DJINN AND THE LORD OF MEN

The Memoirs of Ahmet Shahidi:
Communist, Rebel and Defector

By David Stanway

I betake me for refuge to the Lord of Men,
The King of Men,
The God of Men,
Against the mischief of the steadily withdrawing whisperer
Who whispers in man's breast
Against djinn and men.
SURA CXIV

1.

In the small former trading post of Yeshiltagh in Chinese Turkestan, also known as Xinjiang, camels still gag and pant in the dry heat, and their shit still stinks more than any creature I know. The markets that used to sell grapes and raisins to the caravans and convoys creeping along the southern edge of the Taklamakan desert still form the bulk of the town's activities, along with the two small and half-derelict textile mills looming over the river, their windows smashed and the walls still stenciled with fading proletarian slogans. Recent history - the specific decisions of our people, rather than the indifferent wear and tear of time - has left no obvious mark.

This was always a place of violence, where heroes had to be as violent as the villains and where it was usually impossible to tell the difference between the two. I was born here, a timid, undersized and underfed little child caught in the tumult of a revolution, terrified of horses and camels and foxes and rivers and mountains, waiting for a world that offered order and structure and peace – a place where I thought I might finally thrive.

In the well-preserved mountain caves that overlook our town, where so many still find respite from the summer, you can still see the idols and icons ruined by German, British and Russian explorers as they chipped away for booty to take home. But some of the vandalism is more deliberate. Nearby, you can spot the gouged-out eyes of the kings and sages painted over a

millennium ago by the Zoroastrians, who drifted east across Asia for centuries before settling here. This improbable diaspora was defaced and eventually superseded by another, the messengers of Muhammad spreading through Central Asia, emerging out of nowhere to conquer or convert everything in their path.

Attacking the eyes was the great insult, and supposedly condemned those represented in the friezes to an eternity of hellfire. Blindness was a curse, the worst way they could think of to condemn these already departed souls.

The heresy of syncretism always tempts those on the distant periphery, and the spasms of puritanism are naturally more violent as a result. Among the lurid representations of Ahuru Mazda and Angra Mainu - Zoroaster's avatars of good and evil - stands an icon of a grinning Buddha, lacquered in luminescent gold. His eyes had also been knifed out. The expanding frontiers of Islam, pushed by Arabs and Turks, seemed to sweep everything away, destroying all resistance and gathering thousands of itinerant herdsmen – including my own ancestors, presumably - into its ambit[1]. Such has been our fate for centuries.

Old people in Yeshiltagh used to talk about the old settlement on the Green Mountain, after which our town was named. About fifteen years ago the archaeologists managed to have it closed off, but before that you could still go and visit, just a few

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[1] It also soon intersected with the expansionism of Genghis Khan and the Chinese empire.

miles north of Yeshiltagh itself - a petrified town, with its empty wells, its six rows of neat sandstone huts, and a bone-dry graveyard marking the tombs of several dozen children caught up in a siege and a massacre that took place more than a millennium ago. Perhaps there were names there once, but weather and geology have rubbed them away. Would it have made any difference to anyone if the names were still there?

More to the point, what did the victors get from it in the end? An uninhabited town in a minor oasis on the fringes of the Turkestan deserts, always destined to crumble and dissolve in the sands. But then again, we all know by now that every path of history leads us into a dead end. We turn around and start again, groping around for old familiarities.

I was actually raised to treat all this detritus with the contempt and disdain that we all believed it deserved. Being good Marxists, we regarded the religious as vermin, historical refuse, the vestiges of superstitious backwardness, and destined to burn in the fire of the revolution. Our province was full - as the Russians called them - of such "former people", casting their filthy shadows.

But the picture in Xinjiang was always somewhat deeper than that, deeper than the cycles of revolution and counter-revolution, and deeper than all the battles we fought. Here, everyone was always somehow superseded by something or other. After a thousand years of warfare, caught between umpteen overlapping empires and warring clans, we had been nationalized, brutalized, collectivized and commoditized in the space of little over a century. What was left of us? Was there really an "us" anymore?

In fact, we were always the objects of someone else's campaign or other. No wonder we remained riddled with superstition. Nothing felt like it belonged to us. That was the problem with being nomads. The dry soil was all we had, and we clung to the life that emerged from it - even the *djinn*, the imaginary life.

We were always the bandits from the frontier, the *basmachi* seeping through the borders. It was our misfortune to find ourselves marooned on the wrong side of the lines drawn up by our enemies. And everyone was our enemy. Born amid violence, it was my own personal bad luck that I shrank from it – that I was incapable of fighting the way my father wanted.

For my father, nationalism was as backward as Islam itself. By now, as all these forces sweep across our land, the response - in my case at least – was to say *to hell with them, all of them*.

In a small museum near the caves, there are old Buddhist inscriptions carved into two rows of about twenty slates, preaching serenity and resolve. Clumsily scrawled in red paint on the back of them are homages paid to the pieties and purities of the revolution - "Long live Chairman Mao", "Down with revisionists" - written by a quick-witted curator trying to save them from the hysterical masses.

In the museum, there are no tributes to one particular historical apotheosis, one special dialectic culmination that came to pass here forty years ago. I might as well never have been here.

Outside, on the edge of the People's Square, I am delighted to spot my old friend Asim, his face now old and shrunken like a sultana, his ribcage rattling as he sucks at the dry air.

As is his custom, he is juggling fruit in an attempt to attract trade. It makes no difference. Everyone knows him, and there are few tourists. Physically gifted, he throws up bunches of grapes and bananas, plastic bags bulging with nuts, and even the odd grapefruit. He drops nothing.

I repeat, aloud, a phrase I often used whenever I saw him. "Amid all this, life goes on."

He turns around. I grin, and who I am seems to slowly dawn on him, beginning in his eyes. We embrace.

"You are still here, Asim," I say, surprised – frankly – that he was still alive.

"*Yaq!* You too," he said, smiling. Just one brown tooth now, poking out of his lower gum. His shrunken grin made him look exactly like his father.

I have not seen him for more than 30 years, but there is no sentiment. Not from him, anyway.

The deserts have not been good to him, I thought, but they never are. I remember him as a handsome child, but there is little left of him now, and the years seemed to have carved a permanent scowl into his lower jaw. His bare muscles are still as tight and coarse and brown as old rope soaked in vinegar.

I remind myself to check my own reflection to see what the years had done to me. In the murky glass of a shop window, I see nothing that alarms me unduly, apart from age. There is no story in this face, my sandpaper skin making me look at least a decade older than I really am. Ten years of enforced hard labour in the alpine desert have taken their toll, of course – there is a dry, yellow tautness to my skin - but they have also taught me how to hide my expressions.

Asim pointed at the town square and grinned. "They took it all over in the end," he said.

And he was right. Ancestrally, we are both Uighurs[2], and this was a Uighur town, but there was not much sign of our heritage or ethnicity in the various homages that were being paid to the obscure Marxists, Maoists and "martyrs" who had somehow managed to remain in favour throughout the reversals and betrayals of the last few decades. The fast-food and fashion chains have also leaked into our town from the big cities. Fairy lights festoon the high street, cast like webs on the walls of tower blocks, hotels and saunas. Large chunks of the sprawling old adobe settlements remain visible behind the main thoroughfare – shards buried like broken teeth in the soft slopes of the Green Mountain.

The feasts, at least, were far more sumptuous than I remember them. In a small, comfortable restaurant I'd never seen before, under shoals of fairy lights, Asim and I discussed old times. His wife, a noted beauty, was now fat and loud and tiresome. His eldest son was now 32 and had already been married for fifteen years.

A mile or so away from the main square, beyond a row of empty but somehow optimistic little boutiques, entertainment stores and karaoke parlours, are the town's uncharacteristically modest government offices – they have hardly changed since 1951, with the insignia of the regime still

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[2] Actually, Uighur was a loaded term, more or less invented by the Chinese to describe any of a number of racial backgrounds and mixtures.

enveloped with clinging ivy. Opposite them lies a bankrupt open-cast coal mine, with its miasma of sulphur, the derelict shell of an old stream train and the sprigs of grass sprouting out of the grey earth. Beyond the mine is the entrance to the Yeshiltagh *karez*, a series of underground wells, canals and artificial caves, somehow less renowned than their famous counterparts in Turpan, but older, deeper and to my eyes, more haunting. They once allowed us to wring as much water as possible from the parched Xinjiang earth, diverting melted mountain snow and ice to our towns, but they were also designed to house the old emirs and mullahs and feudal lords as they retreated from the blistering Xinjiang summer. They were once used by dignitaries to hide from the innumerable invaders and usurpers who swept from all directions into our town on the way to Urumqi or Kashgar. The *karez* also allowed a timid child to hide and daydream about improbable future triumphs.

Hiking slowly towards them, the first thing I saw was a sign. "*Hatarlik!* Do not drink the water." It had already been contaminated by the mine, and presumably things hadn't been improved by the new fertiliser and the chemical factories.

When the schools were closed during the mayhem of 1949-50, I would wander through the *karez* for hours and hours with old Asim, looking for places to hide in the seemingly endless network of tunnels and chambers. Asim and I would chase frogs and lizards into the open air, diligently counting how many we had caught and vowing to do better the following day. Then we would throw rocks into the fresh cold streams. My knowledge of the labyrinth proved fateful.

Outside the *karez*, the authorities have now demolished or removed a generic sculpture of a martyred government official marked with the tribute, "To those who perished during the counter-revolutionary struggles of 1966." That was put there for us, as a way of disguising the shame and disgrace our masters felt. But now, forty years later, there is no attempt to pretend that we played an integral and heroic part in facilitating the iron laws of history, dispensing revolutionary justice in "the service of dialectic inevitability", as Li, our leader, might have put it.

Wandering around what is left of the *karez* – the government has long since tried to replace them with more sophisticated electrical pumps – I notice that there remains a single reminder, a word carved portentously into the rock by my comrade, Iqbal (1940-66).

"Remember," the word said.

No one did. At least I always did my best to forget. I loved Iqbal. But he was a romantic, an instinctive rebel soaked and suffused with the sentimentalism of our upbringing, surrounded by horses and camels and the endless skies and plains and deserts of central Asia. Iqbal was thinking, still, in terms of the heroic: the *basmachi* nomad sweeping across the prairies on his pristine steed, or the liberator – immortalised by bards – leading his heaving caravans through the Taklamakan.

But this was no time for heroism. Iqbal actually knew more than most that we had become mere functionaries, chipped cogs in broken machines, faking our attempts to fulfill our fake Five-Year Plans, eager to betray anyone else for any signs of failure. The heroes, we knew, had already been

strung up during the anti-Rightist campaigns or starved to death by the collectivization process or simply subsumed by the masses, lost in the hysteria of mass mobilization and the ever-vigilant campaign against class traitors and other individuals.

Hope is like a path in the forest, said the Chinese writer Lu Xun[3]. The more you walk along it, the more you tread down the weeds and bracken, the more you sharpen the course and flatten the earth, the easier it becomes.

I'd say the same goes for regret, and guilt. I've been honing my self-recrimination for decades, but here it is, staring me in the face, at the entrance of the karez. The stone steps leading down into the bowels of our town are cleaner and drier than I remember. It now has a permanent sentry, a bored looking Chinese man in ethnic Mongol dress collecting fees from whoever he can, loudly clearing his throat.

A wave of nausea rises up from my belly as I hand over my 50-*yuan* note and descend the stone steps into the first narrow tunnel, now lined with polished lamps and gold-framed photographs of eminent (and "patriotic") Uighur businessmen grabbing the hands of visiting Party leaders. Small decorative friezes commemorate two regime-friendly legends that have wrapped themselves around the place over the years – one is an obscure Qing dynasty general who retreated here and

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[3] Lu Xun. Born 1881. Died 1936. Essayist, translator and short story writer. Extolled by the Chinese Communist Party after he succumbed to cancer, demonstrating that for the CCP, the only good intellectual was a dead intellectual.

thereby saved his underlings from certain slaughter, and the other a local princess who cemented her family's suzerainty by offering herself to the Emperor in the east, thus proving that the town has a long history of obeisance towards Beijing.

I hear voices. I imagine that I smell death. Perhaps, in truth, I have always wanted to relive this drama, and my brain is behaving accordingly. My throat tightens, but the body memories cease as I reach the end of the first tunnel and notice that the rest of the catacombs have been walled up. For "safety reasons".

If only we had thought of that.

Beyond the sign was a maze of corridors and secret passages that could house at least a hundred. According to a local legend, two noble families – known the Abays and the Uduls – starved to death down here, trapped by a platoon of Chinese imperial soldiers who had marched into Xinjiang to suppress one of the many brutal uprisings that have marked our history. Before they died, they were driven mad, and according to some accounts, driven to eat one another. The legend says that the two families were divided for the rest of history, and that their offspring were somehow responsible for every new conflict. The incident also lives on in local metaphor. You are either Abay or Udul, my father would say. By extension, you were either for the Party or against it, and there was nothing in between.

It is almost forty years since I last emerged from these caves, wet and caked with blood, emerging after two months into the heat and stench of a town that was still fighting, but seemed more ignorant than ever about what it was fighting for.

We had played out our little fraction of history from the guts and bowels of a region still regarded as "enemy territory", even though it remained my hometown. Outside, the Muslims were still in the final days of their own stupid little war, throwing sticks and petrol bottles and rocks into the empty bazaars, capturing each other and demanding – demanding what exactly?

Let me try to explain. At the time, there was a conflict between the Patriotic People's Muslim Alliance, also known as the Red Skullcaps, and the People's Islamic Front for the Mass Line, who went by – and resented – the inferior nickname of the Red Stars. Both were supposedly vying for the favour of our fractured, wounded leadership in the east, or more precisely, trying to persuade the world that they themselves belonged to some spiritual vanguard, and had abandoned everything that came before them in the name of the glorious flowering of human spirit and history that was the Revolution.

Chairman Mao, the chief emperor, rebel, cconjurer and heresiarch of Beijing, had us believing anything.

As in the rest of the country, faction fought faction, family fought family, and generation fought generation, and the results of these battles were played out – literally and symbolically – in Yeshiltagh's People's Square, formally known as Grapevine Square, where hundreds would line up to denounce their fathers, their friends, their schoolteachers, their upbringing, their ancestors – everything they had. Once you can persuade your people to do that, anything follows.

