,' I told her. 'I wasn't telling the truth before... I don't know why you wouldn't do it with me.'

'You've deceived me!'

'I didn't deceive you. When did I deceive you - what about?'

At this, Shao Na burst into tears. 'You...you dirty low-life scumbag!!'

She covered her face with her hands and rushed out, not forgetting to pick up her sickle as she went.

Chapter 16

The interrogation continued in the afternoon. My wrists were untied, maybe as a reward for my confession. The skin had rubbed raw and the wounds had started to go septic. The thin cord was embedded in the swollen flesh but the orderlies roughly jerked it free. Then Two coiled it and hung the blood- and pus-soiled coils from his belt, for future use.

Now I had to supply the details of my offence: how I'd done it with the cow and how many times. Precise times, places, my feelings and the reaction of my partner (that is, the cow). This was naturally the highlight of the interrogation – you could tell that from the air of excitement among the Civil Defence team.

Deputy Wang paced so energetically up and down the room that it was enough to make anyone feel giddy. Young Seven's pen scraped against the mouth of the ink bottle more and more urgently. Two and Three left their guard posts outside and came in to listen, and Wang allowed them to stay. Their expectations were so high that I honestly felt sorry for them. It was easy enough to admit I'd done it with the cow, but filling in the details required a fertile and enthusiastic imagination. The problem was I had no enthusiasm at all for fabricating an event so outside my experience.

At this moment, all my attention was focussed on my hands. I hadn't seen them for two days. Did they still belong to me?

Wang could see my mind was elsewhere. When I didn't fill in the details to his satisfaction, he said to me: 'I'm warning you, Xiaofei, there'll be no lucky escape this time. This is a very serious offence!'

This was actually something I did want to talk about.

'Just how serious?' I asked.

'For raping the Production Team cow and sabotaging the spring ploughing, definitely execution.'

I didn't understand this. 'Even if I did rape the cow, what's that got to do with the spring ploughing?'

I figured that if they couldn't prove the link between the two things, the worst offence they could get me for was for what was called a 'lifestyle' offence. When it got out, I'd get a bad reputation of course, I might even get a prison sentence – plenty of people got prison for immoral behaviour in those days – but at least I wouldn't face execution. Even men who raped women or committed adultery with the wife of a soldier didn't get taken out and shot. Wang was obviously just trying to scare me.

Then Wang said: 'Well, you doing it with the cow made it break down. That put them behind with the spring ploughing, didn't it?'

'But how can you prove Girlie broke down because of what I did and not because

she got sick?’

‘If you hadn’t done it with her, and in such a big way, the cow definitely wouldn’t have broken down,’ he said.

We were getting nowhere. It was just like the day before when I’d asked Wang: ‘Why are you arresting me? Exactly what crime have I committed?’ And he’d answered: ‘If you hadn’t committed a crime, then why would we arrest you?’ This was a logical *cul-de-sac*. We had to find another way out.

So I said, as reasonably as I could: ‘I fed the cow in winter but she didn’t get sick until a week ago. You can’t say that I did it with her in winter and she didn’t feel the effects until summer. If she was going to get sick, it would have happened before.’

Deputy Wang was momentarily stumped.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘You may be staring death in the face but you’re still stubborn as hell, aren’t you?’ He walked back around the offerings table and took his seat again. ‘Just raping the Production Team cow is enough to get you eight or ten years inside.’

Suddenly, from death by firing squad I was down to an eight- or ten-year prison sentence. I felt confidence returning. But Wang hadn’t finished. He seemed to be thinking aloud, teasing out some bizarre argument in the process: ‘Raping a cow, mating with a farm beast, is the way decadent capitalists live... you’ve got a girlfriend, why bother to rape the team cow? It was obviously deliberate, done out of class hatred for the poor and lower middle peasants, a deliberate act of retaliation... The team only has this one cow, given to them during land reform. If it was a calf then, it must be over 20 years old by now. In human years, that’s equivalent to 70 or 80 years old. How’s an old brown cow in its 70s going to stand being raped by a young man like you, eh? ...If the cow broke down but you hadn’t done it with her, now that would be strange. I’m not surprised that an internal injury it suffered in winter only had an effect in spring... the poor and lower middle peasants’ old cow, how could you have done that? You’re a vicious, hardened criminal!’

