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Island

Militia Women

Lí Fu-chíng

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Li Ju-ching

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ISLAND MILITIA WOMEN

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CHAPTER 1

ON THE TRAIN

SPRING, 1960. The south-bound Express No. 13 from Peking thundered through the early morning.

The green window curtains ruffled by the warm east wind gently fanned the passengers.

All of us in Coach No. 10 were returning from the National People's Militia Conference, each in possession of a shiny new semi-automatic rifle, handed to us personally by leaders of the central authorities on behalf of the motherland and the people. I mused, the rifle in my lap will protect all that is dear to me — our island, our motherland, our happiness.

My fellow travellers were a lively lot. They included veteran Red Guards from southern and northern Fukien, and former fighters of the South Chekiang Guerrilla Column, militia men and women from the plains, the mountains and the islands. Many militant friendships had been formed in the short course of the conference, and now we would very soon be saying good-bye to each other. There was still much to talk about! Some talked of past battles, others about their present work. Some of the younger militia members suddenly burst into the song *March of the Militia*.

*We're the people's militia,
Red of heart and mind.*

*Defend the motherland!
Build up the motherland!
Hail! Let us show what we can do.*

*We're good at production,
And no laggards at fighting.
As handy with pen as with rifle,
Everyone a soldier!
Hail! We have immense strength.*

The hills and valleys, wood and plain, the whole world outside seemed to be in tune with us.

The rising sun was bathing the land in a golden red light. How vast is the motherland, her boundaries stretching far beyond to the horizon! See the tender green of the rice seedlings, the darker green of wheat, the purple of the distant mountains, the pellucid blue of the streams, the cattle and sheep browsing on the slopes, the tractors ploughing the land.

I pressed my face against the window pane. There was so much to see! My neck grew stiff and my back ached, but still my eyes couldn't drink in all the flow of life rushing by the window. Ten pairs of eyes would not suffice me.

Neighbours had told me much about our beautiful land before I left for the conference, and how I had often tried to picture the motherland to myself. But how much lovelier, a thousand times lovelier, was she as she streamed past me.

How wonderful it would be to have all the militia on our island here with me to witness all this! If the motherland asks it of me, her daughter, I will give my life without a qualm. I must take in everything. I must remember everything so that I can tell everyone in our company about it and everyone on our island, too, so that they could share my happiness.

My eyes followed the moving beauty of the land. How dear the motherland is! For a moment my eyes misted over. . . .

Seated opposite to me was Comrade Liu Hsiu-chen, a sturdy if older woman. She had a kindly, understanding smile. This comrade had once fought in the ranks of the South Chekiang Guerrilla Column and was now the Party secretary at

the East Wind People's Commune in Pingyang County. We had been in the same discussion group at the conference, so I had got to know her well, learned much from her, and had come to love her.

While feasting my eyes on the passing scenes outside, I had the feeling she was watching me with those motherly eyes of hers.

Suddenly she reached out and plucked one of my braids over the table. She murmured, "You are a sly little puss, Hai-hsia! At the conference you were always listening to what others said and begging them to tell you more. You were all ears, took everything in, but never said a word yourself."

"I really didn't have much to say," I defended. "Compared with the others, we've done very little on our island."

"But, Hai-hsia, what you have done isn't your affair alone. It was made possible by good Party leadership and Chairman Mao's great military thinking. You've learned from others and others can learn from you. Telling others what the people on your island have done is not boasting."

The listening delegates supported her and turned expectantly towards me. I did not know what to say.

Hsiu-chen came to my aid. "Do you love your little island, Hai-hsia?" she queried.

"You know I do."

"And your comrades in the militia?"

"Of course, I do. I've dreamt about them half a dozen times in the fortnight I've been away."

"Why do you love them?"

"Why? That's rather hard to explain right off." I fingered my braids nervously.

"Look at it this way. You defend the country's coast, right out on the front. People want to know how the militia there lives and fights."

The others' eyes were all on me, eagerly urging me to speak.

Yes, I thought, there is much to tell. I felt a surging in my breast and wished everyone could come and visit our island.

As soon as you set foot there you would see the militia, armed men and women, on guard high up on the cliffs keeping an ever watchful eye on the sea approaches of our motherland. The waves below them batter on the rocks and send up spumes of spray. Sea gulls wheel and swoop about them as they stand guard, martial and stern.

The Amity Reservoir is a little beyond the wharf. The soldiers and militia of the island built it. Every rock of it has been firmly placed in position by the hands of our People's Liberation Army men and militia women. There too is our sea wall enclosing several hundred *mu** of paddy-rice. The crop looks even greener than the sea. On the slopes are the stands of young trees. At low tide emerge a myriad oysters encrusting the rocks. We gather hundreds of baskets of rock oysters from them every year. A visit to our net factory is well worth while too. Our young women's hands are very nimble!

From the island comes the cheerful singing of sea chanties. In the old days, the songs were sad and accompanied by much weeping. But today our songs are full of joy and happiness. They urge us on to greater victories. Tide-Watcher's Point is only a couple of hundred metres above the sea, but from below it looks very high and lofty. It is the highest spot on our Concord Island. Take the path winding upwards and if you search carefully among the sisal hemp you will make out the zigzags of trenches and shelters constructed by our militia.

