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THE EGG THIEF

by Ray Chen Smith

After I'd spoken to Mao and collected my dinner, I headed to my regular table at the rear of the cafeteria. The second I sat down, Rhino asked me, "You hear about the reward, Flabby?"

I sighed. When I was first assigned to this institute in the icy northern city of Harbin, I was pleased to find two of my Shanghai friends there. What didn't please me, however, was that Fu Chen and Rhino insisted on calling me by my childhood nickname. Well, it was actually "Fatty" in Shanghai, but they'd modified it once I lost weight on the institute's wretched food.

"What reward?" I asked, looking miserably at my dinner. Sprinkles of radish and cabbage and two steamed buns the weight and consistency of toilet paper.

Fu Chen smiled and said, "The reward for capturing the egg thief." Fu Chen didn't have a nickname since he was insufferably free of physical

defect. Tall and lean and with a face that belonged atop a marble statue, he must have invaded quite a few women's reveries at the institute.

"I thought Inspector Chiu was looking into that," I said.

"Guess he couldn't find him," Rhino said, his bony cheeks inflated with his two buns.

Fu Chen laughed. "Chiu can't find the toilet without consulting the red book first."

As if on cue, Inspector Chiu—balding and befuddled—strolled into the cafeteria. Like everyone else, he had to first address the Mao portrait above the doorway, required protocol before meals. Unlike everyone else, however, Inspector Chiu didn't just utter a short phrase and go on his way. Instead, he drew out the little red book and consulted it like a student looking up a word in the dictionary. Finally, appropriate phrase in hand, he turned to the photo again.

"Revolutionary culture is a powerful weapon for the broad masses of the people." He punctuated the sentence with a wave of the red book. "It prepares the ground ideologically . . ."

"Showoff," Rhino muttered, and frowned.

"Sycophant," I whispered, and sneered.

"Genius," Fu Chen said, and snickered. I knew what he meant. Despite having a brain hardly more developed than an orangutan's, Inspector Chiu nonetheless was head of security of the entire institute, with all the perks that such a position afforded. Of course, this could be partly explained by his background. Like all the other security personnel here, Inspector Chiu had been a soldier and was therefore rewarded with a plum job after Liberation. Yet that only partly explained it. What allowed this obtuse man to rise above his equally obtuse colleagues was his ideological zeal, which he would demonstrate at every possible moment—like during mealtimes before a packed cafeteria. So it didn't matter that he couldn't find a simple egg thief.

After Inspector Chiu had sat down, I turned to my friends. "How much is the reward?"

"A hundred yuan," Rhino replied.

"A hundred yuan," I repeated, awed. It was more than my monthly salary as an engineer.

Fu Chen said, "Let's find the guy and split the reward. Thirty-three yuan each."

"Sounds good to me." Rhino was no doubt calculating how many buns he could buy.

“That’s ninety-nine yuan,” I said to Fu Chen. “Who gets the final yuan?”

Fu Chen laughed again. “Well, let’s talk about that back in our room.”

The three of us went back to the dorm room I shared with Fu Chen. Actually, we shared it with one other person, an exasperating bore we nicknamed Chiu Junior due to his inability to speak in anything but revolutionary catchphrases. Indeed, the only decoration on his third of the room was a poster that screeched, “Down with Soviet Revisionists!” Thankfully, the guy was a Harbin local and had gone home for the weekend.

For the next ten minutes, we rehashed what we’d heard. For the past month, a thief had been stealing eggs from the institute. How he—we assumed it was a man—did it was simple enough. Catching him, though, proved difficult. The reason was the location of the crimes.

