

## CONVERSATIONS OVER GUNPOWDER TEA

I wonder where you are when I measure pellets of tea into my cup in the morning with the precision of a rifleman, when the sun is watery and white through the kitchen window, and I'm sitting at the table you salvaged from your uncle all those years ago. One leg is still a little shorter than the others, I remember you'd grinned ruefully after hours of trying to fix it; you were never the best at fixing things, but we hadn't had the money to take it to a proper carpenter, so it'd stayed that way, wobbling precariously every time I placed the soup pot on its well-scrubbed surface.

Our daughter comes into the kitchen no more than a minute either side of seven, stifling a yawn behind her hand as if I wouldn't notice anyway. It's been months since she's asked about you; I can't remember exactly, I've lost count. We don't talk about it. She hurries through breakfast - rice porridge with those mustard stems you always loved - and is gone before I can say more than a few words, brushing me off with a huff, barely a 'goodbye' over the bag slung across her shoulder.

That popped rice stand from the market you used to drag me to on the weekends disappeared a while ago. The husband's not been around, of course, and the last I saw, the wife was huddled in a huge black shawl I'd never expected her to own. I remember she used to tell me off, in the way all older women seem to chastise their juniors, for wearing a grey skirt instead of a colourful one, said it made me look too stern, too severe.

I wonder what you're eating when our daughter comes home at noon and I put a bowl of rice in front of her, scraping some from my own into hers when she's not looking. I was never very good at cooking; I remember you used to laugh affectionately when I spilled the salt jar on the floor even though you knew we'd just refilled it, or when I'd recoil as the fire hissed up from under the pan at me, watching helplessly as the flames slowly licked and charred the vegetables.

They've been taking from the harvests to send up north, I've seen the trains; great, cumbersome things heaving with so much grain they seem to huff with exhaustion as they crawl along the tracks. The children are fascinated by it all, constantly hovering around the station instead of going to school. Sometimes, I see them throwing old coats and blankets and tins of sugar and thick gauze packages of tea on the train cars.

My hands are perpetually stained now, like yours used to be. There's a dull ache in my arms as I pull the handle of the press and hear the sizzle of wet ink on paper, slide stacks of still soft copies of the daily bulletin into a dozen satchels and hand them off to the new delivery women. We're slow, clumsy, but there's a neatly folded newspaper on the doorstep of every house before the sun has fully risen.

The Chairman of the local party branch has been making home visits on odd days. The other morning, I'd sent him on his way after some tea, watched him potter down the line of houses as I scooped the damp leaves, still tightly furled like dozens of tiny pills, out from the bottom of the cup. He'd reminded me of one of those oversized garden gnomes we used to see outside manors in the city.

There's this sense of melancholy at home, not all new, of course. I still see that old gentleman in the city centre. He's always on that bench under the tree with his threadbare old coat and gloves that are more hole than wool. The other day, I tried smiling at him, just to see what would happen, and he stared so vacantly at me that I'd felt quite unnerved. I remember you were always upset after seeing him, and I'd ask but you'd brush me off and tell me not to worry. I suppose you must have recognised him from the troubled times. You did always insist on remembering. I never told you about all the times I'd woken up to your anguished mumbles, seen the sweat beading on your forehead, the thrashing of your limbs, all the times you'd begged *please, no, there's no one home, it's only me*, eyes screwed shut with a vengeance no matter how much I pleaded with you to *wake up, it's not real, not anymore*.

I sleep more now, alone in our old room, our too-large bed that's become a sad imitation of luxury. In the evenings, a cool breeze seeps under the door and through cracks in the walls. I remember, when the cold had slipped insistently under the blankets and bitten sharply into our bones, how you'd bury your nose in my shoulder, wrap your arms around my waist, how I'd always let you, even when the pulse of your heart against mine was too close, too loud, even when it felt like you were stealing all the air between us and leaving me with none.

Your nightmares had always been less violent in winter, cowed by a wakeful glare and the soft mist of my breath in the frigid air.

Last Tuesday, I'd called absentmindedly for you, asking you to tie the strings of my apron. You hadn't responded, and there'd already been a sarcastic comment on my lips by the time I realised you'd never been there to hear me in the first place.

Nanjing is quiet, docile. I'd thought I would love it this way, all those years ago during the occupation, the days when I'd mutter a prayer under my breath every time I walked past the guard stations, suppressed a shiver at the hands and eyes of the ochre-clad soldiers raking over my body. There'd been something unsettlingly savage about them, the way they'd laugh and leer as I walked past. I remember a burning sensation on my back even when they were behind me, and how I'd quicken my step until the feeling faded around a few bends of the street.

I wonder what you must be thinking when I sit by the oil lamp at night, bolts of coarse fabric passing through my fingers. I wonder if you've even had time to think. There's been murmurs among the women in the neighbourhood, worries that their husbands have betrayed them, sordid imagination of affairs with foreign prostitutes, even of homosexual sin, with comrades. I don't pay much mind to such rumours, but I do wonder, some nights, as my needle weaves messily across small tears in the silken blue vest you neglected to bring when you'd left, telling me it would only get covered in mud and grime - and maybe blood, though you hadn't said that aloud. I suppose I should have sent it to a tailor, spared myself the look of horror on your face if you ever saw my uneven stitches and poor choice of thread colour.

I wonder if I'm losing you. If I've already lost you.

There'd been a river of tears that day when you and hundreds of other men got on the train to the front. None of them had been ours, though I suspect you would've cried had I not left

hastily, half-dragging our sniffling daughter behind me. You were always the sensitive one between the two of us, after all. I'd wondered that day, briefly, if I could've gone in your place, if it would have hurt her less than seeing your face disappear behind a dirty train window. She always adored you, still adores you, far more than she ever did me. I've had that feeling since she used to fuss and reach for you while still attached by the mouth to my breast as an infant.

You were always a better mother than me. I wonder if I should resent you for it.

I've taken to watching my tea leaves unfurl themselves from the gunpowder-like pellets they'd been pressed into. You had a way of reading them; I remember the little glint of excitement in your eye when you'd turn my cup a few times and tell me that I'd have good fortunes at the market, or that I should be careful walking under a thatched roof. I never understood how you did it; I tried to learn, once, with a few of the old women from across the river, but my head had hurt when they'd wheedle about the nuances of fortune and favour and destiny.

So, I just watch. The air seems to still until there's nothing but those leaves, sinking gently to the bottom of the cup. As I watch, I wonder when you'll come home. I wonder if you ever will.

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