

Chapter 15

In under a Week

The next morning, Radio Beijing reported the Tiananmen Massacre.

Years later, a friend of mine told me that as he listened to the broadcast, he pulled his curtains tight and hid in the pitch black of his room. Rumor had it soldiers would open fire on any sign of life. Even a flick of a light switch could get you killed. He kept his radio as low as possible.

This is Radio Beijing. Never forget June 3, 1989: the most tragic event in the history of the nation's capital.

Radio Beijing was a shortwave station. Its signal was easily scrambled by electronic interferences. Machines in neighboring factories, streetcars, combustion engines, and even desk lamps could distort the signal. But that morning, the city lay in darkness, and nearly all modern conveniences stopped functioning. The sound of Radio Beijing was crystal clear.

Tears rolled down my friend's face.

I missed the broadcast. Gunshots continued until two in the morning, before a silence fell heavily upon the city. Exhausted, I couldn't help but doze off in the embrace of the blackout.

On any other morning, the crack of dawn would've brought with

it the growing clamor of street cleaners, breakfast stalls, newspaper vendors, and bicycle bells. But on June 4, the street might as well have been a long-abandoned film set. Even if there were a few people, they didn't dare make a sound. No one wanted to declare to the world that they were alive. Being alive was a fact you better keep to yourself.

I slept till noon and awoke to see my grandmother perched on her bed, sewing away. I walked over to the window and saw that soldiers had taken the nearby intersection. They stood in pairs, back to back, in full uniform. Sun glinted off their guns and helmets. Unbelievable.

I dragged myself down the hall to the kitchen, basin in hand. People were gathered around the long, rectangular sink, arguing over the death toll. I took my time washing my face and brushing my teeth while listening intently. There were two stories. The first version of events was that the fight lasted through the night and ended with every student killed. Auntie Zhao, Min's mother, held fast to this story, and described the gore in vivid detail as if she'd seen it herself.

"Bodies were piled over bodies like a mountain. Blood rushed toward the drains like a river galloping toward the sea." She smacked her lips.

The second version was that the majority of students left the Square in peace. The ubiquitous Chen backed this story. She claimed to have seen thousands of students marching west past Sanlihe this morning. In their tattered clothes, they looked gaunt and malnourished. Heads were bowed in defeat. Last time she'd seen a crowd like that was in 1976 when refugees from earthquake-stricken areas evacuated toward the cities.

Chen's version was far more credible. Sanlihe was only a mile and a half west of our neighborhood. It was well within reason for Chen to trek over for peek.

"You've gotta be kidding me! Those brats are alive?" a middle-aged man shouted.

"They're miserable, but they're alive," Chen confirmed.

"I don't believe it! It's not fair!" someone else chimed in.

I rarely spoke up in the public kitchen. Everyone in the room was my senior, and in Chinese culture, seniority means superiority. Even so, it was shocking to find that these people didn't even want the students to escape alive.

"What do you mean?" I said, surprising myself. "Don't you want the students to live?"

"I saw it with my own eyes," Chen claimed. "Though I don't believe it either. Civilians were protecting the students, right? The military was butchering its way through every civilian in its path, right? You tell me. Why, when they finally reach the Square, would they simply let the brats go?"

Auntie Zhao chimed in, "Like I said, they all died! There's no way they lived through that."

"But I saw it with my own eyes," Chen insisted.

"It's possible that the government just let the students go," Xue contemplated. "They're still kids. I always said it wasn't worth defending the students."

"What the hell? People paid the ultimate price and the students just get off scot free?"

"We don't know for sure," another smirked. "It's almost graduation. Maybe the only job they can get'll be hard labor in the countryside."

I could feel someone glaring at me as they spoke. Thanks to my grandma, the whole building knew I'd gone to Peking University. Plus, my sympathy toward the students alone made me stand out. I hastily ran a wet rag across my face before heading out.

At least I'd gotten some useful information out. Last night, people had thrown bricks at soldiers out of every tall building on Chang'an Avenue. Therefore, soldiers had started shooting at every open window. This morning, at Muxidi, a senior Party leader's son-in-law had been shot to death through a window when he turned on a light to brush his teeth. I faithfully relayed the message to my grandmother, who hurriedly shut our window. The June heat was

growing more insufferable by the minute. Thank god we could leave the door open, bringing cool, and foul crosswinds from the men's restroom down the hall.