The Mechanical Engineering Institute was a hermetic square; everyone worked and lived within its walled compound. Behind the six-floored main building—offices, labs, classrooms—were the dozen three-storied dorms housing the institute’s six hundred residents. Behind these structures was an immense field that ran all the way to the back wall. The

hard earth there was inhospitable to planting, but there was still plenty of food under that ground. Explaining this abnormality was easy: dozens of refrigerators were buried there. Not the ones plugged into walls, of course, but rather underground shafts, five or six meters deep. Each of the institute's families was assigned one, and they could store whatever they wanted inside. It was always food since nobody found the cafeteria fare satisfactory. During summers, anyone who could afford it, whether with money or government coupons, would buy provisions from the farmers down the road. And since winters in Harbin lasted eight months, the shafts became perfect iceboxes: accessible with ladders and kept safe from marauders, animal and human alike, by padlocked trapdoors. They were perfect, that is, until someone began picking the locks and making off with the most precious loot—the chicken and duck eggs that were so tasty in the deprivation of winter.

“Six iceboxes were burglarized,” Fu Chen said. “Around fifty eggs, I’ve heard.”

“Only fifty?” I asked. “Why are they offering so much reward money then?” A hundred yuan was appropriate if someone had stolen fifty chickens, not eggs.

"Ten yuan for the stolen eggs," Fu Chen explained, "and ninety yuan for Inspector Chiu's stolen honor. But who cares why they're offering so much? How are we going to catch him?"

"He's robbing those iceboxes at night, I'll bet you!" Rhino declared.

Fu Chen said, "We sort of figured that, Rhino," and winked at me. Since this was December, the Harbin night spanned seventeen hours, from three in the afternoon to eight the next morning.

"Well, what has Inspector Chiu done so far?" Rhino asked.

Fu Chen laughed and answered, "Nothing!" It seemed Inspector Chiu had gone about his duties in his usual dazed manner, making me wonder how he could've possibly once helped defeat the Nationalists. On the supposition that no one besides neighbors robbed, he only questioned our department since only our iceboxes were looted. Next he checked the communal kitchens to see if anyone had been cooking eggs he shouldn't have been cooking. Then he went down to the farmers market to see if anyone had been selling eggs he shouldn't have been selling. Finally giving up, Inspector Chiu asked the institute to issue the reward.

"So how are we going to do it differently?" I asked.

"I have an idea," Fu Chen said, and explained. Since there were six hundred people at the institute, he thought it impractical to simply ask

questions like Inspector Chiu. He also thought it pointless to try to find out who might be selling eggs (the thief could be eating them instead) or cooking them (he could be eating them raw). Yet Fu Chen also believed Inspector Chiu was right to assume the culprit was in our department since how else could he have known which iceboxes had eggs. All these considerations led to Fu Chen's central idea: we draw up a list of probable suspects, and then we give the evidence to Inspector Chiu and collect the reward.

"Wait a minute," I said, "what evidence are you talking about here?"

"The stolen eggs, of course."

No doubt as confused as I was, Rhino asked, "How the hell do we know where they're at?"

An awry grin unbalanced Fu Chen's jaw. As he told Rhino and me his idea, both of our faces surely also became distorted—in disbelief. Since the thief wasn't eating the eggs right after he'd stolen them—no eggshells were found near the looted iceboxes—he obviously was storing them somewhere. And chances were, Fu Chen conjectured, that somewhere was his home. Therefore, we simply needed to break into the homes of our suspects and find the stolen eggs. Afterwards, we could bypass the illegality of these acts by lying: we would just tell Inspector Chiu that we saw the thief in the act

of stealing. Inspector Chiu might be skeptical at first, but once he searched the thief's home and found the eggs, our suspicions would be vindicated—and rewarded. "All we need to do," Fu Chen concluded, "is to figure a time to break in when the people aren't home. The breaking-in itself isn't a problem. I mean, have you seen these locks? My grandma can pick them!" He was the only one laughing by this point.

Rhino and I both tried to outwait each other, neither wanting to be the first to tell Fu Chen that he should be committed. We were still waiting when Fu Chen said, "Listen, I'll be the one breaking in"—which changed everything, of course!