Forty years on, after ten years in a labour camp and thirty years abroad, I crisscrossed the province – or "autonomous region", as it should be known - surging through the desert and feeling a swell in my chest as the sand gives way to the northern lakes and forests; heading west to the mountains, passing through the "tourist zones" and "industrial parks" and skimming along the multicoloured plantations of genetically-modified cotton that now seem to dominate the brief oases of Xinjiang.

I arrive in Urumchi, the region's capital, by plane from Beijing. The city square's bazaars have mostly been demolished, I notice. Fast food joints and supermarket chains stand in their place. In the main spire in the city square, a vivacious Mongolian girl with strong, dairy-fed Mongolian teeth shows me the photographs of the diminutive Comrade Deng[4], on an official visit, dwarfed by Xinjiang's miracle (and entirely faked) crop yields of 1958. Next to that, a photograph of Chairman Mao's martyred brother[5], killed in 1942 during a purge of Reds by local warlord Sheng Shicai[6].

The cities stink of petroleum. The ghettos stink of lamb. I leave Yeshiltagh until last and I am hardly surprised that the place has got more Chinese, and

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[4] Deng Xiaoping. “Paramount leader” after Chairman Mao’s death. Architect of China’s “reform and opening up” period beginning in 1978.

[5] Mao Zemin, born 1896, died 1943 during a “white terror” campaign that resulted in the execution of around 140 Communists.

[6] Sheng Shicai, born 1897, died 1970. Warlord ruler of Xinjiang from 1933-44. Murderer of the famous Uighur poet, Mexsut Muhiti, whose head he held in their air in 1933 during a visit fo Astana. Joined the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1938 at the request of Stalin but returned to Chiang Kai-shek’s fold three years later after he was snubbed by Chairman Mao Zedong. Minister of Agriculture and Forestry from 1944-49 in the Kuomintang government. Fled to Taiwan in 1949. Co-author of the self-serving *Sinkiang, Pawn or Pivot* (1958).

that the non-Chinese have got more resentful. An "economic development zone" has been opened up in the eastern quarter. A few plants boil up chemicals or make plastics and dump their frothy waste into the adjacent streams.

There are more mosques than I remember – I reflexively put this down to the enlightened rule of Beijing: two decades spent in the Party do not easily fade. There are also more skullcaps and beards and hijabs than were once permitted. I feel I don't belong here. Forty years is a long time.

Music dominates the small bazaars. Traders sell trinkets and obscure foreign currencies marked with the faces of toppled Muslim despots. Loudspeakers issue the call to prayer and pedlars kneel wearily behind their wooden stalls.

Observances aren't particularly strict. In the evening, drunken Uighurs clutch bottles of *baijiu* and talk fancifully about the *intifada* they had seen on their television sets the night before. The Chinese don't usually go out at night. If they do, they stay in their own quarter.

I'd like to say that it was better in the old days, but it wasn't. This was just another old timer's lament for a moment in history where, at the very least, he still *mattered*. But it just seemed a little easier then, I suppose, when expectations began at a minimum but hope seemed still to flower quite naturally from the desert. Superficially, at least, the disasters were a little easier to take when the crisp taste of fruit seemed to linger permanently in the air, rather than the stench of oil, burning rubber and ill-repaired drains.

If I had learned anything from all this, it was that there was no such thing as a pure anything, let

alone a pure China or a pure Xinjiang, and there never was.

"I'm surprised they let you back in," Asim said, chomping on a chunk of skewered lamb.

"Well, I was never really a *threat*," I said. "If anything, I was guilty of being *too* loyal."

Asim was as quiet and laconic as ever. Suddenly, I saw the child he used to be, and saw in that child's face the old man he now was – his eyebrows thickening, his beard blackening and then greying. He was still completely at one with himself, I thought, a personality never overstretched, with not a trace of bitterness and resentment or a sense that while this is how he was, it wasn't how he *should* be. A feeling, instead, that he just didn't need to wonder what he should be and how he should become it. He just inhabited himself in the same way he inhabited the farm and the old tent he used to take into the prairies during the burning Xinjiang summer. He had crash-landed into life and he would crash-land out of it, and it didn't seem to matter to him either way.

Suddenly, I remember emerging from the *karez* in the late summer of 1966, trembling and covered in blood and filth, and rushing immediately to the Propaganda Bureau to file my report and consign everything that had happened to the Annals. I remember expecting my uncle to be there, with a reassuring smile, to tell me that everything that had happened was the triumphant fulfillment of all the aims of our long campaign.

And I remember submitting a document to my superiors on 28 January 1967, several months after my arrest and the very day that the authorities

declared the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in Xinjiang to be at an end.

"The conclusion of all this is the triumphant fulfillment of all the aims of our long campaign," I wrote, shortly before being dragged off by two skinny youths from the local public security bureau, stripped of my Party membership and sentenced to ten years of hard labour by an impromptu military court.

2.

My name is Ahmet Shahidi, and I was born in Yeshiltagh in 1940, part of what could be described as a long tradition of "collaborators" with the Chinese. My family was among the first to take advantage of China's conquest of Xinjiang in 1884. We were related, by blood, to the feudal rulers of the old city of Hami, who did rather well out of the new order and were quickly "cooked" – the Chinese word for "assimilated" – in the stew of the empire.

A fading daguerrotype shows my grandfather wearing the pigtail favoured (and made compulsory) by our Qing dynasty conquerors. The elder Shahidi was later killed as a "traitor" by a Uighur terrorist during the anti-Chinese pogroms in Hami in 1931. My grandmother lived with us until the brutal winter of 1945, when she dropped dead without fuss as she stumbled home from the market.

In 1938, my father[7] had returned to Yeshiltagh, his home town, from his studies at the Central Asian University in Tashkent and was now working as a kind of pro-Soviet liaison on behalf of a fragile regime imposed on large parts of Xinjiang by

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[7] Ablaz Shahidi, born 1912, died 1987. Vice-chairman of the nationalities section of the Xinjiang Propaganda Bureau (1958-67), head of the Discipline and Inspection Committee of the Xinjiang section of the Chinese Communist Party (1957-64). Member of Chinese Communist Party (1941-1967, 1976-1987). Representative of the China People's Political Consultative Conference (1951-67, 1977-87). Expelled from the party in 1967 but subsequently rehabilitated after the death of Chairman Mao in 1976. Author of the deliberately obtuse and frequently inaccurate *Xinjiang de jiefang* (The Liberation of Xinjiang), Beijing University Press, 1982, in which I am studiously unmentioned.

Sheng Shicai, the latest in a long line of local warlords.

My father had returned at just the right moment. Warlord Sheng – after pandering to Stalin for more than a decade – had decided to try his luck with the Chinese Communist Party. As a Han Chinese[8] trying to rule a province consisting of belligerent Kazakhs, resentful Uzbeks and downtrodden Uighurs, Sheng presumably needed all the help he could get.

He persuaded my father, still not yet recovered from his journey, to set off on a mission to intercept the Reds on the final leg of their Long March[9], with a formal request for party membership. Sheng's entry was refused, but my father's wasn't. That is where he met my mother, who came from a family of Hui Muslim[10] partisans living in the mountains of Yunnan Province.

These were tempestuous times and you could say that my father had been lucky. During the three years he spent in Uzbekistan learning what Stalin and others had pronounced about the mechanization of agriculture and the elimination of nomadism and feudalism in peasant societies, as well as the year he then spent with the Reds on their way to Yan'an[11], he managed to avoid Sheng's Stalin-inspired purges, in which a pre-specified quota of my father's Uighur comrades were shot for

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[8] The Han Chinese are the dominant "race" within China, making up more than 90 percent of the population.

[9] The Long March, the arduous trek by the newly criminalised Chinese Communists as they fled the forces of the Nationalist government.

[10] The Hui, also known as the Dong'an, are Muslims of Chinese descent.

[11] Yan'an, Shaanxi Province. Site of the rebel Communist government following the Long March.

being insufficiently loyal, or for displaying unspecified "Trotskyite" tendencies.

It rarely feels that way at the time, but for however long it lasts, a single life is just one piece of random luck balanced on top of another. Until it topples, at least. As my father's life teetered, I was born.

In my first two years, my father was essentially on the run. With the Russians naturally preoccupied with the Germans and the Chinese with the Japanese, Xinjiang was now even more prone to the chaotic tantrums that had preoccupied its ruling clans for at least a century.

Sheng - fickle, opportunist and having already been rejected by the Chinese Communists - was now making overtures to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's[12] nationalists. Turning on the Reds, Sheng was behind the execution of Chairman Mao's brother in 1943, but my father was among a number of Communists who somehow escaped and fled to the western mountains.

Our town, like the rest of Xinjiang, was caught up in a struggle. China itself was wounded and could do nothing. We were left to our own vicious devices. But the vastness and remoteness of the province gave us space and time. My uncle taught me Russian and my mother taught me Chinese. We lived off the fruits grown out in our garden and had enough goats to slaughter at least one a month.

My father, back from his travels, was concerned about me. He said I was too bookish, too soft – "A

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[12] Chiang Kai-shek, born 1887, died 1975. Head of the Kuomintang (KMT) party of Chinese nationalists. President of China from 1928-49, and then, after defeat in the Chinese civil war, President of Taiwan from 1949 until his death.

rabbit can't talk a fox out of eating him," he would say. He said I needed to be hardened by the farm or the army the factory. He would loom over me and emit the sort of high-pitched shriek usually used against recalcitrant mules and then kick me with his old Russian boot.

It was around that time that I first heard the name Abdurehim, the son of one of my father's acolytes. Abdurehim was only seven years old, my father would say repeatedly, but he was already out hunting.

In 1944, there was a lone encampment of Chinese administrators, the rump representatives of the absurd Generalissimo, lodged in a former imperial palace a few miles north of the town square and cheerfully cut off from the turmoil that had overtaken the rest of the country. Not for much longer.

The anti-Han pogroms were about to begin, and in the summer of 1944, the officials were besieged and slaughtered by a gang of "Soviet-backed pan-Turkic hoodlums," as they were later known.

The gang's leader, yet another claiming to be the "lost emir" of Turkestan, was in turn assassinated only two weeks later by persons unknown, but believed to be connected with my father's friend, the father of Abdurehim.

My father was expecting reprisal. He said the pan-Islamics were mere pawns - victims of the "false consciousness" sprayed out by Japanese or German agents provocateurs and irremediable Kolchakite[13], Trotskyite or Cossack wreckers.

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[13] Aleksandr Vasiliyevich Kolchak, born 1874, died 1920. Russian naval commander, head of anti-Bolshevik forces during Russian civil war.

For me, he had a simpler explanation.

"Religion is for fools," he would tell me. I was four years old but he seemed terrified that I would stray to the mosques. He wanted me to be a man but kept me away from men.

He always urged me to avoid self-pity, but I look at the child I used to be – the child my father made me – and I find pity to be the only valid response. The pity surges through me like adrenalin as I remember falling off the donkeys my father forced me to ride, clinging to my mother's hand as strangers in dirty tunics and smocks made of animal skins came to call. There is little room for the *human* – for tiny, human problems – when the world is at war and whole cities think nothing of wreaking pre-emptive revenge against the inevitable attacks from their enemies. Later, I tried to become a machine – a receptacle and vehicle of history – but it was always a lie. History is humanity and humanity isn't blind or dispassionate or without affect. History is born from the skinny, clumsy kid who is scared of horses and strangers and open spaces, who was beaten by his father and spent the rest of his life trying to assuage the rage of impotence and inadequacy. If you are asking me what I have learned, then this is what I learned: self-pity is unappealing, but for some of us, it is all we have left.

And I learned this: if politics is something you are fleeing into, if the affairs of state become your escape from reality, then perhaps you should be doing something else. But for us, politics became an escape from reality that we couldn't escape from, a hallucination which was somehow endorsed as objective reality. There was an invisible gloss of

utopianism that seemed to coat every starving convict, every crop failure, every bullet in every brain of every purgee and political heretic. It was a promise that no one could keep but everyone was forced to believe.

How did I try to avoid self-pity, as my father urged? By pretending that its whining was the voice of history shouting through the generations, shouting words like "justice" and "vengeance" when all I really needed was peace and rest.

After those spasms of brutality in 1944, Yeshiltagh hardly saw a *hitay* - the local word for the Chinese interlopers[14] - for years. Despite largely successful attempts to paint the "lost emir" as a degenerate criminal and the town as a sanctuary of progressive, pro-Chinese ideas, the Chinese themselves stayed away.

The cartoons and slogans printed out by the KMT garrison in Urumchi and left to wither for years in Yeshiltagh's town square depicted the "lost emir" – in the ultimate combination of insults – as a pig and a whore. Still the Chinese stayed away.

My father told me that Yeshiltagh used to be a vibrant trading post, selling fruit grown in the fecund oases of the Turpan basin to merchants from the north and east, or to Silk Road travellers heading west. By now, it was cut off from all normal commerce. Rumours and conspiracies were suddenly the biggest commodity, with sophisticated folk like my father talking about the surge of the Red Army and superstitious types waiting to be

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[14] Borrowed from the Russian, *kitay.* For concepts we disapproved of, we generally used foreign words. Most Uighurs still use the Chinese word for "rape".

rescued by the Islamic hordes swarming over the horizon.

Among the things I can remember from my childhood are the long silences as we waited for the occasional encroachment of Red Army- or Soviet-backed "Muslim Communists" and "Turkestan separatists" exchanging gunfire with the teetering provisional authorities. And I recall the boredom, even as we anticipated the blood-letting that was to come.

For my father, there were divided loyalties. These, he wrote later in his memoir, *The Liberation of Xinjiang*, were complicated times, and "many, including myself, made mistakes during our attempts to be on the right side of history."

In 1944, he sided with the latest rebellion, launched in the north by a group of politically-ambiguous Muslims, including Exmetjan Qasimi, one of my father's few surviving friends from his years in the Soviet Union. He was well aware that Moscow was stirring up the separatists, pitching weapons and cash at the angry Kazakh fanatics of the north and the badly organized Uighur jihadis in the south largely in order to fulfill the Russian dreams of regional hegemony that had been drawn up by the Tsars. I suppose my father had to do what he thought was for the best. The Chinese Communists had more or less abandoned the scene: they had their own worries.