Nestling in the cove below Tide-Watcher's Point are the two halves of the fishing hamlet of Yungchiao. The walls are whitewashed and the roofs of the new houses and fishing sheds are of grey tile.

This charming, tidy little village is divided into an East Yungchiao and a West Yungchiao which lie on slopes of the hollow, with Tide-Watcher's Point rising above and behind them like the back of a chair, and the two halves forming its two arm-rests. Down below, in front of the settlement, is Gourd Bay, its narrow mouth opening out to sea and its big

* One *mu* = 1/15 hectare, or 1/6 acre.

belly making up the bay itself. It is shaped like a gourd, hence its name. Six or seven hundred metres outside the mouth of the bay is Tiger-Head Isle. It shelters the bay from raging winds and high waves. At night the ships' lights show up a forest of spars.

Astride the gully dividing the hamlet stands a gnarled old banyan tree. Its luxuriant dark green foliage provides cool shelter in summer and its massive matted roots form a natural bridge across the gully, giving our hamlet the name Yungchiao, meaning Banyan Bridge.

We patrol the beach at night and stand sentinel at the Point. As the sun rises out of the sea, first a pale glimmer far to the east, then slowly spreading silver like the underside of a fish, comes the dawn, and the sky changes from silver to a rosy pink like the bloom of a girl's cheeks, and on rapidly to orange. Clouds streaking the sky reveal a tip of golden light, growing slowly into a huge orb colouring the eastern half of the sky a fiery red. A golden sea ripples below. As the sun rises over the sea, a rosy glow bathes the whole island. Smoke begins to curl upwards from the village chimneys. Fishing boats unfurl their sails like birds taking wing, to head for the open sea and the sun.

At such moments our little island seems the loveliest place one could ever wish to see. Every stone, every blade of grass glistens as the sun drives the night away. At such times I think how our great leader Chairman Mao and the glorious Communist Party of China have brought light to our motherland and into our lives. Thoughts like this link us very close to Peking, and we tighten the grip on our guns. Every hill and stream, every blade of grass and tree is precious to us. We will never let an enemy touch any of it! Never!

I would like to tell everyone about our island's militia. At the first blast of the alarm-sounding conch weaving shuttles are stopped, babies are gently taken from the breast and carrying poles are dropped from stalwart shoulders. Cartridge belts are slung and rifles are at the ready. Like a tornado, girls and young women rush to muster by the old banyan tree. Our

blouses are of many colours and our rifles are of various kinds. Our under-age trainees come armed with fishing spears.

Meet our militia members! There is that robust militia woman who puts our neat ranks awry by carrying a baby on her back. She is Sister Ah-hung, one of our platoon leaders. This mother of three children is known for her tough fighting spirit.

That little chit of a girl with brownish hair standing behind Sister Ah-hung is short and slight but she is full of fight. Her name is Chen Yu-hsiu. It was once said that she would never make a good militia woman because she clapped her hands to her ears when a firecracker exploded, but she is now one of our best shots. After a shooting tournament a military sub-area commander said of her, "Well, I never! That girl is accurate and no mistake!" Chen Yu-hsiu is now afraid of only one thing — reporters with cameras asking permission to take a shot of her.

That slender, winsome Huang Yun-hsiang is patient and meticulous, modest, quiet-spoken and well known for her fine singing of fisherfolk's songs. She is married but seldom stays at home with her parents-in-law, for she doesn't like to be away from our militia women's company. On the eve of her wedding day she suddenly flung herself into my arms, sobbing, "I'm afraid, Hai-hsial!"

"Afraid of what?"

"Leaving our militia unit. I hope that will never happen!"

We would not like to lose her, either, so I told her I would leave her name on the company roll, as her new home wasn't far away.

I can't talk about our militia without mentioning Comrade Fang, our tall, strong Party secretary, without whose guidance we could not have made progress.

We also owe much to our elders like thoughtful even-tempered Granddad Teh-shun, and to gruff, straight-speaking Granddad Wang-fa. Both men, who had their fill of suffering in the past, are today full of revolutionary vigour.

But there are too many people to tell about them all, though I would dearly love to.

Once on our island, you can't fail to feel the martial atmosphere there. You'll see rifles stacked at the edge of the field where the militia are planting rice, and on the beach where they are making fishing nets. You cannot fail to see the guns mounted on the boats. Even the youngsters parade spears with red tassels. Every man, woman and child on our island understands Chairman Mao's great strategic concept of people's war. Bearing profound hatred for the enemy, everyone on our fighting little island cherishes his rifle and keeps it close at hand, rain or shine, summer or winter. Chairman Mao's great directives: **The army and the people are the foundation of victory and Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun** are deep in our consciousness.

All the while I mused, Hsiu-chen was sitting opposite me. Like the other militia delegates she was waiting for my story about our island and about our women's militia company, for I was the leader of the company.

