



Fragments by Appel Cabrera

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“The disastrous year 1940 seemed to cast doubt on the idea that there might be any future for China outside the Japanese Empire.” — Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally*

Nanking, 1940.

Yu Weimin tightens his favourite silk tie around his neck and smooths out the lapels of his best suit. He runs a hand lightly over his slicked back hair, tucks an errant strand into place and frowns over the worry creasing his brow. He flashes himself a quick smile in the mirror, but it just looks like a grimace.

“Are you finally going to ask for a job?” His wife is leaning against the doorframe, and Weimin meets her eyes in the mir-

ror. The burn scar on her right cheek, a small souvenir from Japanese artillery fire, gleams red.

“We moved here for that reason, but we’ve been in Nanking for weeks now.”

“I just... wanted us to get settled in first. Shanghai was our home for many years.”

“The lines at the rice distribution centers aren’t getting any shorter, you know. I’ll be back there today. And the vegetables old Mrs. Gao sells me under the table are getting pricier.” Chen gives him a dry smile. “We both know that isn’t why you are stalling.”

“My father cursed the Reorganized National Government with his dying breath.” Weimin turns to her now, and Chen crosses her arms. “It was his dream-come-true when I got a job in Chiang Kai-shek’s civil administration; and when the President left, my father left us too. But here I am, going to work for Wang Jingwei—the da hanjian.”

“If we try to leave, we will all be shot. And don’t you dare call him that here—the rest of China may say so, but we cannot.” Chen’s expression grows cold. “Here—especially here, in Nanking—you must at least believe what I do: Chiang Kai-shek is the true traitor of China. I still haven’t received a single letter from my family since Chiang razed Changsha to the ground before—before they even arrived.”

“I haven’t heard from any of my family in Nanking either,” Weimin spits. “Maybe we passed by a mass grave with their bodies in it on our way here.” He knows that they are dead—he’s read the papers in Shanghai, heard the horrific stories on the radio. To make sleep come at night, he tells himself they got out before it was too late, that his nieces and nephews are living in Chongqing.

Husband and wife glare at each other, until Chen’s shoulders drop. She steps aside, into their bedroom. “There’s a fresh pot of congee on the stove. Eat up before you head out.”

Weimin breathes out a sigh. Chen refrained from voicing her thoughts to his father when he was still alive due to his worsening illness, but often told Weimin about how Chiang Kai-shek is destroying China rather than fighting for it. She had read the papers, discussed the war with her friends. He cannot deny her claims outright—Chiang is not completely China’s patriotic hero. He had, after all, appeased Japan before they attacked and his image only worsened after Changsha was burned, after the news of a destructive flood in the interior, after the withdrawal from the coast which left cities and the burgeoning

heart of a modern China completely undefended.

When Weimin’s father had heard these sentiments on the radio, he shouted himself hoarse about how Chiang was fighting this war as best he could, and that the overall nation had to be saved. That Chongqing still existed meant that there remained hope for the revolutionary dream of an independent China.

Weimin simply saw that his father, who had witnessed the fall of the Qing, was dying of heartbreak as the Japanese entered Beijing, Shanghai and Nanking. He saw the vision of a united Chinese republic crumbling under occupation as neighbourhoods were flattened under airstrikes, as people were stuck through with bayonets in the streets. He saw his wife grow cold and bitter, his children incensed and angry. He lost his job in the civil administration when the Nationalists fled west as his father lay too ill to evacuate, and their savings drained as prices skyrocketed.

Between his father, his wife, and his children, Weimin keeps his own thoughts mostly inside. They all had convincing arguments, but Weimin just wanted to keep putting food on the table, keep their heads down. To dream about the days before the invasion; hope to see the ones after it. He thinks and thinks on what to do to make it there.

As Weimin moves past Chen, he stops and kisses her on the cheek, right by the burn scar. “Things will get better from here. I’m going today.”