It was obvious that Wang was finding this hard going, but he certainly got through to me. I really did feel that whoever had raped the cow should be taken out and shot. Even if the spring ploughing hadn’t been sabotaged, it was the right thing to do. But that that person should be me – that was what I couldn’t accept. Was I really going to be executed?

That evening, I was taken back to my stall in the cowsheds. The Civil Defence Team took it in turn to go for dinner, leaving a couple of people standing guard, guns slung from their shoulders, at the cowshed door. When they weren’t looking, Lijiu lobbed two more coarse, brown-flour mantou in to me. I grabbed them off the straw and swallowed them hastily. At least this time I could pick them up with my hands and put them into my mouth. I couldn’t help being keenly aware of how good it was

to have hands, even if they were infected and wept pus.

Although I was very tired, I just couldn't get to sleep. Thoughts went round and round in my head. I remembered my mother pushing me on her bicycle to the only restaurant in Nanjing which served western food. What a long time ago that was. The butter on the bread was just like the pus which had smeared itself all over my mantou that evening, rather salty.

Of course, I thought of Shao Na too, and Girlie next door, and all the girls and women in the village. In fact I thought of all the human and animal females I had known. After all, I wasn't married yet. I hadn't tasted female flesh, as Big Xu put it. Was I really going to go before a firing squad and die a virgin?

Deputy Wang was trying to scare me, of course. He'd twisted the facts. His logic was full of holes but, fantastic though it was, it was driven by an iron necessity – and that was to get me convicted. That was their aim, and they'd do anything in their power to achieve it. I hadn't done it with Girlie but they wanted to prove I had, so that was what they'd proved. Now they wanted me dead, and that wasn't a problem either. It could be made to happen.

I thought to myself that it didn't matter if I couldn't sleep. After all, there'd be a long, long sleep coming, one I'd never wake up from.

Chapter 17

On the third day, the interrogation didn't start until after lunch. It was if they knew I hadn't slept all night and wanted to give me a lie-in.

I was still dazed with sleep when I heard footsteps in the compound outside. I thought I heard Big Xu and Wu Gang's voices, as they came into the yard, not together but one after the other. Big Xu kept his voice so low that it didn't sound like him, but even if he'd spoken normally, I couldn't have heard what he was saying. It sounded like they'd gone into the clan hall because I heard them greet the Civil Defence Team. They should have turned and come into the cowsheds to see me, but they didn't. That made me angry. After all, I'd lived under the same roof as them for more than two years and now I was in big trouble. ...Of course, they'd had a part in getting me into trouble so it was understandable that they were too embarrassed to face me.

After lunch – that is, after Deputy Wang had had his lunch – I was taken to the clan hall. Oddly enough, Wang didn't mention the rape or the spring ploughing. That meant I didn't get a chance to put any of the counter-arguments I'd spent all night thinking up. I didn't even get a chance to retract my confession. It was almost as if the cow had never been raped at all (as indeed it hadn't). But in that case, why were they holding me prisoner?

Still, if they weren't going to bring it up, then neither was I. Wang just asked me about my life here. What books did I read? What did I care about and talk about? He acted as if this was just an everyday chat. The more he went on like this, the more nervous I became.

He asked me if I studied *The Quotations of Chairman Mao* regularly. I said yes. This was a sign of progressive thinking so I couldn't say no. Then he changed tack and asked whether I had said that there were contradictions in *The Quotations of Chairman Mao*. My heart skipped a beat – so this was what he was leading up to...

I acted dumb and said: 'What do you mean, contradictions?'