In the end, my father decided to throw in his lot with the Xinjiang Turkic People's National Liberation Committee, a broadly pro-Moscow group which had taken over the rebellion but had itself been taken over by "certain bourgeois democratic liberal tendencies," he wrote later. He

figured that the Chinese Communist Party would understand that you had to fight for progress as best you can, and that occasionally, you had to get your hands dirty.

This was still a time for dreams. The Committee, enlightened though it was, collapsed as "a result of its own internal contradictions," according to my father's book. The proto-democratic constitution couldn't quite endure the ethnic and religious tensions that underpinned it, he said, "but the seeds of progress were sown", and it was genuinely popular even as the rest of China plunged into economic and political chaos.

I remember my father's excitement in 1945, when the Japanese were finally driven out of China, and he started to think of himself as part of a "national vanguard of intellectuals" working for the good of the nation, and of mankind. His mother's sudden death barely seemed to register, and she was hastily but quietly entombed in a small family plot on the slopes of the Green Mountain.

I remember the meetings father had in the garden of our small and salubrious bungalow, looking out onto the purple hills and the camels tethered to the slopes. We drank sweet, Mongolian-style milk tea with a scoop of butter melting through it as he whispered with his fellow conspiracists - including his slim and delicate younger brother, Samir - about such things as the liberation and the proletariat. Mixed with the *salaam aleikums*, they all seemed like magic words to me at the time, spells invoked over the cauldrons of sticky milk tea and the bowls filled with curds and koumis – a mist of incantations and scented steam that protected us

from the violent struggles that continued in Yeshiltagh and beyond.

It was around this time that I met Abdurehim for the first time. He was ten years old and I was already terrified of him, laughing nervously as he boasted about the animals he'd killed. He was wild – his eyes were as wide as plates, his lips were dripping with juices, and his arms and legs were already solid chunks of brown muscly flesh that reminded me of the shanks of cooked mutton and beef that my father chewed all night.

"Where do you hunt?" Abdurehim asked me, cocky but without malice.

He grabbed a branch and chased me around the garden saying he was going to be a soldier, the bravest soldier in the world. I hid behind my mother and cried and Abdurehim looked on, bemused but unrepentant, ordering me to come out and play with him some more.

History is everywhere, and it spills in all kinds of unpredictable directions. As a border province, we were always particularly vulnerable to all the changes in direction, and to the purges and pogroms and spasms of retaliation that inevitably ensued. There were times when even my father – usually a firm believer in the iron laws of history and the triviality of individuals – panicked about the future and urged my mother to flee with me to the remote countryside.

For two fraught months – it must have been March or April, 1947 - I headed west with my mother to a small Uighur enclave, a village near the spectacular Lake Karakul that remains difficult to access even now, despite being close to the huge highway that links Xinjiang to Pakistan. We were

chaperoned by my father's youngest brother, Sadir, a brawny youth who resented his elders. "You are lucky," he said frequently, "you are the oldest son. The only son."

He had been sent by my father to instil some manly discipline in me. My father continued to tell me I was too much like my mother – too emotional, too volatile, too *soft*. Curiously, he had started blaming Warlord Sheng, saying his decision to expel the Soviets in 1941 had deprived me of the meat and manly nourishment that an infant boy sorely required.

Mother was miserable, and spent the journey dabbing at her eyes with an impossibly clean white handkerchief. She claimed that it was the dust that made her weep.

Much to my shame, I hardly cared, and these were joyful if uncertain times, I remember, aged just seven, lying in the back of an old Russian truck for days and then carried, by two weary camels, to a makeshift town of about twenty yurts gathered in a low huddle in order to keep out the mountain wind. We lived with half a dozen Soviet-trained Uighur rebels attached to the Xinjiang Turkic People's Liberation Committee, who played cards all day while their herds were tended by their gravid, grumbling wives.

We would sit cross-legged on threadbare carpets and listen to the chief, intoning the legends from our *basmachi* past, when Tartar bandits could bring down an empire. My mother sat alone on a small stool, with her handkerchief.

I think now of the warmth and hope of the harvests as I chased grasshoppers through the wild alfalfa and watched the Kazakh and Kirghiz

herdsmen roaming the slopes, protecting their yaks and asses from the jackals.

A month later, my father arrived, walking in on an elaborate ceremony involving an entire sheep mounted on large spike. He had headed west to bring us home after avoiding the catastrophe he had been predicting with such perverse enthusiasm for so long. There had been casualties, he said, but not many. With him was the near legendary Abdurehim, just 11-years old but already the warrior my father had always wanted me to be – filthy but exuberant and fresh from his first human killing.

"This brave child," my father said, his voice trembling, "saved a life, his own father's life, killing an assassin without any hesitation. If all our boys were like Abdurehim, our future would be glorious!"

One of the herdsmen plucked out one of the sheep's eyes and served it, with due reverence, to my father.

"Still worshipping dead animals I see," he said. "There'll be no place for that soon."

I watched him chewing the eyeball slowly and deliberately and felt nauseous.

"Give the other one to Abdurehim," he said loudly, the squeal of chewed flesh and squirting innards still audible.

Abdurehim laughed and approached the carcass like an animal, his mouth open. I blinked and shook my head and recoiled as I imagined the very moment when the soft, springy casing of the sheep's eyeball was pierced and its pungent juices oozed into my throat. My father hit me on the side of the

head with the flat of his hand and said, “Be a man, be a man!”

"They are already overgrazing the land," he then added, apropos of nothing. He fancied himself as an expert in agriculture as well as political theory, socialist economics and the transformative capabilities of modern technology in "backward" regions, and said if he had the time, he would gladly instruct the herders on how to manage their land more effectively.

3.

Anyone who tells you he regrets nothing is a liar.

From 1967 to 1977, I was in a labour camp, and it wasn't so much the trauma of hard work or captivity that killed my spirit, but the thought that life was little more than a sequence of disconnected dead-ends from which we learn nothing, and that this chunk of time would be permanently occupied by this camp, this crime, this tiredness, and that everything was beyond remedy. As the horizon shimmered and flickered – a cruel hallucination that made it look as if the desert had been dipped in water – I tried to fade out, to turn myself into a passive bearer of a trillion disconnected moments, a machine hacking away at rocks for fourteen hours a day. But we cannot stop ourselves from thinking, and thinking about all the ways things could have been different. From 1967 to 1977, surrounded by hundreds of "counter-revolutionaries" and "unreliable elements", I brooded over my lost comrades. My good friend Iqbal, slain in the caves, my trusted colleague Peng, brutalized by the mob.

I thought of those days, tied up in the *karez*, caked in blood and shit – mine and other people's blood and shit – while our leader conspired against us and everything we were supposed to believe in. And after a while I realized that he had not corrupted our world. It was corrupted from the very beginning simply by the fact that we were in it, bleeding and shitting on everything.

We were forbidden from using the phrase "concentration camp". This was the "reform

through labour" system. I watched people being suspended by their wrists for days on end, as in some sort of crucifixion. Naturally, the religious among us – aspiring martyrs all – were fortified by the spectacle. Religion is for fools, my father used to say, but in the camp, I realized that it certainly wasn't for cowards.

We were the half-dead, the ghost-slaves of the revolution, smashing rocks as our minds floated across the desert. We were made of sand, hazy and indistinct and drifting across the landscape like dunes. Hallucination was the only solace. I dreamt of those glorious months of freedom spent in the western wilderness with my mother and father, heading home along the camel trails and watching the spirits gathering themselves from the shifting contours of the Taklamakan. I imagined I alone had the power to summon the same spirits, that my staring at them was actually bringing them out and deciding their shape.

I would wake up in the morning, aching, gasping for breath, franticly wiping imaginary gore from my hair after dreaming of the dank *karez*.

After we returned home from Karakul in the summer of 1947, my father was happier, obviously thinking about the part he was going to play in the glorious new order. The threats he had mentioned – nameless assassins from the south – seemed now to have gone away, presumably as a result of Abdurehim's as yet undescribed intervention. Father had that distracted, superior look about him, perched as he thought he was on the cusp of inevitable glory.

It didn't last, not in the days of ideological purification that would come later. By the 1960s, no

one really knew who was safe. The Lord of Man himself, Chairman Mao, had begun to turn on Moscow and all the "puppets of Khrushchev" here in China. Each of us could now be tarred with the brush of retrospective revisionism, by virtue of the fact that our father or grandfather happened to side with whatever faction was available in the various ramshackle rebel governments that had been set up over the years.

Mao professed not to understand the idea that we were all - every one of us - covered in the filth of history. He called for a purity of spirit that even he - especially he, it turned out[15] - could not fulfill. Mao indulged his passions and vices with equal vigour, and by the end it was hard to determine which was which. The families of Abay and Udul had finally intermarried, good and evil had been transcended and life had been made to serve abstractions that few of us understood.

Faultlines always surrounded Xinjiang, and we were always at risk of being on the wrong side when the earth cracked open. Over the centuries, in surged the Karakhanids, the Hepthalites, the Naqshabandi Sufists, the Mongols, the Russians, the Tibetans, the Persians, the Turks, the Makhdumazadas and the Khokand. Even the British tried their luck. Soon enough, China crumbled and left us to fend for ourselves. Kolchak's White Russians regrouped here. The

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[15] Mao was as superstitious as the rest of us, fortifying himself with fabricated family trees proving he was the descendant of some ancient warrior. And his penchant for young virgins – aimed at replenishing his *yang* at the expense of their *yin* – was well-known. He loved sex, of course, as well as Hong Kong *kung-fu* movies.

paranoid warlord Sheng Shicai, encircled by opponents and cut off from the beleaguered government in Nanjing, quickly accepted the Soviet embrace. Stalin then put our land on the table at Yalta.

We were folded up and crushed a thousand and more times by history.

A seismic pulse marks our borders like an electric fence and the mountains shudder and the deserts open up, but still they come. And our people have tried to cling on to what they know. Nomads for centuries, their roots began to reach into the loose, shallow topsoil, looking for something to fix on to.

For most of us, the answer lay in choosing sides, and that brought multiple risks of treason. For those large numbers who dreamed of some pan-Islamic alliance – including the Germans and the Japanese, who were trying to subvert British interests in Central Asia - there were many disappointments. The Islamic warlords proved to be without virtue. All kinds of Muslims from all kinds of factions, and from the factions of factions, emboldened by the *hajj* into presuming that they were the new Saladin or Yakub Beg[16]. They would carve out a chunk of territory for themselves, slaughter a few dozen helpless *hitay* and tax the blood out of their citizenry before being deposed, tortured, castrated and beheaded and left hanging on the city gates as an example to others.

The violent uprisings continued. Rebels rose, emboldened by the stench of weakness drifting

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[16] Yakub Beg (1820-1877). The self-styled Emir of Kashgar, who despite his tyrannical ways, became a hero for generations of Uighurs.

across the country. A Turkish Islamic Republic was proclaimed in November 1933 and sharia law was implemented. After that was crushed, a certain Muhammad Amin Bughra along with his two brothers tried again the following year in 1934, but he and his religious-nationalist agenda was also crushed. His legacy lived on in the secret Amin Faction, a semi-mythical band of rebels who populated official propaganda for decades to come, providing an easy label for a variety of ingrates and hooligans with a beef against the Chinese.

In 1911, the Muslims had been declared one of the "great five peoples" of China, and what my father and people like him saw, I think, was an end to the isolation. He thought he was looking beyond the community, and he was met half-way by a Chinese state now thinking of a nation in the abstract, rather than as a race.

But it was my father's innate rebelliousness that prompted him to identify wholeheartedly with what was then an unfashionable cause. While everyone else looked west, to the emirs and sheiks of Uzbekistan, to the Sufists of Kazakhstan, he chose to turn north and east, and to the great chiliastic calls for justice that had originated, so many years before, in the Jewish quarter of Trier, Germany and had now been heeded in Moscow and parts of the Chinese countryside. The spectre of Communism: the *djinn*.

Shortly before his death in 1987, when the whispers of jihad and "East Turkestan" were once again rushing through the sweltering bazaars of Yeshiltagh and elsewhere, my father was already accustomed to being called a dog, fed and kicked for half a century by the *hitay*. He said that the

ghost, the spirit, the spectre, the *djinn*, still lived on, and failure – if that is what it must become - had not yet exorcised it.

There would still be some yearning for justice that went beyond the tribal vengeance of these splittist degenerates, he said in the final conversation I ever had with him – cancer was chewing out his bowel and liver. It was the same old biological malfunction, screaming out for the social conditions in which it could finally put an end to all conflict, all strife.

"Why did I join the Party?" the old man asked, rhetorically in his memoir. He repeated the usual platitudes about the doctrinal rectitude of Marxism-Leninism and about a yearning for international justice and order.

A few weeks after I had been released from the labour camp in 1980 and shortly before I fled China, my last words to him were these: why did you never lose hope?

"I'll tell you what I told the Party when they were investigating me and your mother for anti-Rightist tendencies in 1958," he said. "The Party, I said, was was the only way of uniting against irrationality and injustice. It was the only way of coming together."

Indeed, I wanted to say, but didn't quite have it in me. Communism had tried to turn us into bees, or ants. I had always suspected that my father joined the Party for more pragmatic reasons. He had convinced himself that he was fighting for an idea, rather than a piece of land. He had convinced himself that China – in the guise of the Communist Party - was not just another empire. Rather than suffer the humiliation of defeat and occupation, we

were given the opportunity to internalise it in the form of a beautiful ideology in which all our interests would ultimately be served.

4.

Xinjiang was finally subdued by a quarter of a million Red Army soldiers in 1949 following the so-called "Telegram Uprising"[17]. It was a sultry September and I was nine years old, playing with Asim in the karez when the local functionaries of the KMT handed themselves over to the People's Liberation Army and gratefully declaimed their new allegiance. My mother was in a state of perpetual distress. A month earlier, only an upturned truck a few miles away from Urumchi's Soviet-built airstrip prevented my father from flying to Alma-Ata for a meeting that would eventually involve a disastrous single-engine plane trip to Beijing that ended up killing the entire leadership of the East Turkestan Republic, including Exmetjan Qasimi, Uncle Mehmet, my Russian tutor and the mission's official translator, as well as Abdurehim's father.

"This is a great loss to the people of Xinjiang and to the Chinese people," said Chairman Mao, two months later.

