

# *Running Through Zhongguancun*

by Xu Zechen

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## **1**

*I'm out.*

Dunhuang opened his mouth to shout; a dust devil rose up and filled his eyes, nose and mouth with fine grit; he was obliged to sneeze and rub his eyes. The little iron gate clanged shut behind him. He spat the sand from his mouth; the dust devil had moved on. Tilting his head back he looked at the sky, a blur of yellow dust behind which the sun glowed mild but rough, like a polished piece of ground glass or a copper mirror that had seen years of use. The sunlight had no power to dazzle but Dunhuang's eyes still teared up; it was sunlight, after all. Another dust devil leaned towards him and he dodged out of its way. This was a sandstorm, he'd heard of them on the inside. The past few days they'd talked of only two things: his getting out, and the sandstorms. While he was inside he'd seen the storms picking up, seen the yellow dust settle on the steps and windowsills, but there wasn't enough room to really kick up a fuss. If he could, he'd like to go back in there and tell that pack of old cabbage heads that if they wanted a real sandstorm, they'd have to get out into the wide open spaces.

Wild land stretched before him, a few trees showing new buds, no green grass to be seen. It must be buried in sand, Dunhuang thought, and kicked at the dried up weeds beside the gate—he peered around but still couldn't see a speck of green. Three months, for Christ's sake, and not one blade of green grass grown. He felt cold with the wind on him, and pulled a jacket out of his bag. He shouldered the bag and shouted:

“I’m out!”

The iron gate creaked and a head peered out. Dunhuang saluted it, then laughed, “What are you looking at? Back to your post.”

The head glared at him, retracted, and the iron gate clanged shut once more.

Dunhuang walked for twenty minutes, then waved a little truck over. The driver, with a first growth of fluffy beard, asked where he was going, and Dunhuang said anywhere was fine, so long as it was inside Beijing. The driver dumped him on the west Fourth Ring Road; he was taking his truck to the Liulangzhuang automobile market. As he got off Dunhuang thought he knew this place, he’d been here before. He walked south, turned right, and sure enough there was a little corner store where he’d once bought Zhongnanhai cigarettes. The sandstorm aside, Beijing hadn’t changed much. Dunhuang felt a little bit easier; he’d worried that Beijing might have transformed behind his back. He bought a pack of cigarettes and asked the young salesgirl if she still recognized him. The girl smiled and said he looked familiar. He said I once bought four packs of cigarettes here. As he was leaving he heard the girl spit the melon seed shells from her mouth and mutter:

“Lunatic!”

Dunhuang didn’t look back—who’s going to argue with someone ugly as you! He followed the road onward, knowing he must look like a jobless young tough; he started swinging his bag around and swaggering down the wrong side of the street. Walking on the wrong side wasn’t illegal. He walked slowly, savoring a Zhongnanhai. Being inside was just like being home: it was hard to get a smoke. The first time he’d brought two cartons of Zhongnanhais home his father had been thrilled and passed them out to guests, solemnly telling them, Zhongnanhai, that’s where the leaders of our nation live, they all smoke these. Where the leaders of our nation live. Dunhuang had only once passed the front gate of Zhongnanhai, on his way to see the flag-raising. He’d dragged himself up at 4am, Bao Ding cursing him all the while, saying: you can see the flag raising any day, why has it got to be a foggy day? It had been foggy, and they had to make a delivery that morning, but Dunhuang couldn’t help himself. He hadn’t been in Beijing long, was hanging around with Bao Ding, and apart from enormous heaps of cash his dreams were filled with the flag, fluttering in the wind. He could hear the clack-clacking footsteps of the ceremonial guard, passing in perfect union through his dreams. Flying along on a wrecked old bicycle he had passed a bright blurry gate, where a few guards might have been standing, but he thought nothing of it. When he got back and Bao Ding told him that that was Zhongnanhai, he regretted not stopping. He always meant to

go back and take a closer look, but never got around to it. It was like Bao Ding said: You could go any day, so you end up going no day. He'd never gone.

Dunhuang didn't know where he was headed; when he realized that it seemed terrifying. No place to go. The whole lot of them had gone in: Bao Ding, Big Mouth, Xin'an, and Sanwan with the lame leg. Hardly anyone he knew was left, he'd have trouble just finding a place to crash. And he was short of money, only fifty to hand, minus the nine he'd just spent on cigarettes. He'd follow his feet for now and worry about it tomorrow—he could always burrow in somewhere for a night. The sun was dropping steadily in the sandpaper sky, down towards the end of this street, looking more and more like a giant millstone weighing on Beijing's shoulders. As Dunhuang took the cigarette from his mouth he whistled a bit to buck his spirits; this wouldn't kill him. When he'd first come to Beijing, and gotten separated from Bao Ding, hadn't he slept a night against a concrete pillar under an overpass?