But what was I to tell them?

I thought of how our militia company started and of how we grew up. We'd had our ups and downs and taken many tumbles. Our company grew up like a child learning to walk under a loving mother's care — a few hesitant, stumbling steps forward, a tumble, tears, but up on its feet again. In the old society I was useless and ineffectual. I had eyes but saw nothing, a tongue but could say nothing. Then the Party opened my eyes for me and I took heart, for I could see our island as part of the motherland and the whole wide world.

I've tasted the sweetness of victory that comes through struggle, and I have tasted too the bitterness of failure. I have had discouraging moments and I have shed tears, but with Chairman Mao and the Party to encourage, help and guide me, I have conquered difficulties, faced the storm and stress of the times and gone forward.

"Very well," I said addressing Hsiu-chen and the others, "if you really want to hear about the suffering of the people on our island in the old society and how our militia company grew up in struggle, then I will tell you."

CHAPTER 2

FATHER AND I

IN the old days there were two tyrant families on our island who rode on the backs of the fishermen, plus three families that monopolized the fish market. We fisherfolk called them "Twin Axes and Three Knives," and made up a song about them:

*Don't go to Concord Island if there's anywhere else to go,
A fisherman's lot there is nothing but suffering and woe.
Twin Axes dangle over your head
And Three Knives are pressed against your chests.*

Such was the world I was born into. My first recollections are of hunger, cold and bitter hatred for the "Twin Axes and Three Knives."

Our family name is Li, and my father was known by the unusual name of Li Eighty-Four. I learned his story of grief and pain from my mother after I grew up.

For generations our family lived off the sea. Grandfather, and grandmother too, went out to sea in fine weather and foul the year round, but there was never enough food and clothing for the family. The year father was twelve grandfather fell sick. As he could not go to sea the family had nothing to eat.

Grandmother told my father to go out and gather wild plants. Father, who was sitting by the door, only shook his head and burst into tears.

Grandmother fled into a rage and scolded father, telling him that he was a lazy good-for-nothing who did not care what was worrying his elders. She flung a battered basket at father's feet, crying, "You're twelve this year, you young scamp! Get along!"

Father made no move to go out. Big tears rolled down his cheeks, and as grandmother was about to take a stick to beat him, she heard someone singing in the street.

*With no more bitter greens on the hill,
We eat grass roots which do not fill.
Even Mercy Clay* is found no more,
We chew up wild herbs, leaves, stem and core.*

Grandmother realized then she had wronged father. No more edible herbs were to be found. What was she to do? She couldn't let a sick man starve to death, so she steeled her heart and bonded her young son to work for fish merchant Chen Feng-shih, father of Chen Chan-ao, one of the two despots who owned the fishing boats. In return, grandmother was to be given a hundred *jin*** of dried sweet potato chips. When she got them home and weighed them she found there were only eighty-four *jin*. Grandmother could do nothing but rage and weep. She cursed the heartless Chen Feng-shih.

As the boy was about to leave her, she embraced him, saying, "Son, don't blame your mother. Father is very sick."

My father consoled her, "Don't blame yourself, mother! I understand. I shall not be the only one forced to work for that despot."

"You mustn't ever forget what they've done to us, son," grandmother replied through her tears.

"I'll remember it all right. I'll remember it as long as I remember my name is Li!" And he walked away, not once turning round, for he did not want his mother to see his tears.

* A white clayish substance often used for food by people during famine in the old days.

** One *jin* = 0.5 kilogramme or 1.1 lbs.

When father walked up to the counter in Chen's shop, Chen Feng-shih tapped his head with a walking stick and said, "So you've come, eh? You little turtle's spawn! Why! You're as skinny as a monkey. You look like one who wolfs down food and never does any work! I know your type. What do they call you?"

"I'm called Eighty-Four *Jin*," father burst out.

"What? What did you say? Eighty-four *jin*?" shrieked Chen.

"Eighty-four *jin* of dried sweet potato chips!" replied father defiantly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Chen cackled, realizing what father meant. "So you're not satisfied, eh? You beggars aren't worth half a cent! Eighty-four *jin* of chips is over-payment for you!"

This cruel joke was soon being repeated all over the island and the name Eighty-Four stuck, a name compounded of grief and hatred. Eighty-four *jin* of dried sweet potato chips! That was all a fisherman's life was worth!

Grandfather and grandmother had passed away long before I was born. My parents were already in their forties, and my arrival did not bring joy and gladness to them. In fact, I was not wanted. In those days female infanticide was common on the island, centuries of class oppression and feudal prejudice having made people value the male child only. Everything possible was done to rear a child only if it was a boy. Most baby girls were drowned in a tub of water before their lungs drew in the first breath of air. The whole family regarded the birth of a girl as a tragedy and the enraged grandmother would immediately get rid of her. My parents, however, did not have the heart to drown me.

"Let her live no matter what happens," my mother pleaded softly. "What does it matter if it is a girl-child? She's flesh of our flesh."

Mother had no milk. Living only on wild herbs and sweet potato leaves, how could she? I sucked at her breast till I drew blood.