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Just before midnight on the eve of the May Day celebrations, only days after my first meeting with Mao, I was summoned by one of his bodyguards to go to the Chairman immediately.

I rushed to Mao's residence, assuming that he had taken ill. Why else would I be called so late?

I had never been to Mao's home, and I approached it with reverence. Walking through the gate and into the outer courtyard, I felt I was completing my own long march from ordinary doctor to the center of the revolution. From this day on, I thought, my life will be rooted in this sacred, forbidden land. I was thrilled.

Mao is always described as having led an ascetically simple life, setting an example of frugality. When his residence was opened following his death, his worn-out clothes, robes, and slippers were exhibited to the public as evidence that he had sacrificed luxury in order to stay in contact with the masses. Mao was a peasant and he had simple tastes. He dressed only when he absolutely had to and spent most of his day in bed, wearing a robe and nothing on his feet. When he did get dressed, he wore old clothes and worn-out cloth shoes, donning the "Mao suit" and leather shoes only for formal, public occasions. He had someone else—one of his bodyguards, usually—break in his new cloth shoes. The photographs showing him neatly dressed, working in his office, were staged. He conducted virtually all his business from his bedroom or from the side of his indoor pool.

But he still lived an imperial life. His compound was located in the heart of Zhongnanhai, in the center of the old imperial grounds, just between the Middle and South lakes and facing south, in the manner of emperors. It must have been the best-protected place on earth. Foreigners visiting Mao would notice the absence of armed guards, but in fact they were everywhere in Zhongnanhai, discreetly placed, fanning out in a series of concentric circles with Mao at the center. Mao's bodyguards (*neiwei,*) who doubled as attendants, carried pistols, but security at the outer edges of the concentric circles, at the walls of the compound, was so strict that the effect was of a sealed-off cocoon. Beyond Mao's immediate bodyguards, both within his compound and posted at intervals around it, were the so-called "external guards" (*waiwei*), members of Wang Dongxing's Central Bureau of Guards. They, too, were armed.

Armed combat soldiers from the Central Garrison Corps, formally administered by the army chief of staff but in fact under the direct supervision of Wang Dongxing as vice-minister of the Ministry of Public Security, stood guard at the perimeters of Zhongnanhai. This series of protective layers was duplicated wherever Mao went.

Mao's whereabouts were kept secret from all but the highest party leaders. When he was visiting outside Zhongnanhai on ceremonial occasions, his car would be parked somewhere else lest his license number be seen and remembered. Even so, the number was frequently changed. Much of the security system had been copied from the Soviet Union shortly after the communist takeover, but it was also reminiscent of the elaborate precautions taken to protect Chinese emperors during the imperial age.

Mao's compound had once been the emperor's library and retreat, built during the reign of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1795). The complex had not been properly maintained for decades and had begun to decay. The buildings had yet to be fully restored to their former splendor, and renovations were still in progress. Entering for the first time, I was struck more by the functional simplicity of the interior than by its elegance. But the presence of the Qianlong emperor was everywhere.

The south-facing main gate to Mao's walled compound was traditional, old-fashioned and colorfully painted. The wooden placard above bore the legend FENGZEYUAN, Garden of Abundant Beneficence, and had been inscribed by the Qianlong emperor himself. Indeed, all the wooden placards at the buildings' entrances had been inscribed by the emperor. The roof tiles were gray rather than the golden yellow of those in the adjacent Forbidden City, but the style of the buildings was like that of the imperial abode.

Just inside the main gate, on either side of the entrance, were two small rooms where bodyguards stood duty around the clock. The walled compound could be entered only by those holding the special A pass. There was a large courtyard just inside, and straight ahead was a spacious building designated Yinian Tang, or Longevity Hall, where Mao held meetings, received foreign dignitaries, and hosted banquets before the construction of the Great Hall of the People in 1959. Just behind Longevity Hall was another building, Hanhe Tang, Containing Harmony Hall, which housed Mao's large collection of books. It was almost always locked.