Obstetrics hospital. Zhongguancun Human Resources Market. The Bai Family Courtyard Restaurant. Earthquake Bureau. He looked up and saw Haidian Bridge before him. He hadn't come this way on purpose. Dunhuang stopped, watching an extended city bus run a red light under the bridge. He hadn't wanted to come here, actually, though there wasn't anywhere he wanted to go. It was beside Haidian Bridge where he'd been caught, he and Bao Ding. They ran all the way here from Pacific Digital City without stopping for breath, but still couldn't shake the police. They still had their stuff with them. If they'd known they weren't going to get away they would have tossed it all. He'd called to Bao Ding: it's okay, those cops are too fat to buckle their pants, but they turned out to be pretty nimble. A car cut them off in front, and it was too late to toss anything.

That was three months ago. It had still been cold then, around the New Year, the wind singing in his ears. As they were dodging and sprinting they'd nearly made two cars collide under the bridge. Now he was out, and Bao Ding was still inside. Bao Ding's left hand had gotten stomped by the police, Dunhuang wondered if he'd recovered.

Dunhuang turned onto another street, turned again. The wind picked more sand up off the ground and he ducked in under a building. The light was fading, it was almost dark. He swatted the dust from his clothing, and a girl carrying a bag like his walked up to him, saying "Want a DVD, mister?", pulling a handful of CDs from her bag. "I've got everything: Hollywood, Japanese, Korean, domestic hits. Also, old classics and Oscar winners. Everything." She spread out the colorful packages for him to see.

Under the failing light there was something vaguely improper about those colors, but he knew that the discs were clean. Like the girl's face—dried out by the wind, but not bad-looking. She seemed to be cold, trembling occasionally as if she were about to cry; a good girl. Dunhuang couldn't judge her age, maybe twenty-four or twenty-five, maybe twenty-eight, not more than thirty. Thirty-year-old female DVD-sellers didn't look like that; they would be carrying a child, and ask in mysterious tones, "Hey, want a disc? I've got all sorts; if you want porno I've got hi-def." Then they'd hurriedly draw the discs from the back of their clothing.

"I've got no place to watch them, anyway," Dunhuang said, and leaned back against the wall to let another gust of sand pass by.

"They'll play on a DVD machine or a computer," the girl said. "They're cheap, I'll give you six *kuai* a disc."

Dunhuang dropped his bag on the steps, wanting to sit and rest. The girl thought he meant to buy and squatted down with him, pulling a sheet of newspaper from her bag and spreading the discs on it. "They're all good, guaranteed high quality."

Dunhuang thought it would be churlish not to buy, and said, "all right, I'll take one."

"Thanks. Which do you want?"

"Anything, so long as it's good."

The girl stopped and looked at him. "If you really don't want one then just forget it."

"Who said I don't want one?" He was laughing at himself now. "I'll take two! Hell, give me three!" Worried she'd get suspicious, he hurriedly rummaged through the discs under the lights of the building.

*The Bicycle Thief. Cinema Paradiso. Address Unknown.*

"Hey, you're a film buff!" Elation was obvious in her voice. "Those are all classics!"

Dunhuang said he didn't really understand film, he'd just picked them randomly. It was true: he really didn't understand film. He'd seen *The Bicycle Thief* before; he'd once heard a pair of college students talking about *Cinema Paradiso* on the bus, the boy saying it was good, the girl saying it was great; he'd picked *Address Unknown* just because the name seemed awkward, he thought it should have been *Unknown Address*.

The discs bought, he sat on the steps, looking at the neon lights of the building across the way. Four characters: "Hai Dian Chess Academy." He'd seen that name many times before. He drew out a cigarette, lit it, and blew a cloud of smoke toward the sign.

The girl packed her discs into her bag and stood up, saying, “aren’t you going?”

“You go on, I’m going to rest a bit.” Dunhuang saw no need to tell a stranger that he had no place to go.

She said goodbye, walked off, and then came back to sit on the step beside him. Dunhuang unconsciously shifted his rear to make room.

“Got another?” She meant his cigarette.

Dunhuang looked at her in surprise, then passed her the pack and the lighter. She noted that Zhongnanhai were particularly mild. He had no cause to disagree. He’d crossed paths with many, many people, but they were nearly all transactions, for the sake of cash, and the girl’s behavior threw him off balance. He only panicked for a second, though—what could go wrong? The barefoot do not fear the shod. Whatever would happen, let it happen. Suddenly relaxed, he asked her:

“How’s business?”