My mother thought it was a conspiracy, and she was not alone. Many blamed Stalin. Even more blamed Mao. A few months later, there was a brutal reprisal by a small number of soldiers loyal to the old, semi-independent order. Uncle Sadir, desperate to prove his independence of mind, was among them. Abdurehim, who seemed strangely

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[17] In a slightly anticlimactic end, Xinjiang's interim rulers wired their allegiance to Beijing rather than prolong the fight.

unaffected by the loss of his own father, told my father that he had tried to talk Sadir out of it, but he wouldn't listen. "His mind has gone, filled with *djinn*," he said, grinning inappropriately.

Thousands of Chinese were slaughtered mercilessly. When the Chinese returned in heavy numbers, the retaliation was swift and vicious. Somehow, my father once again survived the subsequent purge, but his youngest brother did not. My father quickly denounced him, and his name would remain forever unspoken, even in his memoirs. The silence was even sharper, even more conspicuous when Sadir was beheaded two years later in a round of routine bloodletting that also included the execution of a notorious Kazakh rebel named Ospan Batyr[18].

Despite Sadir's counter-revolutionary acts, as well as a region-wide purge of officials with even the vaguest connection to the old East Turkestan Republic, the new regime categorized our family as middle class but "enlightened", a crucial distinction. My father's membership of the Party, still rare among Uighurs, proved to be invaluable. Half of our generous parcel of land was turned over to the local government and to dormitories were built to house some of the people who had been dispossessed following an influx of Chinese bureaucrats, but we were left with our small but comfortable bungalow overlooking the river as well as a small quadrangle of turf for our goats.

My mother continued to urge my father to give up public life, saying that nothing good would come

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[18] Also known as Osman the Hero (1899-1951). Kazakh freedom fighter.

of it, saying that he had already changed, that after all the assassinations and arrests, all those machinations and conspiracies, all those flights into the desert and across the border and back again, he was no longer the man she had married – against the wishes of her own father, she would add, as if it would make any difference.

He would reply, sometimes kindly but usually with contempt, that fate had always been on his side and that there was no reason to think it would change. He eventually lived a long – and in the circumstances – satisfying life under the plaudits of the Party, but I am still not sure who was right.

After the schools reopened in November, the teachers – those that had survived the purge - told us that we had been liberated. I remember the anthems, the flags, the banners, and marching to class with the kids from the dormitories.

Most of us, I think, permitted ourselves to hope that the chaos was over. There were quiet ripples of approval in certain sections of our town when Hui Muslims set up their own short-lived and ill-fated independent state in, of all places, Henan Province, the breadbasket of rural China, but for a brief period, things seemed calmer.

We were even allowed to visit Beijing, with my father attending a meeting of various exotic revolutionaries from China's distant border regions. I remember the capital as a city of claustrophobic clutter and human chaos, wandering with my mother through the narrow avenues and dingy thoroughfares, stared at by strangers, while my father did his business.

He was given a number of posts in the new administration of Xinjiang. He became an itinerant

official moving from mission to mission and from city to city, and I hardly saw him. He would visit bemused nomads and decide, *ex cathedra*, whether or not their customs were in accord with the spirit of the new order. He would inspect their tents, their clothes, their elaborate greeting rituals. With his usual political fastidiousness he would scrutinise the bonds of brotherhood that Kazakh herders had been performing longer than anyone could remember, dabbing chicken blood on their hands and faces, and he would filter it all through the unbending truths of the revolution. He also helped run the so-called Xinjiang Army to Reclaim the Wilderness, looking for ways to collectivize the farms and redistribute the *waqf*, the sprawling, fecund lands accumulated by greedy imams and mosques over the last few centuries.

Meanwhile, the People's Liberation Army continued to battle against the "splittist" *basmachi* until at least 1954, helped by enthusiastic new recruits like Abdurehim, whose legend continued to grow in lustre – particularly in my father's eyes – as the months passed.

As my father looked on indifferently, surrounded by a score of soldiers and bodyguards, landlords throughout the oases around the Tarim River were summarily dispossessed, and if their holdings were big enough, they were shot. My father, a consummate bureaucrat, returned home once a month with thousands of documents itemising all the properties he had seized on behalf of the People, signed by himself, his assistant and the unfortunate bourgeois property-owner.

I got on with my schooling, and paid little attention to anything else. An awkward, bookish kid

shifted uneasily towards an even more awkward adolescence, and my father's disappointment was thus compounded. When he returned, once a month or so, Abdurehim would occasionally appear, his body and reputation bigger with every visit, my father wide-eyed and adoring as the young warrior described his various battles with the hidebound reactionaries of Altai and Kashgar and Khotan.

While Abdurehim, only five years my senior, rode through the deserts and shot traitors and spies and enemies of the people, I would wander to the *karez* with Asim and other friends of whom my father did not approve, and I'd listen – shocked but also guiltily elated - to their heroic fantasies about becoming desert warriors and driving out the *hitay* invaders. Asim had already quit school. My father had paid his fees in order to keep me company, but he never really fitted in, and spent most of the time playing tricks on our teachers, leaving horseshit on their chairs or leading the rest of the class out into the woods to chase foxes.

He was, needless to say, tougher than me. Even then, his body and mind seemed perfectly at one, his muscles serving every thought. When he persuaded me to join them for a game of *buzkashi* and I fell off the horse within minutes and was almost crushed, he laughed – not cruelly, but with a kind of marvel: he was as surprised by my physical ineptitude as I was by his animal-like instincts and reactions. A burly friend of Asim's mocked me mercilessly, saying I was half-*hitay* and couldn't be expected to play a man's game. I replied, prissily, saying that we were all half-something or other, especially him, a mongrel Uighur like any of us. He

took offence and squared up to me, and only Asim's calm intervention saved me from a brutal beating.

The pure Uighur race, if it had ever been true, was already a part of history, and those who believed it were dealing with a new reality. After the liberation, the Chinese were now surging in. Ramshackle buildings were hitched up to house demobilised troops, construction workers and farmers from the east. Iron and copper mines were carved out of the vast and empty expanses of the south, and half our town was also ripped apart to reveal a massive deposit of coal that spread to the *karez* themselves. The run-off from the mountains that normally collected in the wells and streams was now undrinkable, and the authorities were forced to dragoon about 20,000 workers from Sichuan province to construct a dozen huge irrigation projects to span the Xinjiang oases.

Meanwhile, our rulers were figuring out what language the revolution spoke. Arabic signs were replaced by Cyrillic, and then by Arabic again, and then by the Latin script, and then by a compromise mixture of Cyrillic, Arabic and Chinese, reflecting the arguments then going on in the propaganda organs of Urumchi.

I can't pretend to have noticed the launch of Mao's "Hundred Flowers" Movement[19] in 1956. I can't pretend that politics were everything, not yet at least. Asim had become interested in girls and I

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[19] The Hundred Flowers Movement (1956). An experiment in democracy where dissenters were encouraged to express their opinions in public. Those opinions turned out to be far more counter-revolutionary than Chairman Mao had anticipated, and he said afterwards that the entire scheme was a cunning plan to lure out the snakes.

felt it necessary to go along with him and groups of others to smoke *hashish* in the caves underground. Intoxicated by the thrill of transgression, and trying to learn from the more assured Asim, I would half-heartedly grope them and apologise to them and nothing would ever come of it.

I remember being scrubbed clean and dragged by my ear to a wedding involving some relative I had never met before, a dark-skinned cousin on my father's side who would eventually perish in a labour camp in 1963. Festivities were meagre and the usual music and dancing was muted, which suited me fine. Peripheral members of our extended family seemed to be keeping their distance. Armed policemen stood at a discreet distance. My father stood at the head of the banquet hall, a chieftain surveying his clan.

Later on, my father told me about a meeting that took place in Urumchi a few days later, which he attended, where Uighur Communist delegates – enthused by the Hundred Flowers and what they believed was a call for democracy – urged their colleagues to support a motion for the establishment of an independent "Soviet Uighurstan". They said there should be more independence, and less Chinese immigration.

"We are losing control of our history," said a youthful new Party delegate called Abdimit, hailing from the restive Khotan. Khotan was the site of a disastrous but humiliating 1954 uprising launched – allegedly – by the Amin Faction. After that, the entire Party membership was removed and replaced.

Mao, I always presumed, was genuinely shocked by the levels of opposition that his movement had

aroused, not just in Xinjiang but throughout the country. Even for him, there were unforeseen consequences. Soon enough, the crackdown began. Among the blooming hundred flowers were the "poisonous weeds", Mao explained, trying to pretend that he had known all along what was going to happen. Most of the comrades that father used to invite to our home on Sunday were gone, consigned to the countryside to learn from the peasants or worse, confined indefinitely to the hell of the labour camp. I saw none of them again. Their names, naturally, went unmentioned, and only one of them was mentioned in my father's book as an example of a good man being led perilously astray by "erroneous thinking".

In Yeshiltagh, about a third of the population seemed to change overnight. Farmsteads were vacated to make way for Chinese settlements. Dormitories were hitched up in a few hours. Garrisons were extended and fortified. The mine had already spewed a mist of sulphur across the streets and a convoy of elderly women marched on the government buildings to complain that they could no longer breathe without the taste of spent matches settling on their throats. Asim and I watched them stumbling in a meandering single file up the steps of the city government offices, holding pieces of dirty red cloth to their faces. Within weeks their homes were demolished and replaced with a dozen new tottering four-storey blocks, and they were sent into the countryside, never to complain to the authorities again.

Soon enough, my father was forced to give another craven self-criticism and was again close to being purged. He was accused of "harbouring

secret loyalty to the counter-revolutionary East Turkestan Republic." These charges were *objective*, said his interrogators, a Marxist codeword indicating that they had little to do with anything he thought or said about the matter. Eventually, he was saved by the personal intervention of Seypidin Ezizi, influential chairman of the regional People's Council.

When I was first consigned to the labour camp in 1967, I met all kinds of "idealists", all of whom were convinced – for the first few days at least – that a mistake had been made, that they shouldn't be there and that justice would eventually be served. My father would say that a rabbit need not try to talk a fox out of eating him, and indeed, I already had accepted my fate. And most of the others realized, after a while, that there was no point trying to reconcile your beliefs to the will of the Party. But those who suffered the most were the idealists who swallowed the propaganda and carried out each twist in policy with passion and conviction, desperate to maintain a kind of spiritual integrity even when their children were being encouraged to throw teachers out of windows or starve poets and playwrights to death. They were the first to struggle, properly and on a genuine intellectual level, with the strange permutations of orthodoxy, and they were usually the first to end up in the camps.

The real *Homo sovieticus* was nothing more than the snake, supple and cynical as he discreetly weaves his way through the poisonous weeds. That wouldn't guarantee your survival – nothing would – but the best option was to do what Asim did, playing along, pleading ignorance and having no expectations at all above and beyond the ordinary.

He grew and sold fruit, and for the most part, it was regular, seasonal, predictable. Everyone – revolutionary and reactionary, ultra-leftist and revisionist - wanted fruit.

The other alternative was to harden, grow a shell, become a machine. That is what seemed to be happening to my father.

After his interrogation, the authorities turned on my mother. He appeared to view this as an inevitability, something as normal as the sun rising, and remembering the look of contempt on his face when she told him he should give up politics, I even suspected for a time that he had told his interrogators that she was the source of all his ideological flaws.

He probably noticed the terror on her face as she faced her accusers, as they blamed her for her husband's doctrinal lapses (her brother had been fingered as a Rightist earlier in the year, and was now serving the last three years of his short, wasted life in a labour camp in Yunnan). But my father had already reached the cliff edge and was looking down upon everything – his wife, his child – like distant rocks on a shore. He couldn't and didn't even want to resist the tide. Perhaps he actually wanted to be the rock.

While my father was soon appointed as the head of the Committee for Party Discipline and Inspection following the purge of his predecessor, my mother never recovered from the shame and sense of isolation, and spent the last year of her life - 1958-9 - in a downward spiral.

I heard her say: "All the things we went through, just for this. Sacrifice after sacrifice for this, this

great future, and now we still have to sacrifice for some other great future."

Her faith – if that's what her marriage with my father was built on - had been shattered, and there was no way it could be rebuilt. What was left for her now? My father was away most of the time, busy identifying ideological lapses on the part of his comrades, a job to which he seemed uniquely suited.

As loyal Party members, we had no reason to starve like millions of others soon would[20], but she would not eat. We had no reason to feel guilt, but she would not even speak. Her only smiles – her only words – were for me, her only son. "Beautiful boy," she said, over and over, but only when my father was there.

He and I behaved as if everything was normal. We hardly spoke of her as she withered in the upstairs bedroom.

Asim and I hid in the *karez* for days with a sack of hashish and old, stale bread, sipping from the cleaner streams of water.

She left us in December 1959. The official cause of death was pneumonia. Her family in Yunnan province were quietly informed. If they mourned, they mourned alone. I never knew them.

After the funeral - a quick, quiet, secular affair, with none of the usual feasts - my father said something about fulfilling his duty to bring the races of China and Xinjiang together. He said nothing about love. He did not appear to mourn. In his

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[20] The Great Leap Forward: Chairman Mao's ill-fated and Promethean attempt to turn 600 million largely untrained and mostly rural people into steel workers led to famine and the death of at least 25 million people.

memoir, he wrote that “the tragic death of my wife forced me to redouble my commitment to the Party.”

I was still spending most of my time with Asim, quietly fomenting discord with my father while smoking the contents of Asim's pipes. In a sweet sickly daze, I floated powerfully across the desert like a *djinn*, rising towards the skies and then falling back to earth under the weight of my own self-disgust.

Asim's father would talk subversively and unguardedly about the great Kazakh exodus of 1951, where thousands packed their thick, matted sheep-wool tents and fled the revolution, taking their herds of camels and goats across the frozen Tibetan plateaux on their way to Kashmir. My chest seemed to fill with pride even as my thoughts were riddled with shame.

“We’ve all been trapped,” said Asim’s father. “The Kazakhs, the Tajiks, the Uighurs. Trapped by mountains and deserts and new frontiers, our land ripped out from under our feet. Trapped by *chushka* and *chashan*.” Pigs and rats. It sounded so much better in our language, and hearing the words being spat out of his toothless maw, I felt excited, excited by the shattering sound they made – the sound of taboos being broken.