The last time we had to close our windows and hide in the corners. It was in 1972 when Richard Nixon visited China. The neighborhood registration officer passed orders door to door, threatening that snipers would shoot anyone who dared poke their head out a window. Seventeen years later, life seemed to have come back around. Nixon's visit opened China's doors to the world. Would those doors close in the wake of the crackdown?

As evening descended, my grandmother paced through the apartment, evaluating our chance of making it through the night. She decided my cot was too dangerous, as it directly faced the window, placing me in the line of fire. She declared I should sleep with her, and that I should take the spot closer to the wall. It seemed unnecessary, but I was touched. She put my safety before hers.

Moonlight shone through the thin curtain, casting a pale glow over my empty cot and part of the bed closest to the window. Supposedly, anywhere the light reached, a bullet could too. I told her to slide further from the window. She pushed herself into me, holding my shoulders.

She hadn't held me like this since I was twelve. She did it often when I was little, especially when I had a fever. Steeped in Chinese tradition, my grandmother knew every trick to torture a fever away: scraping the skin to bring "bad blood" to the surface, pinching the pressure point between the thumb and index finger... Every painful technique somehow made another pain disappear. Every time she administered one of her cures, I would scream like a stuck pig. Somehow, her cures always worked. When she thought I'd had enough and stopped torturing me, my illness magically alleviated. Still, I hated her for it. My body would be drenched in sweat, and my face wet with tears. I turned on my side, refusing to lay eyes on her. She would stroke my head, move down my shoulders, trace down to

my arms and back. Her gentle, hypnotic touch would lull me to sleep.

I couldn't remember the last time we had been this close. It almost felt uncomfortable. I held her wrists and found the skin around them looser than I remembered. I placed her hands back on her chest. She let out a contented groan and drifted off to sleep.

She was lonely.

Who wasn't?

At seven o'clock on the evening of June 4, I turned on China Central Television news. The hosts, Du Xian and Zhang Hongmin, were dressed in black, looking solemn. Du Xian began reading a script that denounced counterrevolutionary riots and claimed military forces had emerged victorious. Du Xian's eyes welled with tears.

The hosts' silent protest had caught authorities off guard. Du Xian's reading lasted only a minute before the director cut them off. The screen went black. Du Xian's bleak voice continued over a blank screen with rolling captions.

The next day, Du Xian and Zhang Hongmin had disappeared and were replaced by Li Ruiying and Xue Fei. Xue Fei also mourned publicly, and he too was fired. Another host quickly replaced him. There were always more people willing to do dirty jobs.

It only took a couple days for the media to pull a 180, changing from expressing condolences for the fallen civilians to lashing out against their crimes. They accused the civilians of creating illegal blockades, surrounding and attacking military forces, beating soldiers with fists and bricks. A soldier was slaughtered and his body was hung from an overpass, lit on fire. Two more had been kidnapped upon release from the hospital and remained missing. Looters ran rampant throughout stores in Xidan, beating anyone who stood in their way.

If you say a lie enough times, it becomes truth. People's criticism of the government began to die under the weight of propaganda. They started to wonder if those dead civilians were actually innocent. Images of the soldier's charred body hanging from Chongwenmen

overpass played ad infinitum on the news. A commentator screamed in furious condemnation:

It's not enough that they murdered this innocent soldier...They then felt the need to show off their handiwork, burning him and hanging him from a bridge for all to see.

In the public kitchen, hatred for the government was definitely cooling.

“These thugs have gone too far! They are sick! Sick in the head,” someone said.

When the phrase “sick in the head” was brought up, the conversation turned to Qiao. “Do you think he could do something like this?”

His mother stood up abruptly, screaming that not only had her son not hurt a soul, but had taken it upon himself to help carry the wounded to the hospital.

June 7, at 11:00 in the evening, my grandmother and I were tucked in bed in a bit tighter than I would have preferred. Suddenly, I heard footsteps from the street, getting louder as they approached the building. Someone called out, “Stop! Stay where you are!” The footsteps made it just below our window when I heard a gunshot, and a body hitting the ground. A woman screamed. Several more shots rang out. I'd never heard gunfire that close.