Deputy Wang sat very upright in his chair, and put both hands to the collar of his Mao jacket, carefully fastening the topmost hooks and eyes. Then he said: 'The Chairman says that it's necessary for educated youth to go to the villages to be re-educated by the poor and lower-middle peasants. And the Chairman also says that educating the peasants is a serious problem. Luo Xiaofei, did you or did you not say that there was a contradiction in sending educated youth to be educated by the uneducated peasants?'

I had said this, several times. I would have liked to ask Wang whether in his view there was a contradiction in these two statements. But that would have been too risky, and anyway, Wang didn't care whether there was a contradiction or not, he only wanted to know whether I had said that Chairman Mao's sayings contradicted each other. So

I said nothing at all.

‘We’ll take your silence as agreement,’ said Wang. ‘Let us go on. Did you or did you not say that Hitler’s blitzkrieg was a formidable tactic?’

.....

‘If you don’t answer, that means you said it. Young Seven, make a note of that. Lets go on. Did you or did you not say that Comrade Jiang Qing was just Chairman Mao’s floozy?’

.....

‘Did you or did you not say that there was nothing special about China putting up a satellite, because after all the Americans had already walked on moonbeams?’

‘On the moon, not on moonbeams,’ I muttered.

The verbal blows were coming so fast and furious that I couldn’t ward them off. Muttering was about the extent of my ‘resistance’. Wang confidently ignored it. ‘Did you or did you not say that Americans live much better than we do,’ he pursued, ‘and that you’d rather go and be a street-sweeper or even a beggar there than stay here?’

.....

‘Did you or did you not say that the commune members harvesting the wheat look like countless heroes competing to see who could bend lowest?’

.....

‘Did you or did you not say that educated youth ‘sent to the countryside to toughen up’ just had to put up and shut up, and there was no point getting competitive?’

‘No, I did not!’ I said.

I said this quite confidently because I really hadn’t said this, Big Xu had. If Wang had pursued his questioning, I could have told him exactly when and where.

I kept repeating to myself that if Big Xu had behaved badly then so could I. I would get my own back on him, come what may. Too bad Wang let it drop. ‘So, you said all the rest?’ he asked.

Another silence...

After this, Wang stopped asking ‘Did you or did you not say ...’ and switched to ‘Did you or did you not do...’

‘Did you or did you not use your copy of *Chairman Mao’s Selected Works* to prop the kerosene lamp on so you could see what you were eating?’

It was Big Xu who had done that. He’d bought three bottles of dried yam spirits for the three of us to share, and cooked two dishes for us. But I wasn’t going to deny anything any more because it was pointless. The reason why Wang was bringing up all the things that Big Xu and Wu Gang had done was that those two had stitched me up. They’d blamed me for Girlie, and they’d just thrown everything else in too. They were two against one, as Wang put it, and the minority had to submit to the majority.

Wang asked a few more ‘Did you or did you not do...’ questions. Some of them I’d done, and some of them were things Big Xu and Wu Gang had done, but I didn’t bother to tell him which. I felt depressed, I kept sweating, and found it difficult to stay on the bench. I’d rather have my hands tied again, I thought. At least that would have held me up. Just now, I might slide down onto the floor at any moment.

Suddenly, Deputy Wang got out a transistor radio and brandished it dramatically: ‘Is this yours?’ he demanded.

‘Yes,’ I said.

Wang carefully pulled out the aerial, then pressed the on-off switch and adjusted the signal. There was an ear-splitting burst of static.

‘The masses have reported,’ he said, ‘that you often listen to enemy radio stations and disseminate the reactionary views of Voice of America.’

‘I have listened to Voice of America, but only the music,’ I told him. ‘Most of the performers are black, and black people in America are the oppressed class.’

‘You’ve got an answer for everything, haven’t you?’ Wang banged the radio down on the table. It went off.

I didn’t understand why he was so angry. Maybe he thought I was being devious or deliberately refusing to give him a straight answer?

Finally, I just had to ask: ‘Deputy Wang, why haven’t you asked about the cow for the whole of this afternoon?’