I managed to suppress an instant smile. Rhino was not so successful with his. Seeing Rhino's fleeting grin, Fu Chen muttered, "You damn turtle egg!"

I broke the subsequent silence by asking, "So, any ideas who our suspects are?"

Fu Chen brightened. "Know anyone who gained a few pounds lately?" Both his and Rhino's eyes were riveted to me, then they tittered like prepubescents. They were best friends again, and once more, at my expense. And I wondered again if the fact that we all came from Shanghai provided sufficient reason for me to stay friends with these two imbeciles.

Half an hour of jabbering later, we'd finished our list of suspects. We could only think of three people, which made Fu Chen's subsequent job considerably easier.

The first suspect was the most obvious: Dingbang, already known as the Thief of Meats. He was a legend at the institute, though not because the fortyish bachelor was a master criminal. After all, he'd only filched a couple pounds of meat in the most laughable way. You see, unlike vegetables and eggs, meat could be frozen solid so that during winter, people simply hung their meat rations outside their windows. For eight months, hundreds of these meats dangled above the common walkways, looking as delectable as the peaches of immortality. What Dingbang did was what everyone else wanted to do but was afraid to: he found a long bamboo pole and knocked down the meats at night. Surprisingly, it took a full month to catch him, and it was only because he got too greedy. Since the institute bosses were assigned the top-floor apartments, Dingbang found his pole couldn't reach high enough to snag the choicest meats and resorted to throwing rocks. One night, while trying to knock down a whole frozen chicken, he inadvertently smashed Inspector Chiu's window. Dingbang had been under house arrest ever since and was only allowed out to attend the institute's

classes, often as the object of scorn in struggle sessions. Luckily, he also lived down the hallway, and we knew his schedule like our own reflections.

Our second suspect was harder, though it wasn't because she was smarter. She was only twelve, after all, and called Small Bun behind her back—though it wasn't due to endearment but rather to the fact that she was the daughter of our heavysset department head Large Bun. But Small Bun resembled her namesake a lot more than her mother did; the girl was as wide as she was tall. Truth be told, her shape was the only reason we suspected her—she couldn't possibly have maintained her weight given the institute's food. And since we also couldn't imagine Large Bun clambering up and down ladders at night, Small Bun must've been the one, and our boss no doubt kept quiet about her daughter's outings. Still, finding evidence wasn't going to be easy. Although Large Bun was a widow—her husband jumped from the roof last year, one of the institute's three suicides—we didn't know her schedule, and her daughter, while a schoolkid, often stayed home. But we had to find a way and time since, outside of Dingbang, Small Bun was our main suspect.

In fact, we added the third suspect as an afterthought, and it was partly because a list with only two names seemed pathetic. Big-Eyed Yong was a former engineer around our age. He was also the son of a local

Chinese mother and a Russian father who'd long ago fled his familial responsibilities by literally fleeing the country. (The Russian border was only a couple hundred kilometers away.) This family history, while humiliating, wasn't fatal to Big Eyes's prospects, and until a few years ago, outside a few catcalls—"big nose" and "hairy one" and the like—he didn't have any problems. Indeed, Big Eyes proved an exemplary engineer. But then came the Chinese-Soviet split, and as Chiu Junior's poster above us showed, "Soviet revisionists" joined "American imperialists" as the enemies of socialism. Big Eyes lost his position as engineer almost immediately. Of course, nobody was really an engineer anymore—we were all students of socialism at this point—but Big Eyes wasn't even allowed to attend classes. Instead, he was forced to run tedious errands for our instructors, like pouring tea and doing laundry. And while not under house arrest like Dingbang, he was so ostracized during his off-hours, he might as well have been. Yet, because of his unfavorable genealogy, Big Eyes was also given his own room, allowing him total secrecy to do or hide anything—including stolen eggs.

Finished with our list of suspects, we congratulated each other on our investigatory insight. Fu Chen and Rhino even patted me on the back,

though that was only because I had another one of my asthma attacks, which the cold Harbin air only exacerbated.