My face and my grandmother's were centimeters away from each other. Neither of us dared utter a word, much less move a muscle. I gripped her hands tightly. Then came the sound of more footsteps... more shouts...more screams, and a woman's cries of pain. Had someone really got shot? A few minutes later, the street was silent again.

For a long time, we remained motionless like animals who'd narrowly escaped a chase. Perhaps hunters were still lurking.

I thought of Guo Yan. Was he at the Square when it all happened? It was likely, given his plan to take advantage of the media frenzy.

Was he still alive?

It was the first time I didn't question whether or not I loved him. Love felt like a trivial consideration compared to simply staying alive. I didn't love him anymore, but I still wanted him to live. I didn't want anyone dead, not even that poor soldier. His body burned until it shriveled up like overcooked pork. No one deserved that. But if Guo Yan was alive, he was probably scuttling around the city like a rat, digging up anything he could to fabricate heroic stories of the Liberation Army. What a shameless way to live. I had to find out how Guo Yan was doing. I had to know that he was alive and suffering.

Daylight came for the fifth time since the massacre. There was a strange buzzing outside. It was faint at first, like a swarm of mosquitoes, then grew to sound like a cloud of flies.

I needed to get to the restroom and opened our door. I peered down the hall to see several people standing outside the door to the restroom. Chen's face lit up as she saw me:

“Did you hear that last night? They killed a woman.”

“I heard the gunshots, but I didn't know she died.”

A look of disbelief came across her face. “You didn't see it?”

I said nothing.

“Come on, come on. Let's see go it!” She brushed past me on her way to our front door, poking her head inside. “Auntie!” she smiled to my grandmother, “good morning! Aye, your house is the best spot in the hall!”

My grandmother stammered, “Y—yeah, it's not bad.”

“Can I look out your window for a minute? I'll be gone before you know it!”

Pure terror came over my grandmother's face. She turned white and shot out of the room like a bullet. We stood in the hall, shoulder to shoulder. Chen was followed by several other onlookers, all of whom bowed to my grandmother out of a mix of embarrassment and excitement.

Chen pushed the wooden-framed windows out into the open air,

letting in a dense torrent of voices. My grandmother clutched her chest, looking as if she might faint. I rushed her to her bed, but she forced herself to sit upright since guests were present. None of them noticed her pale, sweat-soaked face.

“Let’s go to the street and take a closer look,” decided Chen. “We can’t see anything from here, it’s just a sea of heads.”

Her followers were hesitant. Soldiers were on duty only a couple of meters away.

“With that many people down there, I’m sure it’s fine,” someone murmured.

“Let’s find out!” Chen exclaimed, turning to me.

“My grandmother’s not feeling well,” I replied. Finally, everyone noticed the state my grandmother was in. “Auntie, we’re so sorry to have bothered you. Please, rest up!” They ushered themselves out as quickly as they came.

The house was ours again, I walked over to close the window, when I glanced down to see the sea of heads Chen had described. The body was probably up against the wall below our window.

It wasn’t long before our hall’s reconnaissance team returned with findings. It was a young male factory worker who had gotten off late and was mistaken for a troublemaker.

The young man’s tragic fate freed many residents from their homes. Even the most timid people who didn’t even step out for food went to see the dead body. One after the other, daredevils returned unscathed, marveling at how friendly and pleasant the soldiers had become since last night’s execution.

“The soldiers were actually really nice.”

“Did you see the guy in the roundabout? He smiled at me.”

It turned out the dead man was married, but he’d been having an affair with a nurse who worked the night shift at the Children’s Hospital. Troops stopped them as they snuck back to her place. In the late ‘80s, if police saw a man and woman walking hand-in-hand in the middle of the night, they might ask to see their ID. If they

suspected you were having an affair, you’d be taken to the police station and the leader of your work unit would be informed. He must have been scared, and took off running. The story made sense. A normal night shift worker wouldn’t have run.

“What a pity. Why did he have to run? Is losing face really worse than death?”

“Hard to say. Maybe his wife is a tigress.”

Everyone agreed it was the young man’s bad luck.

Around noon, someone came to collect the body and the turmoil downstairs finally died down.

I took advantage of my grandmother’s afternoon nap to leave the apartment. If she woke up and found I wasn’t there, I could say I’d gone to the bathroom. I made my way straight out the front door of our building. What I saw on the street looked like any other day at first glance. The only difference was that the pedestrians looked like sleepwalkers.