Mao's private quarters, known as the Chrysanthemum Fragrance Study (Juxiang Shuwu), were in the second courtyard, connected to the first by a covered corridor. The courtyard was lovely, with magnificent ancient pines and cypresses towering over the wicker tables and chairs where Mao, in the summertime, often held outdoor meetings. Mao's living quarters consisted of two main buildings and several smaller ones. The huge room that served as Mao's study and bedroom was in one building, separated from Jiang Qing's bedroom by a large dining room. The second main building, connected by a corridor to Jiang Qing's bedroom, served as a sitting room for Mao's wife. Adjacent to Jiang Qing's bedroom, and sharing the same interior wall, was the home of Ye Zilong, the head of the Office of Confidential Secretaries, who served also as Mao's chief steward and looked after his personal needs.

To the west of Ye Zilong's quarters and in another building connected to Containing Harmony Hall was the huge kitchen. Ye was in charge of Mao's food. The system of procuring Mao's food was complex—also copied from the Soviets, but similar to the imperial system, too—falling under the larger aegis of Wang Dongxing's Central Bureau of Guards.

Shortly after Mao's return from Moscow in early 1950, two Soviet food specialists had been assigned to the Central Bureau of Guards to help set up a system for inspecting and supplying food to the leaders in Zhongnanhai. At the heart of the system was the Giant Mountain (Jushan) farm, which grew high-quality vegetables, meat, chicken, and eggs for Mao and other top leaders. Mao's chef would send his shopping list to the Central Bureau of Guards' Department of Supply, located near Beihai Park, just north of Zhongnanhai, and the Department of Supply in turn would send the requests to Jushan farm. The food would be delivered to the supply station at Beihai Park, where it would pass through two laboratories—one to analyze the food for freshness and nutritional value and the other to test for poison. After passing the tests, the food was sent to a food-tasting service, where tasters sampled the food before it was given to Mao. The same expensive system existed for all the ranking leaders and was widely duplicated for leaders in the provinces. This cost the public a great deal of money.

Mao's bedroom was connected by a corridor to another building that ostensibly served as his office. The office was locked year-round, opened only for formal picture-taking sessions. Mao never used it.

Adjacent to the compound occupied by Mao and Jiang Qing was another family courtyard, where Li Min, Mao's daughter by He Zizhen, and Li Na, his daughter by Jiang Qing, lived with Jiang Qing's sister, Li Yunlu. Li Yunlu was much older than Jiang Qing—her feet were bound—and she had reared Jiang Qing after their mother died. Later she became a concubine to a businessman. After the party leadership moved to Zhongnanhai, Jiang Qing invited Li Yunlu and her son to live there and help rear Li Na and Li Min. Neither Mao nor Jiang Qing took much interest in their children, and they rarely saw them. They studied in boarding schools, and even when they came home for vacation they only occasionally joined Mao or Jiang Qing for dinner—never more than a few times a year.

A fourth compound consisted of the offices of Mao's medical staff and secretaries and the living quarters of Mao's nephew, Yuanxin, then a young boy of middle-school age. There was a room for playing Ping-Pong here, too, and a large room where Mao's gifts, his clothes, and many of Jiang Qing's belongings were stored. Some of the country's most famous painters, such as Qi Baishi and Xu Beihong, had sent Mao gifts of their art, and these were kept in storage here, but most of the gifts were from foreigners. Later I saw huge, elaborately carved wooden boxes full of Cuban cigars sent by Fidel Castro and cases of aged brandy from Romania's Ceauşescu and a beautiful gold-and-silver cigarette case from the shah of Iran. Ye Zilong, in addition to being responsible for Mao's kitchen, was also in charge of this storeroom.

The courtyard in this area was the largest, with a lovely water fountain and many evergreens and bamboo trees and a grape trellis. In summertime, it was particularly comfortable, several degrees cooler than anywhere else. A large vegetable garden was attached, and in the late 1960s, an air-raid shelter was built under it.

The fifth compound, entered by a separate gate, much simpler than the southern entrance, was dominated by Diligent Administration Hall (Qinzheng Dian). Until the construction of the Great Hall of the People, ambassadors from foreign countries came here to present

their credentials. The dormitories of Mao's bodyguards and Jiang Qing's nurses, on duty around the clock, were also in this compound. Mao's food, stored in three 1940s-style General Electric refrigerators, the daily supplies for his household, and medical supplies were kept in these offices, too.