‘Ask about the cow?’ Wang smiled grimly: ‘It’s not because you’ve been let off. Let me tell you, Luo Xiaofei, raping the cow’s not just a “lifestyle” offence, something you couldn’t help because you were over-sexed, like wet dreams. No! This was class retaliation! It’s consistent with everything you’ve said and done up till now, it was premeditated. For an active counter-revolutionary element like you, it would have been strange for you *not* to have raped the Production Team cow, that’s quite obvious to everyone!’.

Chapter 18

The evening was drawing in. Ren Jun came in with Lijiu and Baldie.

Ren Jun was holding a strange kind of sword. It looked heavy and the tip was covered in rust. The handle and blade were all of a piece, both made of iron. Lijiu carried a trident, prongs facing upwards. Baldie had a stick from which the bark had been peeled off. They burst through the door without warning. Wang looked startled.

‘What do you think you’re doing, dressed like characters out of some opera?’

‘Deputy Wang, the head of the Production Team has invited you to his house for dinner. He says he’s got ten pounds of meat and 5 pints of grain spirits.’

Wang’s face was suddenly wreathed in smiles. ‘Oh, I couldn’t eat such a lot all on my own.’

‘He’s invited the whole Civil Defence Team,’ Ren Jun said, ‘as a thank-you for all their efforts.’

‘They’ll have to take it in turns,’ said Wang. ‘Someone’s got to stay and guard the counter-revolutionary.’

Ren Jun posted himself at the door and said: ‘The head of the Production Team says that we should take over guarding the counter-revolutionary.’

Wang looked the three of them up and down. The orderlies had already started packing up. Young Seven put his papers together, Two and Three took the rifles off their shoulders and looked for somewhere to put them down. Only Swarthy didn’t move from his boss’s side.

Wang shifted his gaze to me, then finally back to Ren Jun.

‘Can you use a gun?’ he asked.

‘Oh yes,’ Ren Jun said swiftly. ‘I’m platoon leader for the village militia. And I’ve done target practice with the commune militia.’

Wang beckoned to Two and Three. He took Two’s gun and threw it at Ren Jun. The latter was unfazed. He caught it deftly and Wang gave an approving nod. Ren Jun dropped the sword with a clatter and stood firmly grasping the old black rifle, the barrel pointing towards the ground.

Wang told him: ‘It’s loaded. If the fucker decides to do a runner, take a pot shot at him for me!’

Ren Jun grunted in agreement.

I felt a clutch of fear. Whoever would have thought that rickety old fire-arm was loaded, and had been loaded all along. The firing squad didn’t seem such an abstract notion after all. I had an image of myself frantically legging it, and a peanut-sized bullet flying from the mouth of the gun, spinning towards the back of my head and lifting off half my skull and spattering my brains.

Then I heard Baldie: 'There's another gun. Give it me.' I felt another spasm of anxiety, but Ren Jun glared at Baldie: 'Deputy Wang's guards can't be left without a gun.'

'I can see you've got a good head on your shoulders,' said Wang. 'When I get a chance, I'll have a word with the Production Brigade head and get you transferred to the commune Civil Defence Team, so you can work with me.'

'I'd be honoured,' said Ren Jun.

Well, at least Baldie wasn't going to get his hands on a gun. He wasn't smart as Ren Jun. In fact, he was so daft that he could do anything.

Before they left, Wang got Two to tie me up again. He said threateningly to me: 'Your old man's going to dinner. You better be quite clear, young man, if you're not good and you try and run away, on your head be it!' And at this he strode out of the door. The orderlies trailed after him. Closest at his heels was Three, acting as Wang's bodyguard, rifle slung over his shoulder. The sandy dog trotted after them too. After all, it was a police guard dog, not just any old dog.

Lijiu lit the hurricane lamp and hung it from a nail in the door frame. He turned it down as low as it would go, making the room look almost darker than if there had been no lamp at all.

Then he picked up the sword and stood grasping it in both hands. He no longer had the trident he'd bought, having passed it to Baldie. Ren Jun held the rifle. The three of them stood around me as if they were clay models or wood carvings.