I walked to the payphone near the alley leading to the back entrance of Children’s Hospital. Countless wounded people had been carried in this same door on the night of June 3. After struggling attempts to open the narrow door, I squeezed into the booth and dialed the Metropark Lido Hotel, where Mr. Murata lived.

I told the operator the room number I wanted to ring. She asked who I was and “may I ask what this is concerning?” I’d called Mr. Murata many times before at his hotel, but this was the first time the operator wanted to know about my business.

The hold music was a simple, eight-bar loop over and over. When Mr. Murata picked up the receiver, the music was replaced by a heavy buzz. The monitoring equipment had been turned on.

I cleared my throat, “Hello? It’s me! Wang! How have you been?”

“I’m well, thanks for asking!” His reply sounded enthusiastic, but still a bit broken.

“When are we headed back to work?” I asked.

“Monday,” he replied, “but call me Sunday to confirm.”

A massive weight lifted from my shoulders. Mr. Murata was still in Beijing. I still had a job.

I tried my best to close the door behind me, but it hung haphazardly in its frame like a kid’s first carpentry project.

I saw Qiao walking in my direction. Our eyes met, and I saw that he’d returned to normal. His thousand-yard stare had been replaced by a lucid expression. “Hey, Wang Yan. Where you going?”

The name “Wang Yan” instantly brought back my childhood memory. I said as casually as when we were little.

“Nowhere, just making a call. You?”

“I’m heading to the hospital.”

I remembered his mother shouting about him carrying a wounded man there in the heat of battle.

“Was that guy your friend?” I asked.

“Nah,” he replied. “I’d never met him before that night. He had a super nice camera I’d never seen before and he let me mess around with it. Right as I was handing it back to him, he got hit. It could’ve easily been me. There were rumors that they were specifically targeting people with cameras.”

I remembered the two incidents in which my camera had nearly been stolen. It seemed that in any time of violence, a camera was the enemy.

Though we had never done more than exchanging pleasantries in the past, he asked if I wanted to go with him. I thought for a moment and decided to come along.

We made our way down the alley to the rear entrance. We walked through the gates and found a notice posted on the wall to our right. A small crowd had gathered. It was a list of the dead.

Since June 4, countless families had begun to comb the city’s hospitals looking for lost loved ones. Staff had found it necessary to post lists of the deceased. If the name of the person they were looking for tragically appeared, there was nothing left to do but claim

the body at the morgue. If not, it was on to the next hospital.

I wanted to ask the name of Qiao’s friend, but I was afraid to make a sound. There were several people standing before us, eyes glued to the notice. I could feel the anxiety from the back of their heads.

Qiao held his breath as well. He read the list from beginning to end, then again just to be sure. Without a word, he pulled my arm and we left, exiting the main gate in silence.

“You have some time?” he asked, once we were out on the street.

“Yeah, sure.”

We sat down near one of the small flowerbeds next to the entrance. He took out a pack of cigarettes and offered me one. I didn’t smoke, but I took it anyway. He smoked nearly halfway of his before saying, “I wanna go find him. You coming?”

“Are you sure he’s still there?”

“He must be there. His name isn’t on the list.”

“Do you know his name?”

“I just know his last name is Guo. The list didn’t have any Guos on it.”

Panic ran through me. I put my cigarette out in the dirt.

“Sorry, I’ve got something to do,” I said abruptly.

I ran back to the phone. In the back of my mind, I knew it was only a slim chance it was Guo Yan, but it gave me an excuse to call. Guo Yan had given me the number for the phone in the security room at his gated community. I had never called. Guo Yan said never to call unless it was an absolute emergency.

An old woman answered the phone. A moment later, I heard her shout into the courtyard through a megaphone: “Building 16, room 501, Guo Yan, you have a phone call.”

Then silence. I heard the woman drop back into her chair, flip through the paper, and occasionally exchange pleasantries with passing residents.

The sound of footsteps grew louder, echoing as they entered the

small, concrete room. "Auntie Liu, is someone looking for Guo Yan?"

It was a young woman's voice.

"Yeah," Auntie Liu replied.

"He's taking a nap."

"Well, you answer it then."