It took us three days to find our suspects' schedules and make the picklock. On the fourth day, Fu Chen feigned a stomachache bad enough to be excused from classes but not severe enough to warrant a trip to the infirmary.

Rhino and I sweated through that morning's ideological discussions—though, not because of the material. Everything I needed to pass that class I'd learned while observing the family parrot as a kid. By repeating everything the instructor said, I elicited the same response from him as that dumb bird did from my family: smiles and warm feelings all around. The afternoon struggle session proved more challenging as I had to occasionally shout denunciations at the accused—who, for that day, was Large Bun. This occurrence, of course, was not a coincidence as Fu Chen shredded her privacy while we in the classroom shredded her dignity.

Rhino and I met Fu Chen that night in the library. We layered our table with books on tapeworms and other intestinal parasites, as if trying to find out what was ailing poor Fu Chen.

"I have two pieces of bad news," Fu Chen whispered. "First, I didn't find any stolen eggs. And second, I couldn't hit Big Eyes's place. I was picking his lock like I did the other two places when he opened the door! I said something stupid about being lost and got out of there."

"I swear he was going out today!" Rhino said. Fu Chen and I had made the mistake of entrusting him with finding Big Eyes's schedule.

"It doesn't matter," Fu Chen said. "He was probably forced to write a paper today criticizing himself for being born half-Russian or something." He laughed at his own joke and then swiveled to me. "Which means, Flabby, you have to break into his place tomorrow."

"WHAT?"

"Big Eyes saw me already. And if I take another day off, they'll send me to the hospital for sure. Flabby, you're the only one who can do it. And you know it."

I scowled, amazed how my affliction could be used against me. An unintended benefit of my asthma was that I could be excused from classes whenever I had an attack.

"What are you worrying about, Flabby?" Fu Chen asked. "Big Eyes's going to the city tomorrow. Check the schedule. And even if he comes back early, we'll have time to alert you."

I scowled again. Each morning's discussions were held in a classroom in our dorm building. The windows inside faced the compound's front gates, and Big Eyes's place was directly below the classroom. Since the building's radiators were connected vertically, a tap against one was heard all along the pipe. "If I see the guy," Fu Chen said, "I'll rap five times."

He was, of course, an expert of the radiator-as-alarm system; he'd used it plenty of times before to escape detection while visiting various sweethearts. "So what you do think, Flabby?"

I sighed and nodded. I had run out of arguments.

The next morning, I dutifully faked an asthma attack and left my class. I spent a few minutes loudly coughing up nonexistent mucus in the communal restroom, then made my way downstairs to Big Eyes's room. It was at the end of a hallway smelling of spoiled vegetables.

I used Fu Chen's picklock and within five seconds, I was inside. In contrast to the dirty hallway outside, the small room was unsoiled by even a trace of dust. Very sparse furnishing: a mattress of folded clothes, a tiny desk, a battered dresser, and a framed Mao. A transom let in the morning light. I tuned my ears to the radiator, but the only sound was my nervous heartbeats.

I quickly opened the dresser and plunged my hands beneath the clothes. My fingers touched something hard, and withdrawing them, I found I was holding a faded photograph. Three smiling people stood in front of one of Harbin's Russian churches. A plump Chinese woman, a squinty-eyed Caucasian man, and a gap-toothed Eurasian kid. I stared at the photo for a moment, surprised that Big Eyes would keep such a memento. Never mind the political consequences. Why would anyone care about someone who'd abandoned him? I didn't have an answer and replaced the photograph.

After leaving Big Eyes's place, I spent the hours until lunch in my own room. When lunchtime finally came, I rushed to the cafeteria and finding Fu Chen and Rhino, told them what I'd found. "See, I told you!" Rhino shouted afterwards.

As was foreseen, Inspector Chiu was skeptical that we saw Big Eyes stealing eggs a day ago. But eventually, he relented and marched down to Big Eyes's room with the three of us trailing behind. Our claim was vindicated when Inspector Chiu found the eggs where I'd last seen them: hidden in a corner of the dresser. And he found the family photo too.