“This land was ours,” he whispered. “The land beyond the mountains was theirs. But it wasn’t enough for them.”

Asim grinned and said, “We are simple people. We live with camels and goats.”

Lounging in the caves, smoking Asim's hashish, my pipedreams called for rebellion. I dreamed of warriors like Ospan Batyr, Kine Sari or Atub Beg.

My father would appear to me as an ugly machine, with rusting rivets and bent steel plates, grinding noisily through the desert.

I wanted an answer, something that would overwhelm me like a bolt of lightning.

I would urge Asim to join me on a journey west to create a life of uncompromising nomadism, beholden to no one, freed from the restraints of family and nation.

He would tell me, carefully, that I'd change my mind pretty quickly if I ever chose to live in the desert.

Only intellectuals want the world to be pure, I imagined his father saying. The rest of us just get on with life, wading through the shit and the stench, patching up our imperfections instead of taking the role of Allah upon ourselves. We have only been given a small part of our humanity and we just do our best until Allah finally decides to give us the remainder, he said.

I went home one night to get a change of clothes and told my father I was leaving, leaving forever. He locked me in the bungalow and threatened to beat me with a stick. He said his reputation, his career, his life were all on the line. He wondered whether I had "really considered the possibility" that I was close to losing *both* my parents. He did not mention my mother by name, but invoked Abdurehim, who was an orphan at 12 and went on to slaughter "hundreds of our enemies" on behalf of the Party.

"Politics, government," I muttered. "I'm not a country. I don't belong to China. I don't belong to Turkestan. I'm going to sell fruit with Asim."

I was actually misquoting Asim's father, who said: "Who cares about all this? Give me my piece of land. That's all I need."

In truth, I was seeking a refuge. I was pleading with my father to find something simple and understandable that made everything make sense.

"You are not to see Asim again," my father shouted through a bolted wooden door. "If you do, the consequences will be bad for both of you."

"And when will you learn?" he asked a few hours later, still shouting from behind the door. "This is not about nations. This is about progress. What difference does it make that it is the Chinese and not the Russians, that we are Uighur and not Kazakh? Progress hurts, we all know that."

His tone mellowed slightly. He went on.

"But it is necessary. Do you really think you would fare better living in the medieval world of Asim's father and grandfather? Do you really think they were free?"

"You are not a rebel. You wouldn't last a day," he said, returning to the house after another few hours.

"Better to die than to live like dogs," I replied, remembering something that Asim's father had said.

My father laughed contemptuously. "Remember who you are. Could you really live in a tent, burning camel shit to cook your meals? Cowering in the face of those desert spirits?"

He was right, of course. At that moment, I couldn't admit it, but I knew he was right.

I refused to eat. I might have spent as long as three days, light-headed and hysterical, dreaming of the authenticity of the desert warriors, staring out

onto the hills and the mountain behind it, thinking of stealing one of the bored looking camels tethered to the slopes and surging into the distance. I spent hours staring at the clouds, watched them thin out and reform. Inspired by the stories of Asim's father, I imagined the *djinn*, floating through the sky, beckoning me to liberate myself.

Uncle Samir – my father's only surviving brother – eventually appeared, telling me how much he understood my feelings.

He said that now wasn't the age of individuals, or at least, not the kind that I had idolized.

He asked me what good it would do, for me and for the memory of my mother, to give up now. Idealists could change nothing, he said.

I finally succumbed and ate the thin soup that my father had prepared for me. But I wept for another day and night, thinking about my mother, thinking about my people, and despising my own vanity – to think that I could possibly believe that anything I did could make any difference.

I remember Uncle Samir saying: the act is everything. There is nothing beyond what we do to the world and to each other. We are the sum total of our acts and nothing more.

You cannot withdraw from society and imagine that you are suddenly freed from the burden of living, he said.

You cannot lose yourself in pipedreams about how the world should be or would have been, had things gone a little differently, he said.

"But none of this is *ours*," I said. "Islam, the Party, the country. None of it is real and none of it is *ours*."

He smiled kindly and explained that you cannot go around complaining that everything around you

– from the religions of the west to the ideologies of the east – were mere extraneous details that have somehow imposed themselves on you, and on Xinjiang. What, then, would be left? Even the ancient religions of two thousand years ago, where the dead were buried with pots and pans and clothing to take to the other world, came from outside. Strip away Muhammad, Zoroaster, Buddha or Marx from these lands and what do you have? Worshipping the sun and the wheat and the ephedra and the wolf and the rat, he said.

He grinned and then went off on a customary tangent. "The rat god. Hah yes! the rat god! It was supposed to protect us from invaders. Hah! That didn't do us much good, did it? People would pray before rat holes and offer food and clothes and bows and arrows. Primitive shamanism!"

"Islam and Christianity were the obvious next steps, and Communism is one step further, taking the superstition and God out of these systems of thought – but the masses, the uneducated masses, still need instruction, yes they do!"

He was staring at the ground and then looked up, embarassed. "Now, what was I saying?"

Uncle Samir left me alone, and I stared out of the tiny window, imagining how wonderful it would be to have no imagination at all, to have no self to speak of, to think and feel through the community. Is that what Uncle Samir was saying? Perhaps not quite, but that is how I chose to interpret his words, figuring out how to live a life of integrity in the face of coercion and injustice.

Better not to be here. Not to be dead, but to be alive in the deed, in society, in the Party.

As my father wished, I formally entered the Chinese Communist Party in 1959. I remember being surprised by the rituals - the cleansings of the soul, the confessions, the portentous loyalty oaths.

My self-criticism was thorough, and written in the large part by my father. The confession involved being insufficiently class-conscious, succumbing to old ways of thinking, and failing to respect objective science.

Shortly afterwards, my father organised an official gathering in Yeshiltagh, a festival of all the ethnic minorities of Xinjiang who came to pay tribute to the Party. The rain poured down, like a mass baptism. There was a cacophony of noise as the groups beat their drums and played their *pipa* and their harps and their horns. There were petitions, as representatives from Altai sought official recognition as an ethnic minority in their own right. Watching them, I felt uplifted. For the first time in a long time, I felt I *belonged*.

My father, who was appointed deputy head for Discipline and Inspection for the whole of the region, eventually sent me away to the Minorities School in the regional capital of Urumchi in 1960, where I stayed - studying language and political theory - until the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was launched in 1966.

5.

Urumchi in 1960 was already nothing like Yeshiltagh, and it was already thickened by engineers and industrialists and factory workers surging into the city from the overpopulated east. Our bazaars were closing. The Xinjiang Production Corps was already in full operation, building garrisons and power plants across the region. Street signs were already appearing in Chinese and the Language Reform Commission was already working its perverse magic on our own tongue, bringing in phrases we had somehow managed without, like *the mass line* and *Khruschev puppet revisionists*. Pork now hung visibly from the hooks of butchers shops – when there *was* pork, of course. The Great Leap Forward – the hapless nationwide campaign to turn half a billion wayward and ill-equipped peasants into a glistening, hyperefficient factory farm – was turning, officially, into the Age of Famine.

In northern Xinjiang, herders were coralled into collectives, pastures were occupied and barracks and farm buildings were built on the prairies, but for the most part, the old clan system still prevailed. The region suffered far less than the rest of China, but our state farms were still obliged to absorb around 100,000 starving migrants, and we were even exporting our meat to the stricken east.

Occasionally, you would see messages scrawled on building sites and factories, calling for the *hitay* to

go home, but the authorities were confident that the most ardent and visible of separatists and xenophobes had already been slaughtered in the years that followed the Liberation, and by now, much of the region was too subdued by hunger to resist anything with any great fervour, if resist is what it really wanted to do. But any hope that the Communists brought to the region had already been smothered by concrete reality. The poisonous weeds were already growing back, and good Party members like myself were already considering the necessity of scorching the earth and starting again.

Perhaps, in retrospect, it was already too late. Islam was beginning to rumble again, giving the authorities an excuse to further "restructure" the population. Unemployed Uighurs – naturally identified as potential troublemakers – were kicked out of the cities and forced to remote farms, their houses seized, usually by faceless Chinese engineers and bureaucrats. The divisions between the two communities were thereby widened.

In Urumchi, as a rule, the Uighurs and the Chinese kept their distance and rarely talked to one another. But at the Minorities School, things were different. We felt we were among the most enlightened in the country. With Iqbal, my friend and comrade, self-confident Salma with her straight back and permanent smile, and Jamil, a lanky but prodigiously intelligent electrical engineering student from Kashgar, we would hold study groups and talk about the insignificance of race under the vanguard of the Party. A dozen of us – Chinese, a Kazakh, two Russians, and a few Uighurs – would gather in the modest kitchen of our dormitory and talk for hours, not just about politics, but about our

our adolescent hopes for a future in which our backgrounds no longer mattered.

Fat chance. We all knew we were fighting against human nature. Those inner, instinctive, sanguinary prejudices that would emerge when I saw an Uzbek or a Kazakh in the street, which I would try to swallow immediately, told me everything I needed to know about my own brotherly love. Still, I fought my instincts, even pretending that they didn't exist, or were a reflection of an imperfect environment that we were now in the process of rectifying. These were the hopes.

It was hard for most people to go along with the doctrines of the CCP at the best of times, and these certainly were not the best of times. Unity usually arises only from the identification of a common enemy, and increasingly - on the streets at least - that was the Chinese.

Things weren't so perfect outside the walls of our college. One night, in the winter of 1960, we climbed out of our barrack-like campus, six of us, breaking the curfew and taking it upon ourselves to "investigate" the rumours we had been hearing so often for the last few months. The stall we used to visit, where kebabs sizzled and smoked deliciously, had already closed down. Either there were no more kebabs, or it had become too dangerous to try to sell them.

Hungry crowds had gathered in the city, ragged and desperate but still angry, even more angry – I imagined – because the starvation that had ravaged the countryside somehow didn't belong to them, that it had been caused by the millions of immigrants wasting their time making bricks and

smelting steel when they should have been working the fields.

There were riots across the region, but Xinjiang wasn't as badly hit as the rest of the country. The "special treatment" and slow path to collectivization urged by moderates like Wang Enmao[21] meant, at least, that we could still get close to feeding ourselves. It meant that we hadn't melted down all our steel to meet central government targets. It meant that we had not been ordered to bang the pots and pans and makeshift drums that scared the sparrows, exhausting and killing them and preventing them from killing the pests that preyed on staple crops. Still, we were struggling, with many locals complaining that food – Xinjiang's food – was being stolen to address the follies of the east.

With Iqbal, Jamil and Salma, I sat in a government-approved restaurant eating old mutton and rice and a week-old *gösh nan* with my Uncle Samir, who was here from Yeshiltagh for a meeting at the local propaganda bureau. He told us that his colleagues in the city hall were shocked, incredulous, incapable of believing what they could see with their own eyes – food riots, scurvy, things he thought he'd never see again in his life.

"It never occurred to them that it could go so wrong," he said, half-amused I thought. "It never occurred to them that they could be to blame."

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[21] Wang Enmao (1914-2001). Head of Xinjiang Communist Party from 1952 to 1966, when after being denounced as an "emperor" by Red Guards he fled to Beijing and urged the government to tread softly in Xinjiang and maintain its "special characteristics". He returned as leader from 1981 to 1985.

Outside, the armed police had gathered, protecting the Party from the wretched, famished crowds. This, I thought, was not a protest. Nor was there any more anger. Their faces seemed too desperate for that.

These were not the times even for our modest feasts. Hui Muslim traders, whose forebears had been coming here for centuries to swap grain and fabric and fruit, now had nothing to trade but rumours about grain riots in Ningxia, corrupt officialdom in Yunnan and insurgency in Tibet. They would talk about the grass soup and stale rice kernels that were sustaining their brothers in the countryside. They would talk about their family herds, slaughtered without ceremony. With shame, they would talk about the way *halal* had been abandoned as they hunted for dogs and vermin. They would whisper, quietly, that the Party was about to topple, that Allah was stirring for revenge.

One night in the sweltering summer of 1960, after school, a Uighur classmate named Iskander took me to the bazaar, telling me that there was something I needed to hear, something I needed to tell my father. The market, already closed, was hushed and solemn, and a dozen of us were led by lamplight to an elderly blue Soviet-built truck dripping with unburnt diesel.

Shokrat, a skinny, elderly imam with a thin beard that dangled across his chest in two wispy clumps, was preaching hellfire to a dozen or so hardened believers. He was dusty and bony and almost fossilized, like he had emerged whole after a thousand years in the desert. He looked like he could shatter instantly into a thousand pieces.

They were enthused, ecstatic, hungry for food as well as vengeance. If they had known who I really was - the son of a Xinjiang propaganda chief, one of the devils and dogs of the *hitay* - they'd have probably ripped out my heart and eaten it. I was terrified Iskander might have told them already, and might have already planned my execution.

I was driven to a makeshift and illegal mosque, jerry-built and filled with battered trinkets and faded prayer books published in a variety of Central Asian languages, set up right under the noses of the Chinese garrison at the western fringe of the town, close to a disused aeronautics plant that the Russians had put up a few decades earlier. I heard imams preaching jihad in their dirty robes. There were no specific plans, or at least, none that I was allowed to hear. But as the long rising hum of the *dua* continued, I watched as the imam handed out old rusty knives wrapped in bright red cloth and heard them talk about martyrdom and vengeance.

I agonised for days, wondering what all this might portend. My father was visiting the school on an official trip and as we nursed our bowls of noodles, he looked me over, scanning every pore.

“Something troubling you?” he asked with what seemed to be a rare moment of solicitude.

I looked up, shook my head and told him what had happened.

He cursed me, saying that I was giving succour to the "great Han chauvinists[22]" that had wormed their way into the Party, saying that everything he had worked for had been put in jeopardy.

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[22] Great Han Chauvinists was a phrase used by Chairman Mao.

My father was obviously still hoping to make amends for 1958. That was the beauty of the system: you were always trying to "rectify" past offences. He reported my classmate to the authorities almost immediately, and without compunction.

A day or so later, the mosque was raided, razed to the ground, its flock sent to re-education camps and its aging preachers executed. Iskander disappeared, and in his wake came a squall of rumours involving his arrest and execution, followed by his escape and exile.