The phone bumped against the desk. The young woman raised it to her ear, sounding like she'd received too many calls on her husband's behalf. "Hello? Who's looking for Guo Yan?"

Her gentle voice smashed all my fantasies about Guo Yan. I painfully realized that there was nothing real between us. As the guns rang out, a man only made sense if I could hold him in my arms. Otherwise, we are both empty words to each other. I hung up without a word.

It seemed like a miracle that life in Beijing had more or less returned to normal in less than a week. Charred military transports were pulled from the roads. Concrete pylons were now neatly returned to their rightful places. Shops, both small and large, opened their doors again, bringing the city back to life.

Chinese people have a tendency to bestow legitimacy to the victors. If you won, you chose how history would be written. If you lost, what was once called courage would be seen as recklessness, and righteousness became stubbornness. The fascists we'd cursed were now praised. "Go up against the Party? Yeah, right," people scoffed.

On Sunday, I ventured out again to call Mr. Murata, but the payphone was out of service. On my way home, I ran into Uncle Li. His face warmed, "Wang Yan! You don't look so hot. You OK?"

"I'm fine. Do you know where I can find a payphone?"

"You've been off work for what, a week now? Is your boss still in China?"

"I hope so. Last time I checked..."

He didn't wait for me to finish. "Min's always talking about how busy you are, and how you make so much money." The smile never

left his eyes.

I felt there was a "but" coming.

"No way. I'm just a secretary."

"You're not just any secretary. You're a secretary for a foreigner," he said, looking over my head. "But you can't depend on foreigners, can you? One minute they're here, the next they're gone. And then what?"

He tilted his head slightly and narrowed his eyes. He acted casual, but was watching my every move.

He was upset because I'd missed Min's wedding. He felt I'd broken my promise out of arrogance.

I knew I was in the wrong, and I felt apologetic, but this was between Min and me. He wasn't entitled to any sort of revenge. However, he'd been patiently waiting for a chance to belittle me.

It just so happened that I'd had current affairs on my mind a lot lately, so I had my answers ready.

"Then what? Which way do *you* think China's going to go?" I asked. "Do you really think China's going to regress 17 years? Do you think you could handle being separated from your father again? Do you think Auntie Zhao and your two children are going to lose their Beijing residency? If you really believe those things are going to happen, then you can gloat."

He froze. I smiled and walked inside.

On Monday, I hadn't received word either way and decided to head to work. On the street, I could feel just how badly people wanted things to go back to how they were. A few were still madly searching hospitals for loved ones. It was said that one mother stumbled across her son's rotting corpse in a hospital garage a month after he'd passed. He was only recognizable by his belongings. But those unfortunate few could be easily overlooked. For most, the chaos of the past two months was nothing more than a bad dream. All they had to do was wake up and embrace a new morning.

From the moment the protests began, my world had revolved around Tiananmen Square. To a Japanese person, it was only a small part of a much larger picture. Since 1989, there was only one thing on any Japanese citizen's mind: consumption tax. Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita successfully instituted a 3% consumption tax after a series of hard-fought negotiations, but he was soon forced to resign following an insider-trading scandal. On June 3, Sosuke Uno was sworn in as the seventy-fifth prime minister of Japan, inheriting a broken government.

The four of us, Mr. Murata, Ms. Kawashima, Zhao, and I, sat together in the same room again.

"Japan changed prime ministers on June 3?" I couldn't believe it.

"Mm hmm," Mr. Murata replied.

Sosuke Uno stepped into office on the morning of June 3, and Tiananmen Massacre happened that evening. He barely had a moment to assess the situation. The next day, George Bush Sr., issued a statement declaring economic sanctions against China. Mr. Uno only condemned the Chinese government's use of weapons against its own people.

On June 6, nearly twelve hundred employees of Sanwa Bank, Sumitomo Bank, Nippon Life, Panasonic, Seibu Department Stores, Mitsukoshi Limited, and others fled back to Japan. The next day, Chinese military forces attacked Japan's Diplomatic Residence Compound and three Japanese consuls' homes were attacked, scaring away nearly eighteen-hundred more Japanese.