All four of us gazed out of the door, though we could see nothing because the lamp was so dim. The compound was plunged in darkness, but somehow poised for action. No one spoke to me, or even to each other. Feeling a bit embarrassed, I fidgeted my behind on the bench, making its legs scrape against the floor bricks. The lamp flickered as if it was going to go out at any minute.

'We're all from the same village,' I said. 'We should lighten up a bit!'

Lijiu was the first to respond, and smiled at me. His teeth flashed white in the gloom. They were normally tarry black from the tobacco he smoked. Very strange.

I tried to keep the conversation going. 'That's a handsome sword. Like a sword in a Chinese

'It's not from an opera,' said Lijiu. 'It's an heirloom of the Fan clan. It's been kept in the clan hall for the last two years.'

'Why the last two years?'

'Grandpa Fu took it, and then two years ago, he gave it to us to keep here.'

I grunted. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

After a bit I tried again: 'I suppose all the wheat has been harvested by now. Lucky it's been sunny the last few days, and it hasn't rained.'

‘Lijiu gave a long sigh and let his sword droop. ‘Heaven helped us but it was still no use. People messed up!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You don’t know because you’ve been shut in here, but Weiguo was stabbed to death with a pitchfork by his brother.’

I was flabbergasted. ‘Weiguo’s dead? When did that happen?’

‘Around midday today. One moment he was alive and kicking, and the next... ay...’

And he squatted on the floor, propping himself on the handle of the sword. I saw Weiguo’s stocky figure in my mind’s eye, his back as broad and strong as an ox, laden down with the ropes which pulled the wooden harrow. Then there was that pair of ‘liberation shoes’, with great holes in, which he took off and stuck up on the bank between the fields, where they stank of sweaty feet. That smell couldn’t come from a dead person, but it was as if I could smell it that very moment.

Lijiu muttered away, as if he were talking to himself: ‘The brothers’ allotment was all planted to wheat, and they cut it a few days ago. At midday today, Weiguo was busy winnowing the wheat at their gate, but the wind was in the wrong direction and the husks blew over to Weihao’s house. The brothers came to blows. Weihao’s the eldest, but he was no match for Weiguo, He was pushed to the ground, but he wouldn’t give up. He scrambled to his feet and grabbed a pitchfork. He just wanted to frighten his brother but he accidentally jabbed him in the temple. That did for Weiguo. He collapsed on the ground, his legs jerked a couple of times and then he didn’t move any more. It was terrifying, he puked up a big pool of bloody froth, just like a crab spits out bubbles...’

‘Oh dear,’ I said, ‘that’s really dreadful.’ I couldn’t think what else to say.

Lijiu rubbed his face, though it was too dark to see whether he was crying. Everyone in Da Fan village had the same surname – Fan – and were descended from the same ancestors, so they were all kin to some degree. I didn’t know whether Lijiu was closely related to Weiguo or only distantly.

‘It’s the busy season in the fields,’ Lijiu went on. ‘Girlie’s broken down, you’re shut in here, now Weiguo’s died before his time and Weihao will have to pay for that with his life... Our Production Team only has 30 or 40 able-bodied men. The Team leader’s going to find it difficult, isn’t he?’

I was startled: ‘When he invited the Civil Defence Team to come to the village,’ I asked Lijiu, ‘was it because of that?’

‘Yes, at least partly...’

He was about to say something else, but Ren Jun waggled the rifle and berated him: ‘Lijiu, cut that nonsense! You’re getting to be an old blabbermouth!’

Ren Jun was actually two generations younger than Lijiu, and it would have been

more proper if he'd addressed Lijiu respectfully as 'Grandpa'. But everyone in the village, old and young alike, called him just 'Lijiu, Lijiu'. For some reason Lijiu had never married and had children, so now he'd reached the age of 80 and was still treated as an old 'lad'.

Anyway, Lijiu did as he was told and shut up. He stood up and restored the sword to its position slung from his shoulder. Until Weiqiao arrived, the three of them stood without moving a muscle or uttering a word.