As we were leaving, we ran unexpectedly into Big Eyes coming down the hallway, his babyish face tightened, his gray eyes wide. "Why is everyone—?" But Inspector Chiu cut him off with a curt "SHUT UP" and for good measure, smacked the young man across the face.

Rhino, Fu Chen, and I received the reward, split three ways with the extra yuan going to me for finding the eggs—though, nobody besides us knew that. Most of the institute's praise, I'd like to believe, was genuine, like Chiu Junior rhapsodizing how lucky he was to share a room with such "heroes of socialism." Still, I couldn't help but think that many people hated us, especially when Big Eyes was led away in handcuffs. There was no house arrest for Soviet revisionists—or their illegitimate sons. But why should we feel guilty? Even Big Eyes's best friends had abandoned him once policy had shifted toward our northern neighbor.

Rhino, Fu Chen, and I went to downtown Harbin that Saturday, intent on a shopping splurge. That never happened, of course. The stores were mostly empty, and where there were products, you needed government coupons, which we didn't have. We eventually found a noodle shop that served us for money, and we gorged ourselves on vegetable wontons. Nearing sunset at a market, we handed over the last of our

reward: a liquor coupon that Inspector Chiu, ever the teetotaler, had given us. Then with our jug of Confucius Family rice wine, we set off for home.

Back in our room, we drank and laughed and drank some more. Eventually, our numbed tongues loosened. We started whining about our fate, separated as we were from sun-soaked Shanghai in this black, moonlike landscape. And when Rhino began railing against the party officials who'd forced us here, Fu Chen and I nervously ushered him back to his own place.

Back in our room, Fu Chen and I proceeded to quietly finish the rice wine. After awhile, Fu Chen said, "You know what's funny, Flabby? I still can't believe Big Eyes did that."

"Maybe he just wanted to get back at people," I said. "I might've done the same thing if they'd taken away my position just because of who my father was."

"True, but they've been doing that to everyone, not only people with Russian dads." He studied me and smiled. "So where are the rest of them?"

"The rest of what?"

"The eggs. You couldn't have planted your whole stash to entrap Big Eyes."

I was abruptly sober. "Are you drunk, Fu Chen? Think about what you're saying."

Fu Chen chuckled. "I figured it was you when I asked you to break into Big Eyes's room. You're the only person in this place who could leave his duties whenever he wanted. All you had to do was start coughing." He retched a few times and then smiled at me again. "Then I found out the days people reported their stuff stolen were the same dates you excused yourself."

I forced a laugh. "You think I'm crazy enough to steal in broad daylight?"

"You know by three o'clock, it's black as midnight outside. And you always excused yourself during the afternoon classes." He leaned toward me. "So, are you going to make this easy or hard? Remember, falsely entrapping a guy is a lot more serious than stealing eggs."

I suddenly felt immersed in a giant rice cooker. A second later, Fu Chen stood up and walked to the door.

"Alright, alright! The eggs are behind the Mao quotation books at the library!"

Fu Chen laughed and returned to his bed. "Why did you put them there of all places?"

"Because who the hell would ever check those damn books out?"

Fu Chen rolled on his bed, holding his stomach as he guffawed. At last, he calmed down and stood up again. And I must've made a face because he said, "I'm not going to tell anyone, Flabby. I just figure a few fried eggs would be nice. The kitchen should be deserted by now, don't you think?" He made his way to the door.

"You weren't really going to tell Inspector Chiu, were you?"

Fu Chen laughed. "Of course not. We're friends, Flabby. And as friends, I think you owe me something else." He reached out an open palm.

I forced my hand into my pocket and handed over my third of the reward.

Fu Chen pocketed the bills. "And don't worry, I won't tell Rhino either." Then he left, leaving me alone in the room to curse him and his ancestors.