Canon had requested that their employees do the same, but Mr. Murata and Ms. Kawashima resolved to stay. "We're even staying despite Mr. Murata's favorite bar closing down," Ms. Kawashima said with a wink. Clearly it was less the cocktails, but more the waitresses. I couldn't have cared less. There was nothing in the world left to laugh about, but I thought it best to play along. It really meant the world to me that they stayed behind. The least I could do was pretend Ms. Kawashima was funny.

Lunchtime came, and Mr. Murata suggested we all head downstairs to the hotel's Chinese restaurant—his treat. At the touch of a button, the elevator whisked us off to the first floor without stopping. We marched into a vast, empty dining hall, where a dozen idle waitresses suddenly snapped to attention, bowing as we walked in.

The massive hall was able to seat three hundred, but currently held only one Western couple. They were quietly eating near the window as tanks rumbled down an otherwise empty Chang'an Avenue.

As we took our seats and picked up our menus, Mr. Murata told us to each order our favorite dish. He'd never been considerate like this before. Normally he just ordered for everyone. Although Mr. Murata was putting on his best front, his voice had the tenor of a swan song. Any meal could be our last together.

Simply by chance, I opened my menu right to shark fin stew.

I had a classmate in elementary school whose last name was Huang. An aunt on his father's side lived in America, but his father had cut off all communication with her when anti-American sentiment reached a fever pitch in the '50s. In the '70s, following in Nixon's footsteps, Huang's aunt visited China for the first time in well over two decades. She stayed at the Beijing Hotel and invited her brother and her nephew to lunch at the hotel's restaurant.

She ordered many delicacies, among them, a steaming bowl of noodles and shredded pork. When the noodles were placed on the table, her eyes lit up, "I've been dreaming of this for so many years."

Huang was ecstatic too. Pork was his favorite. At a time when meat was rationed, a ten-year-old boy could never get enough. But even in all his excitement, he was too self-conscious to eat the shredded pork for fear of appearing greedy. Instead, he declared war on the noodles. These were not normal noodles. They were oddly short, slippery, and really hard to pick up with chopsticks. Each translucent strand only made his longing for meat stronger. He cleared through every last noodle as fast as he could to quell his craving for that mouthwatering pork.

His aunt was dumbfounded. She gathered herself up and remarked, bemusedly, at how much her nephew apparently loved eating shark fin. It was then that his father realized, with no shortage of embarrassment, that his son had devoured a bowl of shark fin by mistake.

According to Huang, his father had planned to ask her to take his son to America, hoping he'd have a better life, but after the shark fin incident, they simply said their thanks and left.

Though I'd never tasted shark fin, a wave of nostalgia overtook me. My strong feeling wasn't about the delicacy itself, really. It was about the end of an era. To me, Huang's aunt symbolized the start of reform and opening up. Now that China was threatening to close its doors, I'd better taste that legendary shark fin before it was too late.

"I'll have the shark fin soup," I said.

Zhao scoffed. "Shark fin? Are you serious? It doesn't even taste like anything!"

I blushed, "I wanna try it. What're you getting then, genius?"

He ordered duck in consommé.

The waitress left and we chatted over steaming cups of tea. Another line of tanks rumbled by, or maybe the ones from a few minutes ago simply made another pass. Either way, these were on our side of the street and rattled all the china in the dining room as their treads tore up the pavement. The Western couple at the window could hardly look away. One of them whipped out a camera. I could tell by the way he moved that he wasn't a journalist. Surely they were tourists; two of the very few who'd stayed behind out of pure curiosity.

Just then, the tanks stopped dead in their tracks and one swung its turret directly into the dining room. A waitress let out a terrified scream and the dish she was carrying went crashing onto the carpet. Her dress was covered in what was to be the couple's lunch. All of us ducked under our tables.

The seconds passed like hours. Finally, the china above our heads began to clatter again. The tanks were on their way. A young man,

apparently the manager, came to our table, bent to meet our gaze, and assured us we were safe.

As I climbed out, I saw a look of shame on Mr. Murata's face. He was our leader, but he had cowered in fear like everyone else. The manager apologized and informed us that both the shark fin soup and duck were slow-cooked dishes which had to be ordered two days in advance. The restaurant had been a ghost town for days, and was down to just the basics. "If you'd like some Yangzhou fried rice..."

"Actually, that's perfect," I replied. "Maybe it's a good sign. If I can't eat shark fin, that means Mr. Murata can't leave, right?"

Mr. Murata smiled.