“Business is business. Weather’s bad.” She was talking about the sandstorm. It had driven all the idlers indoors, and it was mostly idlers who bought discs.

“Mmm.” Dunhuang nodded in sympathy. The weather had plenty to do with his line of work, too. Rain or wind set the world scurrying; no one was in the mood.

She was no stranger to smoking, her smoke-rings were better than his. The two of them sat there watching the sky darken. The pedestrians thinned out. Dunhuang heard someone in a nearby bookshop saying, Close it up, who’s going to buy books when the gravel’s flying? Then the sound of a shutter door being dragged straight down to bang into the ground. “Flying gravel...” Hardly. Dunhuang did his best not to look at the girl. He wasn’t sure how to talk to her, he wasn’t used to lounging around with girls he didn’t know, what exactly was this turning into? He wanted to leave.

“What do you do?” the girl asked him abruptly.

“What do you think?”

“A student? I can’t tell.”

“I don’t do anything. I’m homeless.” Dunhuang found that the truth was as easy as a lie.

“I don’t believe you,” she said, standing. “But so what if you are homeless, let’s have a couple of drinks. My treat.”

Dunhuang smiled to himself. You’ve showed your hand now, I knew this wasn’t your only profession. He’d never paid for it, but Bao Ding and lame Sanwan had, and he had a basic handle on women. But a girl like

this in that line of work... it was a little heartbreaking. But he talked himself around—the newspapers said many of these girls were actually college students. Even college students, such a grand thing to be, were doing this. Dunhuang thought again about those furtive women with their babies, selling discs.

“Why don’t I treat you.” Dunhuang put on the generous act. Dead hogs don’t fear a scalding: what the hell. “I don’t know this area, you pick a spot.”

## 2

They went to the “Ancients” hotpot restaurant next to Changchun Park. The girl said she was frozen through and needed to warm up. Dunhuang assented; the sandstorm had blasted Beijing straight back out of spring. Seen from outside, the windows of the hotpot place were blanketed in heavy steam; shadows milled within. There was such a crowd, all red faces and thick necks, it looked as though half of Beijing had squeezed inside. Countless beer glasses hoisted overhead, the smell of alcohol and hotpot mixing with the sound of voices, rising on the hot air. Dunhuang had not felt such a welcoming intimacy in three months, at least, and his heart warmed so suddenly he nearly wept. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten hotpot. He loved hotpot; the first time he’d gone home from Beijing for the spring festival he’d bought an electric pot with his own money to bring back, and eaten hotpot from the first of the new year to the sixth, when he returned to Beijing.

They picked a table in the corner, the girl seated against the wall, Dunhuang with a crowd of boisterous diners behind him. A split pot; Dunhuang liked it spicy. Three bottles of Yanjing beer. He noticed that she ordered two plates of winter melon and mushroom. The pot boiled, the mutton floated. Dunhuang lifted his glass and said:

“What are we toasting?”

“Nothing. Drink your beer.”

The first glass was awfully refreshing. The girl wasn’t as good a drinker as she had let on. Dunhuang could drink; he felt it was his only true talent. Not many people knew it. Bao Ding thought he could drink, but after he had five catty of *erguotou* in him, he never did find out how much Dunhuang could handle.

“You can really drink,” said Dunhuang.

“You’re not bad yourself.”

“Nah, after one bottle I start talking nonsense.”

“So go ahead, I’m listening,” she said carelessly, smoothing out her sleeves. She hadn’t noticed how Dunhuang poured his beer straight down, hardly swallowing. “Let’s drink until we talk nonsense.”

The two of them started downing beer by the half glass. Across the roiling, steaming pot, they looked like lovers. Dunhuang hadn’t faced such lush temptation in three months. His eyes glittered; he stuffed mutton by the chopsticks-full into his mouth.

“You must be starved.”

“A little,” he answered, obliged to pause and look at his dining partner. Her face had become flushed and soft, and she appeared much younger than she had out in the wind. Not bad looking. The few freckles on her nose looked pretty good. “You eat, too.”

Someone’s phone rang and the girl hurriedly looked in her bag. By the time she found her phone a man nearby was already talking. Her disappointment was obvious. She turned the cellphone in her palms a few times, then put it on the table.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Dunhuang.”

“Dunhuang? That’s nice. Is it real?”

“Course it’s real—free returns if it’s not.”

“Who gave it to you? Sounds pretty educated.”