Being good and loyal communists, my family had been protected from the worst of the starvation and granted access to the state granaries, which were still bulging as a result of high state targets and nationwide confiscations. A gnawing sense of guilt meant that I had actually convinced myself that it was a matter of good judgment – rather than good fortune - that we were holding banquets and feasts in the Party's fortified headquarters, meeting dignitaries from the rest of China and pretending that all was well while the fields and hamlets around us starved to death. I agreed with my comrades, too, when they said that it was necessary for Party members to be well-nourished during these testing times, which were blamed on the perfidious Soviets[23] or on cruel Nature herself. And I even went along with the idea, mentioned often enough by my father, that it was somehow their fault - that they were somehow not loyal enough, not zealous

[23] Angered by Maoist heresies, the Soviet Union withdrew its advisers in 1960, providing a convenient scapegoat for the famines that followed.

enough, that they were being punished by some kind of revolutionary justice – the avenging *djinn* of the revolution.

My father wrote, "There must always be struggles in the revolution," as if there was nothing left to be said. I never noticed him struggling with any of the *volte faces*, the twists of official ideology, the blatant cover-ups by government propagandists. His certainties had actually hardened., especially after my mother's death, and he seemed to swallow everything, until late in his life at least, as if credulousness was his duty. He even accepted the implausibility that Comrade Liu[24] and Comrade Deng were counter-revolutionaries.

Something had obviously gone wrong. The place was desperate and miserable and on the verge of chaos. What was the answer? Well, it seems like it was the same, only more of it. More revolution. More fervour. More purity of spirit. More violence. More arrests in the dead of night. More houndings and beatings and book burnings. More mosques were closed. Propaganda offices piped out slogans from cheap, crackling loudspeakers.

Our species just doesn't do perfection. The more we strove for it, the further away it seemed.

Amid all this, life went on. Iqbal openly coveted Salma, and I did too. Days of feigned indifference would be followed by hearty declarations of love. Suddenly, Iqbal had got it into his head that Salma had chosen me. Iqbal sulked for a while, and even suggested that our friendship was over. At class, he

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[24] Liu Shaoqi. State President. Arrested in 1966 and left to die in solitary confinement.

would sit apart from us, bringing Salma and me closer together. Salma tried to talk to him. I didn't even try: I wanted him to believe we were together, wanted him to believe that Salma wasn't in fact crushingly *bored* whenever the two of us were together, and that she didn't firmly turn her lips away and bear a chaste cheek whenever I moved to kiss her. I wanted him to believe that I had exclusive ownership of her scent and her sound, that every image she formed in every retina belonged to me. He shared the agony of looking at her, and the agony of not looking at her, and also flinched at the thought of her voice somehow being heard by others.

The Soviet Union had mischievously opened the borders and thousands were fleeing Chinese rule, and Iqbal - overcome with jealousy - threatened to go with them. The exodus began in 1962, shortly after the restive citizens of Ili began their ill-fated riot against grain shortages. The Soviets launched a propaganda campaign, sending food parcels and clothing to try to show that the U.S.S.R. was more capable of feeding its people than China. The departees eventually included hundreds of government and military officials from ethnic minority backgrounds, putting anyone who stayed under even greater suspicion. No one could predict who was next to go. Iqbal, who was always too frail for our revolution, could easily have been next.

Little happened between Salma and me: I told myself the times were never right. In truth, the more she resisted, the more I sought complete possession over her.

I told myself that Salma could have been happy if she really knew me, but she always knew already. It

wasn't the fact that something inside of me was constantly on the verge of insurrection, as I kept telling myself. It wasn't because romance was frivolous in these difficult times, although it was true that the revolution left little room for love.

I got increasingly desperate, opening up my soul to her during long, frustrating nights and choosing to overlook the way she winced and hinted she had other things to do as I talked and talked about my family, about our treks across the desert, about the interminable *mashraps*[25] my father would hold at the house, with the lyrics of folk songs embarassingly rewritten to replace old cultural heroes with Chairman Mao or Joseph Stalin. I would talk about my mother and make it very clear to Salma how wounded I was. But my honesty did not touch her. In fact, the more she knew about my childhood, the more repelled she seemed to be. In the end, there was never a place for me, and never even the slighest ambivalence in her heart about what I meant to her. An awkward antipathy eventually developed between us, and Iqbal seemed steadily to gather strength from my own misery.

In the end, it was Salma who left. She left a rambling, plaintive but largely insincere note about the importance of family and friendship, and about how her departure would be the best for everyone. She was leaving anyway, she admitted, moving with her family to the border region, which the regime was frantically repopulating with loyal citizens.

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[25] Traditional Uighur gatherings of music and poetry recital.

"Nonsense," I told Iqbal, feeling my heart hardening as I said it. "Typical female self-indulgence."

I needed time to clear my head. I wandered for two days on the fringes of the desert wilderness, carefully retracing my steps. I had to remove the clutter from my mind. I vowed to show no emotion. I had allowed myself to be distracted, I thought. No one likes the truth to be mediated by human concerns like power, prestige, status or self-esteem. I vowed again to be a machine, a revolutionary mechanism.

My father again managed to survive the purge that followed the border exodus, but he was demoted for showing signs of "splittist accommodationism" and returned to Yeshiltagh, where he became deputy general secretary of the local Party committee. Members in Ghulja were reprimanded, expelled and in some cases imprisoned for their failure to contain the disturbances at their bus station, where thousands had gathered to cross the border.

Everyone was interrogated, including the interrogators. The spells and incantations involved shadowy organisations we'd never heard of – the ubiquitous Amin Faction, the East Turkestan National Youth Salvation Army, the League for the Struggle For East Turkestan Independence, The Avengers Society, the *Voenno Trodovaya Narodnaya Revolutsionnaya Partya*[26] and most ominiously of all, the East Turkestan People's Revolutionary Party,

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[26] The Military-Labour People's Revolutionary Party, set up, of course, by the Russians.

which I'd heard mentioned before. Some and perhaps all of these were in league with the Soviet Union. My father described them as idiot hoodlums driven by some backward ideology and a fug of false consciousness into robbing banks. The East Turkestan People's Revolutionary Party was either in league with the Russians, or had been set up by Beijing to pretend to be in league with the Russians, or was a spontaneous organisation set up either to support or oppose Chinese rule. No one seemed very clear.

I felt the world get darker, but we revelled in the darkness. And what followed always seemed to me to be inevitable. Children across the land were looking for someone to blame for their misery. It was Chairman Mao's peculiar political genius, and his dual role as Supreme Leader and quintessential countercultural rebel – both Xuan Zang[27] and the Monkey King – that persuaded them to blame their parents, their uncles, their teachers, rather than himself.

We felt we were at war, and I did not have time to brood.

[27] Xuan Zang was a Buddhist monk who, in legend, controlled the Monkey King's base urges.

6.

I was already determined that we would not waste the revolution. We, who were purer in spirit than our parents and thoroughly untainted by the past, would bide our time, and give the old folks a little push towards their elimination.

I immersed myself in my studies. We decided, as a group, to abandon the few frivolities we had allowed into our lives – the weekend dances, the moonlit feasts – and dedicate ourselves to the nation. I believed as much as anyone that I was not seeking my own aggrandizement, but merely a sort of greatness of the spirit.

After graduating in languages and political theory from the Minorities School in Urumchi, I was lined up to join the government. The urgings of Uncle Samir, now the head of the Uighur section of the regional propaganda bureau - must have also helped.

I remember the day of my appointment, walking into an office filled with ethnic trinkets and memorabilia from our history, meeting Peng Qing, the (non-Uighur) chief of the propaganda bureau in Urumchi, when we met for the first time in 1964. He was short, softly spoken, and wore big steel-rimmed glasses that dominated his small, triangular face. I remember noticing his huge, dangling earlobes that seemed to grow bigger as the years passed, presumably because of the way he used to twist them when he was nervous.

"Education must be used to serve the people," he said in an amiable tone, as if he were talking about the weather.

Peng had that way about him, common among government officials, that suggested that he was always reading something from a banner hanging behind my right shoulder.

"Xinjiang is an integral part of China's revolution," he said while offering a cigarette.

No one seemed very sure how Peng had got to the position he now occupied. He lacked the requisite ruthlessness. Still, he had his theories. He explained, quite plausibly, that the upsurge of Islam in Xinjiang in the last century was caused primarily by reactionaries like Yang Zengxin[28] who authorised a mosque-building programme in order to head off the reformers who were undermining his backward, ramshackle regime.

Peng was also so obsessed with Uighur culture that some of his Han Chinese colleagues feared for his sanity. His shelves were filled with books, some written in the Uighur script. He instantly aroused the suspicion of his Party minders when he asked me to help him with his studies of the language.

This was the time for propaganda and pamphlets. Since the Sino-Soviet split, Moscow was flooding Xinjiang with their own air-dropped and broadcast junk about the gloriousness of independence and the evil revisionism of Beijing. My job was to counter that. As Peng's special advisor, I was entrusted with finding ways of

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[28] Yang Zengxin (1859-1928). Brutal Republican warlord of Xinjiang from the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 until his assassination.

bringing the Islam of my forebears into line with the doctrines of the government, and thereby magically render the recalcitrant border tribes - we the Uighurs, the Kazakhs, the Tartars, the Uzbeks – into the arms of Mao.

This wasn't actually as hard, or as implausible, as it seems. Religions are more flexible than you'd think. As the Russians catechized, Christ is a New Man and the New Man is the Soviet Man. In our case, the itinerant Muslims in Turkestan, always on the distant fringes of the *umma*, were mostly indifferent to scripture and long-accustomed to heresy. Sufists thrived on Islam's frontiers. Tribesmen, mostly illiterate and concerned primarily with their own survival, tended to make all kinds of accommodations with the status quo.

Many of us, including the idealists of my father's generation, seemed to remain believers in a vague sense, with Muhammad's paradise roughly approximating to the End of History. Abdurehim, who was still fighting the good fight in the recalcitrant border regions, used to say that he believed in God, the Party, and the country – in that order. He saw no contradiction. Amid the struggle for subsistence in the semi-barren northwest, religion did not need to be the biggest concern.

My ideas - explaining that the End of History was consistent with the perfect society envisaged by Muhammad himself - were initially cribbed from the work of theoreticians in the Muslim "autonomous republics" of the Soviet Union, and they quickly found their way to the propaganda bureau of Xinjiang. Pamphlets with red covers were

handed out, free of charge, in the "patriotic" mosques.

Strictly speaking, my theories were doubly heretical, violating the precepts of both Islam and Mao Zedong Thought. I knew them to be a corruption of our ideals, an unforgiveable compromise to feudal superstition, and perhaps a symptom of the failed methodology of our seniors in government. I proceeded anyway, with some pleasure and pride in my work.

What we needed, said Iqbal, speaking in a tone that was strident enough to draw attention to the pools of torment bubbling beneath, was to raze the entire religion to the ground and start afresh, and I understood. I was also part of that generation. We had grown up indoctrinated with the expectations of a new world, with the fertile visions of justice and prosperity and triumph, but all we had seen was failure and desolation. And here were these old ghosts, these *djinn* polluting our thoughts and our ideas. We were still addicts, and addicts – in moments of clarity – would sometimes prefer to see their opium wiped from the face of the Earth, thereby forcing them to give up.

Our time would come soon. You could feel it in the hordes of indoctrinated youths searching for orthodox reasons to resent their parents. We were about to turn on our elders and denounce them for failing to understand the preciousness and uniqueness of their destiny. In the meantime, here I was, making compromises with the old customs. My younger comrades at school and in the bureau would bristle and buzz with impatience. I was now an official with the government, and I could now

loftily urge them to wait for a more propitious moment.

Iqbal, was sent to Beijing. He was distracted and depressed – Salma's departure had hit him more deeply than we'd all imagined – and his parents, functionaries at the Xinjiang Bureau of Civil Affairs, arranged for him to continue his studies. I was alone, now with no restraining influence.

As part of my duties, I would pay close attention to the actions of the splittist rump when they were cornered and captured, as they inevitably would be, exposed as they were under the bright lights of forced collectivization, which was slowly but surely taking hold in Xinjiang's oases.

In the spring of 1965, our attentions were drawn to a small uprising in Karakesh. Abdurehim and his team of PLA special forces were sent to the region and in a gunfight with rebels, he was shot and almost killed. He eventually lost a leg.

The rebels claimed to be acolytes of a Sufi sheik from Karakesh named Muhammatjan Aqbi, and during his interrogations, I heard the man – accused of disseminating anti-state propaganda and also said to be in the pay of the KGB station in Kazakhstan – describe the injustice that the region had supposedly suffered, the poverty inflicted on his people and the damage done by Beijing's experimental nuclear tests, which had begun in 1961 in the deserts of Lop Nur. Quietly but persuasively, Aqbi complained about the way some of his fellow clerics throughout Xinjiang had been forced – for no other reason but humiliation – to tend pigs in communal farms. He then talked of his need for *hajj* and *hijra*, pilgrimage and migration, things that had been denied him by the Chinese.

No compelling evidence was found to prove the allegations that Aqbi was in the pay of "foreign elements", but the prosecutors managed to find a cache of arms and seditious propaganda in a cellar near his house. Aqbi, even after extensive torture, claimed that they had been put there by the authorities.

The actual truth might have been on his side, but he could do nothing to oppose the “objective truth” of the Party. Aqbi was formally defined as a cog in the notorious Amin Faction and shot in the back of the head.

My next pamphlet, written on one feverish night that followed Aqbi's public execution, explained that *hijra* was an internal matter, a mental state, a liberation of thinking that was perfectly consistent with the precepts of Communism.

Jihad was easy. "The holy war and the Maoist guerrilla warfare against bourgeois, semi-feudal, semi-imperialist poisonous weeds are one and the same," I wrote.

The story of the Prophet, I wrote enthusiastically, is the story of the class struggle. “Allah, like Mao, is the Sun and the Sun rises in the East.”

Muhammad was a humble tradesman, surrounded by the poor and the wretched and persecuted by the corrupt and sanctimonious Meccan hierarchy. He flees to the oasis of Medina – the *hijra* – just as our own people have fled the persecution of the old feudal system now being constructed in our own little oasis. "Let us recreate the battle of Badr, of Uhud. Let us find the strength generated during the siege of Medina and repel the counter-revolutionaries."

I didn't believe a word of it. Not a single word. And yet, I pursued it with the glee of a maniac. I already suspected that it was just empty propaganda that would be used, in the end, to root out the enemies of the Party.