The offices of Mao's bodyguards, where Mao's calendar and the log of his activities were kept, were located just inside the back door of the fourth compound. Anyone wishing to see Mao, including the staff who worked directly for him, had to report first to the bodyguards stationed here. It was to this courtyard that I rushed around midnight, April 30, 1955, certain that Mao had taken ill. A bodyguard greeted me as I came in.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The Chairman has taken sleeping pills twice but still cannot sleep," the guard explained. "He wants to talk to you."

I was escorted to Mao's bedroom. It was huge, almost the size of a ballroom. The furniture was more Western than Chinese, contemporary and functional, and the four windows were covered in heavy velvet drapes, which were, I realized later, always kept closed. Inside Mao's room it was impossible to tell whether it was night or day.

Mao was lying on a huge wooden bed, half again the size of an ordinary double bed, constructed especially for him by one of the carpenters in Zhongnanhai. Two thirds of the bed was stacked with books, and I noticed that on the side where Mao was now reclining, the edge was raised about four inches higher than the rest of the bed. Li Yinqiao told me later that this was a safety measure to prevent Mao from falling out. It would be years before I realized that the incline had more to do with his sex life than his safety.

Just next to the bed was a large square table, which doubled as his office desk and dining table. Mao took most of his meals alone, in his bedroom. He and Jiang Qing, even then, lived very separate lives and seldom ate together.

"I haven't had my supper yet," Mao said in greeting, fully alert. "I want to have a chat with you." He was wearing a robe, open to expose his chest. He was holding an ancient Chinese book bound together by linen string.

Mao put down his book and I pulled up a chair to sit next to him, sipping the tea his bodyguard had served.

"Is there any news?" he began. I was puzzled. All my news came from the *People's Daily,* which I assumed Mao also read. Surely I had no information that he did not. "For example," Mao continued, noting my confusion, "whom did you see in the last couple of days? What did you talk about?"

"Is there any news?" was to become Mao's daily greeting, and he asked the same question of every staff member. It was his way of gathering information and keeping continual check on us. It was his way of controlling us, too. He expected us to repeat all our conversations and activities and encouraged us to criticize each other. He liked to play one member of the staff off against another. He permitted no secrets.

I told him of my conversation with Fu Lianzhang.

Mao listened attentively. Then he began talking about how Fu Lianzhang had come to accompany the communists on the Long March from the soviet-base area in Jiangxi province to the headquarters of the new base area in Shaanxi. "During our internal struggle against the Guomindang's Anti-Bolshevik Corps in the early 1930s, the Communist party executed five members of Fu Lianzhang's family, including his daughter and son-in-law. They were members of the party themselves but had been accused of being secret members of the Guomindang's Anti-Bolshevik Corps." It was during this time, I knew from Fu Lianzhang's own story, that Fu had also been treating Mao for malaria.

"Fu was not then a member of the Communist party, but I asked if he wanted to join us on the Long March anyway," Mao continued. "He did. We gave him a horse, but he did not know how to ride, so he fell into a river and almost drowned. But he stayed with us all the way to Shaanxi. He's a good man, Fu Lianzhang. But you don't have to listen to everything he says. You really don't have to consult with him about my health problems. When I don't feel well, talk to me about the treatment, not him. If I agree to the treatment, I won't blame you if anything goes wrong. If you don't discuss the treatment with me, then you can't claim credit for healing me, even if I do get better."

I was happy not to have to discuss Mao's health with Fu Lianzhang but was disconcerted that Mao expected to be so closely consulted. Did Mao really want me to describe the physiological and pathological changes the body undergoes during illness? Would I really have to explain every treatment? Would he actually have to be persuaded to accept my treatment? Where would I find layman's language to explain everything to him?

Mao would not be an easy patient.

Dinner was served. Again, the food was swimming in oil. Mao was sixty-two years old and weighed just over 190 pounds—a bit heavy

even for his five-foot-ten-inch frame. Later, I would often criticize his diet and caution him against eating so much fat, but he never listened. He had been in the habit of eating fatty pork since boyhood, and he would do so until the end of his life.