Weiqiao bustled in, smelling of booze. A thin jacket hung from his shoulders, leaving his arms free. That was how the Da Fan village cadres usually dressed. Only the jackets differed. Ligui, our Team leader, had a Sun Yatsen jacket, and Fan the Production Brigade Party Secretary had an army greatcoat, which he wore draped around his shoulders even in summer, without seeming to feel the heat.

There was a chorus of: 'Weiqiao, Mr Book-keeper.'

Weiqiao didn't answer but came straight over to me. He stopped a pace away from me and shrugged his jacket off. It slid to the ground and Ren Jun promptly picked it up. I greeted him too: 'Weiqiao, Mr Book-keeper'.

Weiqiao peered at me tipsily. His eyes held a very strange expression, which could have been either worry or concern. 'Oh, Xiaofei,' he said, 'that's a capital offence you committed!'

I felt like crying. 'Weiqiao, Mr Book-keeper, I'm innocent! Big Xu and Wu Gang...' Weiqiao interrupted me.

He acted as if someone was after him and spoke urgently. 'Xiaofei, what are you going to do now?'

'What can I do? Deputy Wang and his team are going to have me shot.'

Weiqiao changed tack. 'What family have you got?'

'My mother died when I was at primary school. There's just my dad.'

Weiqiao didn't ask how my mother died. 'Brothers and sisters?'

'An older brother and an older sister,' I told him. 'They're much older than me, they found jobs and left home a long while ago.'

What I was trying to say was that although I had a brother and a sister, it was like not having any. And that my father was an old man and was being punished by a spell in a May 7 Cadre School. His case was still pending, so he couldn't be any help to me. So effectively I had no father. I was an orphan. There was no one to look after me except the Production Team.

But I didn't get a chance to say that. Weiqiao pondered a moment and then said: 'You've got an elder brother and sister, so your dad won't be worried that there's no one to send him to his grave.'

What ever did he mean? I was still wondering when Weiqiao said: 'Untie Xiaofei.'

Ren Jun and Lijiu put down their weapons and rushed over to undo the ropes. One went for my wrists, the other dived under the table to undo the rope which tied me to the table leg. They had been tied in running knots, and wouldn't come undone. 'Just undo one for a start,' said Weiqiao. So the pair of them set to work together, four rough horny hands wrenching and pulling at my injured wrists. It was so painful I nearly choked. The more they hurried, the more of a muddle they made. Lijiu stood on the bench and got the hurricane lamp down. The flame flickered once and went out.

Weiqiao swore: 'Idiot!'

In the darkness, Ren Jun and Lijiu kept working away at the knots, which seemed as if they would never come undone.

I felt panicky. The others were getting anxious too. Suddenly I saw Baldie's shape groping around on the floor and exclaimed: 'Don't let him get the gun!'

Weiqiao pounced on Baldie: 'Do you hear that? Put it down! Itchy fingers!'

Baldie dropped the gun with a clatter.

Finally the knots came undone. Weiqiao put one hand on my shoulder. His swarthy face came so close to mine that I could feel his breath. The whites of his eyes gleamed. His hand felt like a lead-weight and his voice was deadly serious. 'Xiaofei, do you want to live or die?'

'I want to live.'

'Come with me then.'

'Weiqiao, Mr Book-keeper...'

'Don't say a word. Act as if your mum and dad had never had you as their son.'

This made me even more frightened of going with him. I remembered Wang's parting instructions to Ren Jun before he set off to the banquet at Ligui's house. I turned around quickly and looked at Ren Jun. He had retrieved his rifle and although he held it with the barrel pointing downwards, I couldn't help worrying. The moment I left the hall, he might get ready to fire.

'Quick!' Weiqiao was pushing me. 'If we don't go now, Wang and his team will be back!'

I got up from the bench hesitantly. Weiqiao gave me a hefty jerk and I staggered forward. I was still not standing upright when he came round behind me and pushed me out of the hall door.

I kept looking round and eyeing Ren Jun. He hadn't moved, and his gun barrel still pointed downwards. At least, I thought, if he does pick up his gun, Weiqiao is between him and me. I calmed down a bit.