Shortly afterwards, perhaps sensing an officially-sanctioned space for their pieties, the students of Urumchi set up the Patriotic People's Muslim Alliance, known also as the Red Skullcaps, for that is what they wore. Their aim, they said in a shabbily printed (and partly handwritten) manifesto sanctioned by Peng and the local propaganda bureau, was to unite Mao Zedong Thought with the Koran. It was an outrageous blasphemy in Islamic terms, and was unlikely to appeal to orthodox Maoists in Beijing. Many in our department sought to stamp it out immediately, but Peng agreed that Xinjiang required such "special treatment".

The arguments were heated. A short and emotional official named, Tu Qing, nominally Peng's deputy, said we would regret the policy, and that Beijing would not look kindly on it.

I liked Tu. His Han Chinese family had moved to Xinjiang three generations ago and he owed his position in the propaganda bureau to his fluent Uighur and his passion for revolution. But he was cautious.

I visited Yeshiltagh to see their own Red Skullcaps faction set up at the Minorities College. They seemed earnest and pious and slightly confused. There were undercurrents of resentment, coupled with the sort of self-righteousness and the seeking out of good causes that you'd find in any group of adolescents. They didn't seem to realize

that they were already finished, that they were being manipulated, or that even moderates like Peng and my father viewed them with a mixture of suspicion and contempt.

"This new movement is a true sign of the benevolence of the Party and our respect for religions," I said at a makeshift podium in the college canteen.

The students cheered enthusiastically.

“But you must maintain ideological discipline,” I said.

I met their leader, an earnest, charismatic hydroelectric engineering student called Mehmet. When he spoke, heads rose, eyes widened, ears pricked and sparks seemed to fly in the room, but he was quieter when he met me and asked earnestly for advice on how to proceed with Xinjiang’s own peculiar version of the revolution.

“As you know, Islam cannot be eliminated, and nor should it be,” he said, “but it can be accommodated. Our aims are the same.”

Shortly afterwards, I went to see Asim. His grizzled father talked about the Han Chinese virgins given to the tribesmen a thousand and more years ago to stop them from attacking the Empire's fragile frontiers. "They've been seeking revenge ever since," he said.

7.

The Salifiyya Muslims who once lived in Gansu province on China's rugged northern steppe had a schism. Those who believed that Allah was transcendent cut their hair short, and those who thought he was immanent let their hair fall to their shoulders. Alas, during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, everyone still looked the same – the same cropped, malnourished hysteria prevailed everywhere, even though (in our minds at least) the future of the world seemed to depend on us and the side we chose to take.

In the two years or so that preceded the launch of the Cultural Revolution, we knew virtually nothing about the struggle going on in Beijing, Shanghai and elsewhere, when the "revisionists" led by Liu Shaoqi were engaging in a life-and-death conflict with the so-called Gang of Four[29], led by the sidelined Mao, and we felt the shockwaves only months afterwards, but this region had its own problems.

After the debacle of 1962, when thousands were given Soviet passports and allowed to flee China, Beijing sought to rectify the problem. Border regions were evacuated to make way for Han farmers, *bingtuan*[30] workers and the necessary

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[29] The post-Maoist leadership identified four senior leftists, including Jiang Qing, Mao's unhinged wife, as the source of everything that had gone wrong during Mao's turbulent senescence. Dissidents suggested it was really a gang of six that was to blame, adding Lin Biao and Mao himself to the rogue's gallery.

[30] Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps run by the People's Liberation Army as de facto enclaves.

layer of Party officials (including the family of Salma). Despite the gathering turmoil in the east, pragmatic concerns still prevailed when it came to the security of the state.

The Red Skullcaps continued to hold their meetings and I was sent to most of them. I was senior enough to offer encouragement and turn them in the right direction, and not senior enough to demonstrate wholehearted approval on the part of the government.

Meanwhile, I would wander through Urumchi and glow with pride at my works. Posters across the region were covered in slogans I had written. “Superstition is the friend of poverty and poverty is the enemy of socialism.”

I was still churning out my pamphlets, this time about *payghamber,* the End of Days, and about Mao and his premonitions of social cataclysm culminating in the New World. Being on the right side of the apocalypse began to preoccupy everyone.

"I do not approve of all this," said my father in June 1965, during a tense dinner. I’d been dreading our meeting all week. Father was still smarting from his humiliating demotion, and had wreaked havoc in Yeshiltagh, purging and punishing with abandon. Another two hours of doctrinal discussions. I had no time for any of this.

Uncle Samir, dismissed by most as merely an "intellectual", was always more playfully heterodox in his ideas than my father, and there was always a sense of ironic distance. But he was now above my father in the Party hierarchy.

"I am actually quite fascinated," he said. "Did you know that the codeword for Moscow used by

American communists in the 1920s was 'Mecca', the source of all eastern wisdom?"

I smiled awkwardly and slowly shook my head, knowing I was about to be on the wrong end of a lecture. "No I didn't."

"And of course we also have our holy canon, our apocrypha and our heresies and satanic verses," Uncle Samir said. "Xinjiang is the region of heresy, and always has been."

"We all know what this is all about," said my father. "It is all very well for us to play these erudite games. With the masses, it is dangerous. Most of them don't even know the Quran. Kids with no idea about anything: uneducated, dragged from war to war, from stupidity to stupidity. Give them a sign of God and you could get them to do anything. As indeed you have."

"What are you saying?" I asked. "That I haven't gone far enough? That I should have mentioned the references in the hadith to comrades Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai?"

"It is an insult to both sides," my father said. "Either Islam is correct or Marxism is correct. There is nothing in between."

There they were again, my father's certainties. I sat there, biting my lip, wanting to erupt and criticise him for his demotion and his “splittist accommodationism”, the official verdict handed out by his Party bosses. Somehow, I couldn’t say anything. What son does not want to blame and then supplant his father? In the turmoil of our history, each new generation sought to turn on its predecessor, and yet – smothered by the pieties of filial duty – I was speechless, and even more angry because I couldn’t express my anger.

"You are pandering to the worst elements in society," my father continued, using what I suddenly imagined to be the cold and officious tone he used when he told me that my mother was dead.

I gnawed at my lip and sipped my tea.

"Ah, but you must understand," said Uncle Samir, turning to my father with a smile, "that it is a slow and complex process, rooting out superstition."

"You old Menshevik," said father, with a derisive chuckle. "Be careful you don't get purged as well."

"What was the Hungarian's name?" said Uncle Samir, with an expression that would have reminded any observer that they were indeed brothers. "Bela Kun[31]! Drunk with revolution! Kill first, think later, and hope everything magically comes to pass."

My father smiled and clinked his glass of homemade moonshine against my uncle's. "To science, not magic," he said.

"You've read my paper about what the Russians did," Uncle Samir said, smoking his long thin pipe. "Sending teams of scientists to disabuse the peasants of their fantasies. Stalin's League of the Militant Godless. Undermining the only thing that these people had left - "

"But it's fantasy. They are clinging to fantasy - "

"Of course, but telling them that the weeping statues of the Virgin Mary were caused by rusting metal frames dripping into the rock and so on. The scientists were torn to shreds by the mob, and

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[31] Bela Kun. Reckless Hungarian Soviet leader. It was my uncle's common rejoinder. He used to say, "We need fewer Bela Kuns and more Lenins."

understandably so. If you are going to take away these spiritual comforts you have to make sure you have already found something to replace them. Or make sure that they don't need them any more."

My father smiled. "Consciousness always lies behind objective economic change. If we do not strive to change that, the problem is that the revolution doesn't change anything, except only superficially," he said.

I drifted away and thought back to the time I spent near the Karakul Lake, doing my utmost to overcome my crippling fear of horses and animals of all kinds, riding towards my father and shouting, “Dad, dad, I’m riding, I’m riding,” at which point he dismissed me with a curt reference to Abdurehim, for whom everything came naturally. Now Abdurehim’s fight was over.

I thought back to the time when I was beaten for coming home late, and the time when I was beaten for coming home early. I thought of the time when I was beaten at school and got home and heard my father say to my mother, “Abdurehim would have fought back.”

My father gently touched his refilled glass against mine, and even that seemed a courtesy designed to strike right at my heart, and I wanted to grab my glass and throw it against the wall. I cursed my own cowardice and I swallowed a mouthful, almost choking.

"It takes time to enlighten the masses," I said, mainly to regain my composure, "just like it takes time to educate a child. Our people are still too backward. Until they are grown up enough we have to make these concessions."

"In that case, we might as well give up now," father said. He smiled. "You are very much like your mother. Too emotional."

I glared at him.

“You need to get married,” he added. “Have a family. Solitude is no good for anyone, least of all you.”

8.

It is no wonder that Genghis Khan was so brutal. He was a mere adolescent when he led his warriors to conquer the world. The worst thing that any empire can do is to cede control to its children. Abdurehim was a perfect example. A reckless youth with a machine gun and a grenade belt, somehow believing he is indestructable and that all this was little more than a game.

The Cultural Revolution, launched in 1966 and lauded by western idealists as a way out of the impasse of Soviet-style bureaucratic hierarchies, was an ideal device to co-opt the rebelliousness and resentment of China's youth. You don't like the system? Fine. Fight it. Fight back. Mao and the reprobates who came to be known as the Gang of Four would allow you to do it, as long as it helped defeat their opponents in Beijing.

When the turmoil finally erupted, the good Communists of the Xinjiang region were forced to come out with their own plans aimed at eliminating "Khrushchev puppets", members of the "Liu Shaoqi clique" and various other "antagonistic" elements that had supposedly grown like "poisonous weeds" in the fertile soil of the revolution but in Xinjiang were little more than *djinn* floating out of the dunes of the Taklamakan and possessing us, more or less at random, speaking curses and incantations that meant nothing, particularly to the herdsmen and fruit farmers moving from oasis to oasis and wanting nothing more than to be left alone.

It was already in the air, even in the frigid cold of January at the end of Ramadan. I had returned already to Yeshiltagh and spent *eid ul-fitr*[32] with Asim and his extended family. Asim's father was mortally sick, wrapped in thick and oily blankets, moaning and twitching until the opiates finally kicked in.

"He has had nothing – only struggle," said Asim's mother.

For the first time, I dared to scrutinise his face closely. It was weathered but not unkind. His forehead was round, smooth and shiny, and would have seemed almost like Buddha were his mouth not contorted in agony. His slow, lifeless body bore the imprint of malnutrition. His fat cheeks sank as if the air had been let out of them.

Scholars say the big clash in Xinjiang is not so much down to th Turks and the Russians and the Mongols and the Chinese, and more to do with the age-old dichotomy between those who roam and those who settle down. Asim's father embodied this conflict: he was a nomad who had been forced to settle.

Asim said he had fallen off his mule while returning home at night. A gang of workers were drinking liquor at the building site near their compound. Asim said the vigour seemed to drain right out of his open mouth as his body slumped from the saddle. Asim said his father muttered something incomprehensible about Allah as his family struggled to carry his massive weight back home, and after that he said absolutely nothing,

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[32] Sunday 23 January 1966, the first of Shawwal, the end of the fast.

made absolutely no noise at all in the three days since, apart from the peaceful rasp and splutter of his breathing.

"It's like he's already gone," Asim said. "Like his spirit has gone but forgot to turn the lights out."

The old man stirred occasionally, waving a quivering hand through the drear of his makeshift ward. More than anything, he looked bored and disappointed. I wonder now if the the militancy of Islam in these parts had been aggravated more than anything by the prefabricated *drabness* of Party rule. The old man must have felt the colour draining from the town in the years since the revolution. We couldn't but notice that the forests that gave the Green Mountain its name had been stripped down and turned to firewood. And the mighty *karez*, easily the greatest in the region, had been lost and forgotten, with most of its tunnels accidently demolished by the Yeshiltagh Prospecting Bureau. Things had to change, of course. Things *always* had to change. But why did everything have to be so *dull*?

The light drained away from Asim's father's eyes as the heavy, dirt-smeared hemp curtain that separated his room from the rest of the house was dropped, and suddenly, the warrior was finally *tamed* – and I thought of the thousands of herdsmen across China's cold and merciless frontiers, dragged out of their woollen tents, stripped of their swords, and shipped off to apartment blocks. Now, I think of the Mongol tribes used to roaming across the northern plains and now hemmed in by state highways and factory farms and chemical plants, leaving them nothing but the state-sanctioned "national minority theme

park" designed and packaged to celebrate their own dwindling otherness. Now, they are no longer warriors, no longer even herdsmen: they are caged lions, declawed bears, captured falcons, chimps playing their *dumbri* and *sibizka* for tourist groups and visiting dignitaries.

Looking back, I take solace in my little moments of doubt, but I was no closer to disavowing the Party than my father was, even as the world seemed to darken in the first few months of 1966. Counter-revolution was believed to be in the air, and if we didn't do something to exorcise our demons, we would be accused of being demons ourselves. But we had absolutely no idea who the demons were – they could have been *us*, for all I knew.

The Patriotic People's Muslim Alliance, which I had played a part in creating, was supposedly ours, a front organisation aimed at coopting delinquent Muslim separatists into the fight against the old and reactionary, but it was already worrying the authorities in Urumchi. Their fate was discussed during a few tense meetings as if they were playthings, automata who would respond immediately to our instructions ordering them to shut down, burn their Korans and build shrines to the Great Helmsman.

At the urging of Tu Qing, Peng and I agreed to embark on a purge – a classic holding manoeuvre in which some of the less useful members were arrested, interrogated and accused of links to separatist organisations like the ETPRP or the Amin Faction. Then, we would replace them with spies from our own bureau.

Mehmet, the self-appointed head of the Red Skullcaps, was the first to go. He was charismatic and popular, and therefore dangerous.

At the same time, the Red Skullcaps were impressing the leftists in Shanghai by calling for the acceleration of "Islamic" collective farms. Hearing about this, one of the Gang of Four, Yao Wenyuan, sent an acolyte to Xinjiang during Ramadan and eventually published an editorial in Shanghai's *Liberation Daily* disparaging “backward displays of religious superstition” but praising the Red Skullcaps’ “spontaneous” efforts to eliminate the *djinn* of the old world.