He offered me a dish of bitter melon cooked with hot peppers. "How does it taste?" he wondered.

I had never eaten such a dish. "It's hot and bitter," I replied.

Mao roared with laughter. "Everyone should taste some bitterness in his life," he said, "especially a person like you. You studied medicine and became a doctor. You have probably never eaten bitterness."

Chi ku, "to eat bitterness," can mean, literally, to eat something bitter or to suffer hardship, and I was not certain whether Mao was referring to the food we were eating or playing on words to let me know he regarded me as soft, a product of an easy upper-class life. "I have never eaten this kind of bitter melon before," I replied, sticking to the question of food, "but it's tasty."

"Well, good," he replied. "You must be prepared to taste some bitterness."

Mao's answer made clear that he was sure I had never faced hardship or difficulty, and he wanted me to taste my share. Mao, I would discover, thought everyone—from his daughters Li Na and Li Min to the country's highest leaders—should *chi ku.* Most of the leaders, coming as they did from peasant pasts and having struggled for decades to bring the revolution to victory, had already had their share of bitterness. But Mao thought they had become soft after gaining power and settling into luxurious lives in the city. Without periodic exposure to suffering, he thought, those at the top would forget the real China. In years to come, he would make certain that everyone around him, myself and the highest leaders included, ate more than a little bitterness.

He turned to other topics. China has made three great contributions to the world, he said—Chinese medicine, Cao Xueqin's novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber,* and mah-jongg. He wanted to know if I played mah-jongg.

Mah-jongg is a gambling game that four people play with a set of 136 small tiles, and for many Chinese the game becomes addictive. My family had always disapproved of gambling, and since middle school I had regarded mah-jongg and opium addiction as two cancers eating away at Chinese society. I had never learned to play.

"Well, don't look down on mah-jongg," Mao chastised me. "With a total of 136 tiles, every player has to watch not only over his own pieces but all the other pieces on the table. You have to observe how the others are playing and put all this complicated information together to calculate the possibility of winning and losing. If you knew how to play the game, you would also understand the relationship between the principle of probability and the principle of certainty."

Mah-jongg is indeed a game of strategy, and Mao was both China's great strategist and a superb mah-jongg player. But I think his strategic brilliance came from other sources—from Sun Zi's ancient *Art of War,* from his reading of Chinese history, from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms.* But sharpening his strategic wit was not the only reason he played mah-jongg. His partners, I learned later, were usually pretty young girls. While his hands were busy with the tiles, he was also flirting with his partners, using his feet to touch this one's feet or that one's legs under the table.

"*The Dream of the Red Chamber,*" Mao continued, "is about the rise and fall of feudal society—a condensed history of China over the last two thousand years. I don't ordinarily read novels, but I like *The Dream of the Red Chamber.*"

I had only skimmed *The Dream of the Red Chamber,* unable to read it from cover to cover. It is indeed the greatest of all Chinese novels, but the story is complicated, and the characters numerous. Every time I picked the book up, I laid it aside in boredom after only two or three pages. One of its themes is the decline of the very wealthy Jia family and the corrupt society in which the family is embedded. Mao saw it as a classic study of corruption and the decline of "feudalism" in China. But Chinese for centuries had read it as the tragic love story of Jia Baoyu, who falls in love with a young woman whom his family refuses to allow him to marry. Alienated from society and his family, Jia eventually becomes a monk, but his early rebellion takes the form of pleasure seeking and the pursuit of beautiful women. Later, when I knew Mao better, I understood that he saw much of himself in Jia Baoyu. Even his compound, the Garden of Abundant Beneficence, seemed almost a replica of the opulent Jia family home. Mao, too, was a rebel who liked to seduce young women, and he surrounded himself with female companions. But Mao, unlike Jia Baoyu, never became a monk. "Don't think I'm a saint," Mao warned me early in our relationship. "I'm not at all a saint, and I'm not a monk. I don't want to be."