“My dad. Educated? He’s basically illiterate; he just got lucky. My mom says that a couple days after I was born he was so frustrated with trying to pick a good name he got constipated. In the end he had to drag some old newspapers over from the neighbors, but he spent a whole day looking through them and couldn’t decide on anything. Finally he saw the characters ‘Dunhuang’ in a headline in the *People’s Daily*, and that was me.”

“What’s with your dad? He should have had a name picked out before you were born!” The girl laughed emptily, her eyes flicking over her cell phone. “Guess my name.”

“I don’t know.”

“Kuang Xia. ‘Kuang’ from ‘spacious’, ‘xia’ for ‘summer’. Nice, huh?”

“That’s nice. Way better than ‘Dunhuang’, I always feel like I’m some big rock they dragged out of the earth.”

The girl laughed as though she meant it, then told him that Kuang was her father’s surname, and Xia was her mother’s. Dunhuang didn’t think it was a particularly good name. Adding your father’s surname to your mother’s: the world was full of people named that way. But still he said, Nice. He needed to make her happy. Then he started talking about how good it was

to sell DVDs, how when he'd first come to Beijing he'd wanted to do that, but had never found an in, and regretted it ever since.

"So what do you do now?" Kuang Xia asked.

"Bit of everything. A couple days of this, a couple days of that. Beijing's too big to starve in."

"Why don't you go back? Is Beijing all that great?"

"It's not that it's so great. Just getting by, right? One place is as good as another."

Kuang Xia spun her cell phone again, her expression growing heavy. "If I weren't selling DVDs I would have gone home ages ago. Beijing's windy."

"That it is, but at least the wind can't kill you."

Someone's phone rang again, and Kuang Xia picked up the phone she'd just put down. Another call for someone else. Dunhuang could see something was going on and decided to forget it, quit while he was ahead. He said, Why don't we call it a night, and seeing how happily she agreed, he said he'd treat. He waved at a waitress to get the bill.

"I'll get it, I'll get it," she said, going for her wallet. "I said I would."

Dunhuang gestured at her to put it away, and obediently she did. He was thunderstruck—didn't have to twist your arm, did I? He pretended to look for his money in the pockets of his coat hanging on his seat, at least a quart of sweat oozing from his body in two seconds flat. There was nothing for it but to risk a trick Bao Ding had taught him. He rummaged around in his left pocket for a while, his forehead knotting, then rummaged in his right pocket, then leaped to his feet and cried out in panic:

"My wallet's gone! My cellphone, too!"

"That can't be, keep looking." Kuang Xia had risen as well.

Dunhuang went through his pockets again, then snatched up his whole coat and turned the two interior pockets inside out for Kuang Xia and the waitress to see. They were entirely empty, of course. "They've been stolen!" he said. "I had them when I came in." Then, to the waitress: "You've got a thief here somewhere!"

The waitress, a girl of eighteen or so, was so terrified she began to back away, as if the thief himself were bearing down on her. Her hand fluttered in negation, "We don't, we don't!" Her look of fright gave Dunhuang pause, but the show, once begun, had to go on.

The chopsticks of the diners nearby all halted in midair, their heads turned to watch with deep interest a man who'd lost his wallet and cellphone, everyone leaning slightly backwards as if to indicate their innocence. The stage was growing larger; Dunhuang gritted his teeth and prepared for his solo.



“Are you sure you didn’t just put them in your bag?” asked Kuang Xia.

“Of course I’m sure. There was six hundred *yuan* in my wallet, maybe more, I’m not sure. There was also my bank card, my ID card, and a fifty-/yuan/ phone card—all gone! Never mind the money, but it’s a huge hassle replacing an ID card. And I bought that cell phone less than a month ago, it cost more than a thousand.”

He did his best to play the nattering old woman. Practically all the diners in the place were staring at him. The young waitress grew even more panicked and ran off to find her duty manager. By the time the duty manager arrived Kuang Xia had noticed that the waitress had failed to put the clothing cover over the back of his chair and his coat—if she had, the wallet and phone could never have been stolen. The restaurant, therefore, bore responsibility. The clothing cover had indeed been forgotten—in fact, Dunhuang’s coat was draped on top of it. The manager wouldn’t admit the restaurant’s fault: he only faltered a bit as he explained that the sign on the door stated very clearly that customers should take care of their own belongings, and that the establishment would not be responsible for losses. Dunhuang and Kuang Xia wouldn’t hear of it: if the clothing cover had been in place the restaurant would of course be blameless, but the fact was it wasn’t in place, and who knew whether that had been intentional. The implication was clear.

“We are deeply sorry for the loss of your belongings,” said the manager, finally caving in. “Why don’t we give you a 20% discount, and we’ll leave it at that. We can also throw in two free bottles of cold beer?”