“Good luck.” She says this casually, but Chen tucks a hair behind her right ear and hides a smile. The steamy, bland smell

of rice distribution center congee fills his nostrils as he enters the kitchen. Weimin stops by the pot and opens the drawer left of the stove. Three knives gleam in the drawer—a cleaver, a meat knife, and a small fruit knife. Weimin hesitates when he sees the shining steel, the remains from a set that had been a wedding gift from his father to himself and Chen. His hand hovers over the smallest knife briefly before he selects it, wrapping it in a handkerchief and sliding it into the inner pocket of his suit jacket. He smooths down his lapels and closes the drawer.

In the background, he can hear his daughter and son talking rapidly about the news—apparently, the Kuomintang Juntong had managed to assassinate another collaborator. “These are the true national heroes of China,” his daughter is saying. Liyan is dressed for school, an empty bowl in front of her. Her brother, two years younger and ever receptive, is nodding vigorously. “Remember when assassins killed the foreign minister in his own living room? Maybe they can kill Wang Jingwei next!”

“They will kill him—we need revenge. “Liming’s bowl is still half-full. “My Nanking classmates told me all about what happened here. No Japanese soldier or Chinese hanjian should survive. I hope they kill Hirohito next.”

“Eat your congee, Liming,” Weimin scolds, tapping the table. “Your mother waited hours for it, and who knows when looters will raid this center next.” Liming doesn’t hesitate before tipping the water-and-rice gruel into his mouth. Weimin glares at the newspaper laid out between the two of them. It is one

of those resistance papers they keep bringing home from school, hidden between the pages of their textbooks. “Watch yourselves, and don’t you dare say these things at school. Whenever these assassinations happen, a crackdown on everyone else follows.”

Liming sputters in indignation and sets his bowl down, not a grain of rice left in it.

“But we need to resist, Ba! If we do not, we would just be helping the Japanese kill our own people! We need to punish everyone who even compromises with the enemy.”

“Ba is right, Liming,” Liyan says. “When people actively resist the Japanese, innocents die. But if we do nothing, the enemy will keep winning. I believe that we cannot stop, no matter the cost, otherwise Japan will destroy China.”

“Enough!” Weimin says sharply, but he cannot bring himself to feel anger. He clenches his fists to stop his hands from trembling. “Keep out of trouble and this will all be over soon.”

Neither of his children are fazed.

“Chongqing tells us to resist at all costs. Grandfather said that to oppose Wang Jingwei is to oppose all hanjian,” recites Liming. He has a small bit of rice stuck to the corner of his mouth, his round cheeks stubbornly holding onto their baby fat despite his age of fifteen, despite the rationing.

“Do you know what they make us do at school, Ba?” Liyan says, fixing him with a stare that matches Chen’s. The louder fights between his wife and children frighten Weimin the most—all it would take would be one nosy neighbour, one Japanese soldier

passing by. “Whenever one of our cities are captured, they gather the whole school for a rally so that we can celebrate. Celebrate, Ba! It takes everything for me and my friends not to scream against the Japanese and the hanjian.”

Their friends. The schools were rife with child revolutionaries and nationalists, even in Nanking. Martyrs, the lot of them. Generations and generations of foolish dreamers, who still think this half-developed country could be saved.

He grits his teeth. “Just watch each other when you walk to and from school.” Weimin turns on his heel, marching towards the front door when he spots an open envelope on the cupboard. A new letter from Liwei must have reached them. Weimin snatches it up and skims over it quickly—it is much of the same. His eldest son writes to them from ‘Iolani School in Honolulu, always begging them to come to America. Before the Japanese

took Shanghai, Liwei would tell them that the Japanese would never dare strike the powerful United States, but now, he simply tells them that he is scrounging up money to get them out.

It is too late for them now. And if Weimin knew his family at all, they would all die in China than admit there was no future for this country. His father already had.

“Why the suit, Ba?” Liyan seemed to finally notice his attire. Or at least, she finally gathered up the courage to ask about it. “Where are you going?”

“Seeking a job,” Weimin says flatly. He stares at his two children, as if daring them to inquire further. They remain silent. He puts his hat on and turns to leave. Just before he fully closes the door behind him, Weimin hears Liming whisper, “Big sister, doesn’t Ba look a little like Wang Jingwei?”



Nut Vendor by Jason Gallant