Mao attributed China's large population to the efficacy of Chinese medicine. For thousands of years, he told me, China had gone through

continual war and natural disaster. But our population now was more than 500 million. Was it because of Western medicine that we had this many people? Western medicine had been practiced in China for only about one hundred years. For thousands of years before, our people had depended on Chinese medicine. Why were there still people who dismissed Chinese medicine? The only Chinese books he had not yet read, he said, were those on Chinese medicine and Buddhism. He wondered if I had read books on Chinese medicine.

My ancestors had been devoted to Chinese medicine, but my training had been Western and I had never given much thought to the contributions of traditional medicine. But I did not believe that China's large population was the result of Chinese medicine. I told Mao that I had read some ancient Chinese medical books but could not really understand them, especially those relating to the theory of the five elements—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. I did not understand the theory.

Mao laughed. "The theory of *yin* and *yang* and the five elements really is very difficult," he said. "The theory is used by doctors of Chinese medicine to explain the physiological and pathological conditions of the human body. What I believe is that Chinese and Western medicine should be integrated. Well-trained doctors of Western medicine should learn Chinese medicine; senior doctors of Chinese medicine should study anatomy, physiology, bacteriology, pathology, and so on. They should learn how to use modern science to explain the principles of Chinese medicine. They should translate some classical Chinese medicine books into modern language, with proper annotations and explanations. Then a new medical science, based on the integration of Chinese and Western medicine, can emerge. That would be a great contribution to the world."

He paused to reflect. "Even though I believe we should promote Chinese medicine, I personally do not believe in it. I don't take Chinese medicine. Don't you think that is strange?"

I agreed that it was strange. Publicly, the Chairman was the leading advocate of traditional medicine, but he refused to use it himself.

"Tomorrow is May Day," Mao said as our nocturnal visit drew to a close. "Come with me to the top of Tiananmen to watch the celebration. It will be a good education for you." He asked how old my child was.

"Five," I replied.

"Take him, too, and let him see the scene," Mao suggested.

"That might not be such a good idea," I replied. "All the top leaders will be there. I will go because of my work, but he really has no reason to go. No one else takes his children. Besides, if he makes trouble, I would be criticized."

Mao smiled. "All right. You don't have to take him. Now go home and get some sleep."

It was three-thirty in the morning when I reached home, long past my ordinary ten o'clock bedtime. Lillian was still waiting up for me. I told her of my talk with Mao. "He is still in good health," I said a bit irritably. "He doesn't need daily medical care. I feel as though he is using me to make idle chatter rather than as a doctor."

Lillian urged me to be patient and accommodate the Chairman for now. "You are just starting your job," she pointed out. "He seems to have a very good impression of you. Don't rush things."

That was the first of countless nocturnal chats I had with Mao. He led an isolated life, seldom saw Jiang Qing, and had no friends. The "Yanan spirit"—the comradeship of the survivors of the Long March—was a myth. Occasionally, Liu Shaoqi or Zhou Enlai would come to meet with Mao on business, but most of their communications took place either through notes on the documents that were constantly being exchanged among them or at the meetings of the politburo standing committee that Mao convened irregularly in the living room of Longevity Hall—or in whatever city he happened to be staying. There was no coming and going, no visiting back and forth between Mao and other ranking party leaders. His bodyguards were his closest everyday company, and they were young, uneducated peasants with whom the possibility of conversation was limited. He talked to them about their girlfriends, offered them romantic advice, and sometimes even helped compose their love letters. But it was impossible to talk to them about the subjects that interested him most—Chinese history and philosophy.

So Mao made me his conversation partner, encouraging me to read his favorite historical and philosophical texts, and spent hours every week talking to me. When insomnia struck, he would sometimes read a book or call a meeting—no matter how late and inconvenient for others—but often he would simply call someone in to chat, and I was frequently that person. It was not unusual to receive a summons from Mao at three o'clock in the morning. His insomnia was always particularly acute just before National Day and May Day, when he was to review the parade and receive the crowds at Tiananmen.

Lillian was right to urge patience but wrong that the need to accommodate Mao would be temporary. Mao was a dictator. There were no other preferences but his. Those of us around him had to grant his every wish. To assert one's individuality in Mao's imperial court would have been an invitation to disaster.