Dunhuang looked at Kuang Xia, who assented. Dunhuang, however, said “No! We want five bottles!”

The manager said, “Sir, that’s the best I can do.”

Dunhuang answered, “Fine, call your boss over.”

The duty manager hesitated, then left. Kuang Xia asked Dunhuang for his cell phone number: she would call it and see if the thief was still in the restaurant. Dunhuang rattled off a number and Kuang Xia dialed; the phone was off. Give it up, there’s no hope. There was no hope to begin with, thought Dunhuang. That was a three-month-old number and god knows where the phone is now. The duty manager came back two minutes later, the waitress behind him carrying five bottles of beer. He apologized once again and said the head manager was currently engaged, but sent his apologies and agreed to five bottles of beer.

Dunhuang said, “All right, pack them up so this lady can take them home.” Then to Kuang Xia: “I’m sorry, looks like this one’s on you after all.”

Kuang Xia said never mind, it was meant to be hers to begin with. She looked at her cell phone, then suddenly stuffed it in her bag, sat down, and

told the waitress, “Open them, we’ll drink them now!”

So let’s drink them, Dunhuang thought. Who am I afraid of? It so happened I hadn’t had enough.

They really got started, then. Kuang Xia was suddenly drinking with abandon, as though she were downing water, their glasses clinking with solemn determination. Drink, drink, she said. Two bottles later all she could say was “drink”, as she slowly slumped onto the table.

“You all right?” Dunhuang asked.

“Fine, drink. Drink.” Kuang Xia spoke as if she had a fishball in her mouth, then suddenly she began to weep. “I want to go home, take me home.”

Okay, said Dunhuang, I’ll take you home now, meanwhile finishing the rest of the beer straight from the bottle.

Luckily Kuang Xia remembered the name of the place where she lived, and Dunhuang had heard of it. Three months ago he’d been as familiar with this stretch of Haidian as an old Beijinger. She lived in a one-bedroom apartment in the west zone of Furongli, third floor, a rental. Dunhuang got her upstairs and opened the door to discover that the whole room was full of white wicker baskets, all of them full of DVDs. Labels were stuck on the baskets, reading Euro/American, Indian, Korean, Japanese, etc. He was just thinking of looking for the “softcore” and “hardcore” baskets when Kuang Xia spoke from the bed, her eyes still closed:

“Water, I want water.”

Dunhuang went to the kitchen, but the water bottle was empty. He ran back into the room and told her to hold on a bit, he would boil some. While he boiled water she fell asleep again, rolling herself in the blanket, snoring gently. He sat down in an old wooden chair, holding the glass and waiting for the water to cool. The room was crudely furnished; besides the queen-sized bed where Kuang Xia lay there was only one table and one chair in the whole place, an old television and a nearly-new DVD player on the table. The rest was DVD baskets. He nosed about here and there, and ended up drinking the water himself. He couldn’t imagine how he would pass the rest of the evening—more precisely, where he would sleep that night. Listening to Kuang Xia’s light snores he was suddenly overcome with self-pity: he didn’t have so much as his own den. He’d been in Beijing for two years and this was the best he’d done. Thinking about it soberly, it was really too much. When he’d quit his old living-dead job he’d fully believed that he could come to Beijing and make a good life—now he himself was living dead. He had only 22 *yuan 4 mao* in his pocket. He poured another glass of water for Kuang Xia, so he’d have something ready if she asked for a drink.

Dunhuang looked through all the baskets but found no hardcore, not even anything that could properly be considered softcore, only “romance” flicks. Seeing a woman with bared arms and legs on the cover he knew it was all a show—the whole film probably only bared that much. At last he found something that seemed to be raunchy, a French movie called *Porno Director*. He turned on the TV and DVD player and starting watching with the sound muted. He watched half of it without seeing anything to quicken his pulse and soon lost interest. His eyelids began to droop and he fell asleep where he sat in the chair. When he jerked awake the film was over, the DVD tray had ejected itself, and the TV displayed a steady deep blue, with the white brand logo of the DVD player.

It was two thirty in the morning. He turned off the TV and DVD player, feeling cold and stiff-backed. Kuang Xia was huddled on the other side of the bed like a cat, her snores ceased, the blanket rising and falling with her breath. To hell with it, Dunhuang thought, and drawing his wrinkled felt overcoat from his bag he laid down gingerly on the queen-sized bed, curling his body up like a dog. He pulled his coat over his head and the world went dark. For him, night had come at last. He thought to scratch an itch on his chin—his hand halfway there, he slept.