The praise did conceal a number of ominous signs. Parts of Xinjiang, and Yeshiltagh in particular, had actually done rather better than most out of the revolution. The influence of people like my father and uncle might have played a part, but it was relatively untouched by some of the more extreme decisions made by Beijing. Collectivization was implemented in an apologetic, half-hearted way, allowing the likes of Asim to continue running his orchard and his herds more or less unaffected. This prompted the *Liberation Daily* to accuse us of showing possible signs of "bourgeois exceptionalism" and warn us of stronger measures to come.

My uncle's influence on the Xinjiang educational committee also enabled Yeshiltagh – still a relatively small town - to set up three colleges, all of which were becoming hotbeds of radicalism. In February, students at the Engineering Institute, envious of all the attention given by sophisticated newspapers in Shanghai to the Minorities College, soon set up a rival organization to the Red Skullcaps, known as

the People's Islamic Front for the Mass Line (PIFML) or the Red Stars, inspired by the *Liberation Daily* editorial and claiming to eliminate the ideological errors of their rivals.

Naturally, the government already had agents in both factions. In fact, we estimated that for every 10 members, at least two were reporting to us, two more to the regional government in Urumchi and another two to Beijing. No one really knew who was who at the time, but everyone was suspicious and everyone was a suspect. The aim of the paranoid Party apparatus was to subordinate all human relationships to the Party itself. Surveillance and the "struggle sessions" made it easier for them, but there was also an eagerness to please that made many people genuinely desperate to find these imaginary enemies.

In the beginning, there was a spectre haunting Europe. By now, the *People's Daily* was telling us that all the ghosts of the past should be smashed. That was easier said than done, of course.

Years later, in the labour camp, I was surrounded by the shale and rock and sand of Xinjiang's alpine steppe. If you were lucky, amid the dead white land, you would spot the occasional wild ruminant looking around for shrubs. But the hunger and boredom brought madness and the madness created faces in the clouds and voices in the wind, and soon, everything was a mirage, and everything that was real seemed little more than a fraction of the illusionary.

And that, I thought, was a fitting conclusion to the Cultural Revolution itself.

In truth, no one - not even the most sophisticated Party members - really knew how to

identify the class enemies or revisionist traitors that the new movement had urged us to destroy, and in the efforts to avoid ending up on the wrong end of the divide between good and evil, many tended to focus their attentions on the identifiably different, which in Xinjiang, usually meant ethnic minorities like mine. At the end of March, we saw the first Mosque cast in flames after a couple of Han thugs, possibly instructed by rogue elements of the secret police or the People's Liberation Army, doused the rafters with valuable petrol.

It was tense. Some Muslims chose to blend in with the chaos. Some sought to exploit it to serve their own ancestral prejudices. The so-called "Patriotic Mosques" – emboldened by the propaganda I had written – decided to fight back, and mobilized their own little revolutionary cliques in preparation for the struggles ahead. Few could see far enough to understand what was going on. Others thought they understood – and they were the most dangerous.

The local papers in Urumchi were already warning about the resurgence in activity by the East Turkestan People's Revolutionary Party, which they described as "wolves in sheep's clothing" – religious revivalist stooges in the pay of Khrushchev revisionists and their lackies in Bishkek and Alma-Ata. Everyone, needless to say, was a suspect.

Some of the more enlightened members of the Party - citing Chairman Mao's criticism of "great Han chauvinism" - were always anxious to show that being a good Communist had nothing to do with racial origin. The "actually existing" system represents the ossification of new class interests led by the "great Han chauvinist" traitor himself, Liu

Shaoqi, who has subverted the apotheosis and underlying truth of the revolution represented by Chairman Mao himself.

Instructed by Peng at the propaganda bureau – who had been subject to increasing levels of criticism by radical groups of every stripe - I continued to churn out my pamphlets. "Use the spirit of Muhammad and Mao to fight against the new class of counter-revolutionary traitors," I wrote. The slogan quickly appeared on a number of posters outside the city's mosques, with a socialist-realist style painting of good Muslims (peaceful, beatific, wide-eyed) surrounded by bad Muslims (swarthy, hairy, armed).

Things were changing, and Xinjiang could no longer be protected from the zeal and excess of the east.

Peng was in trouble and was - everyone thought - about to be sacrificed. There was now a different quality to his nervousness. It was less an eagerness to please and more a fear for his life. How he ended up in this job was a deepening mystery. He was a burgher, a shopkeeper, an amiable placeholder in a system that demanded perpetual struggle and strained sinews and heart rates at 200 beats per minute.

"Of course it is all true," he muttered distractedly. "We have been moving too slowly. And there *are* snakes…" He looked around and then seemed to shudder at the thought of seeing a snake.

Purges were commonplace – but heads were falling at an unprecedented pace throughout Xinjiang. Salma's mother and father were removed from the education bureau in the Karakul region

and Salma herself was already in a labour camp after being exposed as a member of the Soviet-backed Military Labour People's Revolutionary Party, which I always believed to be a fabrication. Was she a Soviet agent? At the time, I thought it was plausible. It seemed to explain everything – her doctrinal punctiliousness, her curiosity about Party minutes.

There was more than enough suspicion to go around, and it was shared out indiscriminately. As soon as you made the mistake of trying to defend yourself, you had already lost. If you didn't defend yourself, you had lost anyway. Most of us lived in a trance, a trance inside a nightmare.

Peng, at a series of meetings in late March, was accused of "objectively" supporting revisionism and rightist deviationism. His demeanour, normally placid, became panicked. He remained in office but he had no power. His head drooped in shame.

I thought my days were numbered. I was his protégé, his second in command in the propaganda office.

It seemed, however, that I was still considered useful. A few days later, I was offered a new job.

I still felt in a precarious position. As an able, enthusiastic and ambitious Party member, I would be an integral part of the "shock ideological worker" teams that were now being assembled and mobilized by the Propaganda Bureau on the instruction of a special unit of the central government. Iqbal, who had just returned from Beijing, said I would also be the first to be blamed when everything went wrong.

"Your defeatism has been noted," I told Iqbal. I was suspicious. He was always the *yin* to my *yang*,

you might say, but something about his demeanour made me feel uncomfortable. I found myself wondering if he had been told by in Beijing to deliberately stoke dissent and confusion in order to draw out the various counter-revolutionary “snakes in the grass” that Mao and his acolytes had been discussing for so long. I also wondered if he had lost his faith.

When I visited him in his office, Peng looked sick and even thinner than usual. He told me to take the offer. "Our situation is getting more difficult," he said, apologetically. "Your new team will protect you."

By now, it was merely a question of survival. I agreed to take the job. I don’t think I felt scared at the time, but I remember preparing myself for the assignment, urging myself to be more Maoist than Mao himself. There would be no compromise with feudal superstition, no accommodating myself to the old ways.

I felt myself to be beyond reason, beyond ordinary cause and effect – but that was mere wishful thinking. I could be drunk with revolution for most of the day but there were still moments – redeeming moments of brutal, crapulous sobriety.

Iqbal and I went to Yeshiltagh in time for *näwroz bayrimi*, Xinjiang’s suspiciously Pagan celebration of the new year and the new harvest. His mother had died earlier in the year, but I had no time or urge to offer condolences. We needed to immerse ourselves in our duties at this crucial time, I told him, by way of apology.

The Propaganda Bureau was planning a display of might was planned that might normally have involved soldiers and armoured trucks surging

through the streets. This time they would use amateurs – students, workers, ex-herdsmen strutting through the streets in PLA uniforms.

Iqbal was angrier than I remembered him, even during the worst of our troubles.

"It felt like a different country out there," he said. "I was like a foreigner, stuck in a dormitory with other Uighurs. And I get back to my hometown and find it is just the same. A stinking dormitory. You know what we have become? Machinery. Not even machines, but the parts inside. All ready to be replaced as soon as we break."

"There is still backward thinking everywhere," I said, speaking to the audience that Iqbal might now be representing.

"I am Iqbal, *your friend*. What are you talking about?"

"Machines are what we need to be," I said, "Machines of revolution."

I went home, and a small group of my father's loyalists were there to celebrate. Abdurehim was there. I felt sorry for him, but I was sure he also felt sorry for me. He promised to protect me, for my father, for his father.

The Cultural Revolution was coming to Xinjiang in the form of the Special Revolutionary Committee and the Second Red Headquarters.

We were assigned to teams of "shock ideological workers". Each team had a chief propagandist who effectively served as the leader and mouthpiece not of the regime, as such, but of this unstoppable wave of counter-reactionary exorcism that was gathering energy across the country, and Li Jianguo was ours.

Li presented himself to us, immaculately turned out in an aspirational pseudo-military suit that was

common among civilians at the time. He was haughty and affected, proud of his self-appointed status as genuine proletarian surrounded by effete intellectuals and college boys. At the same time he was insecure, capricious and out of his depth - I thought at the time - when it came to the delicate theoretical matters that would come to occupy us.

But looking around, I couldn't imagine that any of us were capable of the sinister tasks with which we would eventually be entrusted.

I had prepared myself. If this was a test, I would pass quickly and easily. I came out with proposals aimed at striking at the heart of Islam in Xinjiang. I said we should turn all mosques into revolutionary education groups.

"Why not turn them into pig farms?" Li suggested. As the team smirked, Li looked surprised. "Food is more important than superstition," he said piously. He obviously meant it

I nodded, and I felt Iqbal's disdainful gaze. I suddenly felt the urge to stand up and denounce him, to strip him of his righteousness and thereby abolish my own shame.

Others on the team, mostly those from Beijing, stood up and agreed with Li's dangerous proposal.

"Xinjiang has had it easy for too long," said Zhu, a scholarly type. "The mountains are high and the Emperor is far away. But now the Emperor is here in the mountains."

Iqbal stood up and murmured, "The Emperor must understand what lurks in those mountains, or he could destroy himself."

Was this heresy? Everyone looked to Li for guidance.

I rose up. "We must not be afraid," I said. "The work we have done already – we have most of the people on our side."

Everyone still looked to Li for guidance.

It was March 31, the first day of the *hajj*. Ibrahim sacrificing Ismail was nothing. I was prepared to sacrifice everything – not just my life, which was always temporary, but my whole self and everything that belonged to it – the friendships, the pleasures, everything it meant to be human.

Beside me was Iqbal, fidgeting nervously. I looked to him for reassurance, believing that he might have learnt something in his year away. Instead, he was looking at me with something close to contempt.

Li rose and strutted to the front of the hall.

There must have been hundreds of us packed into the tiny hall – college students, worker committee heads, delegates from surrounding villages, token minority representatives like myself, firebrands from the Red Skullcaps and the Red Stars, the former in beards and the latter shaven-headed in order to distinguish the two holy orders.

Li berated and belittled our tepid revolutionary zeal. He plucked out a piece of paper from his jacket and unfolded it dramatically on the lectern that had been put there especially for him. The lectern made him look small.

He read out a list of names, asking each to stay behind as the others – including Iqbal – filed out. Looking at the retinue of bored looking PLA soldiers at the back of the hall, I thought we were all about to be shot.

I watched Iqbal leaving and thought, "Why him? Why not me?" Counter-revolution runs through his

Islamic veins, I thought. He is feeble and womanly. I was ready to denounce him, denounce Peng, denounce my father and his effete brother, not so much out of fear but a sense – however misplaced – of *justice*. Not revolutionary justice but justice to me.

Li, his chest pushed out, his hands gesticulating furiously, told us that he had been dispatched to Xinjiang on a special mission. He pointed dramatically at each of the names on his list and asked us to *explain ourselves*. It was a deliberate attempt to expose us, to turn us against each other. I was filling up with rage. "It can't be me," I muttered to myself. "After everything I have done, it can't be me." Luckily, others spoke first, including my old comrade Tu Qing.

"We are committed to strengthening the revolution in Xinjiang," Tu said, non-commitally.

"Good, good," said Li.

This was not a purge, though Li wanted to make it seem like one.

He said that we had been chosen as the Eight Best Ideological Workers in the Region on the recommendation of a friendly elder in the regional party apparatus.

"Chairman Mao himself has expressed his satisfaction with your work," Li said.

Years later, I found out from a close comrade of my father's, who worked in the Yeshiltagh planning department, that Li was always regarded as an "unreliable element". After being castigated for "excessive zeal" and "leftist infantilism" in the wake of the Great Leap Forward, he spent two years "convalescing" from some psychosomatic or "neurasthenic" illness in the warmer climes of the southwest. This was, presumably, his big chance to

return to the thick of the battle and ingratiate himself with the peurile ideologues who now seemed to be running things back in the east.

I'd like to say I thought Li was the worst kind of officious *hitay*, but I wanted to be impressed by him. After all, he had a kind of *heritage*. He was the third son of a People's Liberation Army general from Shandong on the eastern coast, born in the aftermath of the Long March in 1938 and abandoned shortly afterwards by his parents in Yan'an. He was eventually sent to a Party school set up in Beijing after the revolution. It was from there - we had heard - that he was expelled in disgrace after locking a fellow pupil - the scion of some minor vice-minister who was later purged during the 1958 anti-Rightist campaign - in a cupboard for a whole weekend.

Now, far from home, Li obviously sought to shield himself from local conditions by wrapping himself in a hard shell of ideology. He spat out imprecations and slogans taken straight from the Party manuals and the *People's Daily*.

"Comrades from Xinjiang will work closely with those from.." I think he almost said *from China*, an unforgiveable solecism given the efforts that archaeologists and historians had made to prove that Xinjiang was actually inextricably a part of the motherland. "We will *all* work together but I will make the final decisions with my assistant, Comrade Zhen."

A skinny kid with long ropy arms and sloping shoulders stood up and nodded aggressively. "I am Zhen," he said before sitting down again.

I discovered later that his father was one of the functionaries at the Shanghai culture bureau

responsible for placating the young Yao Wenyuan, the lunatic propagandist of the Gang of Four. Zhen, though technically second in command, was a stupid, bovine character and easy to manipulate. He deferred constantly to Li.

"So Comrade Li," he said more than once. "How do you think we should proceed?

Li had been insufferable, and now he was doubly so. Showing off in front of the new arrivals, he took the opportunity to lecture us about our feudal-nomadic past, our parasitism, our inability to conform to the precepts of the revolution. I wanted to tell him that my family was fighting the fight when his father was cleaning latrines, but I held my tongue. Somehow. It seemed hypocritical to invoke my father when we were about to start struggling against him.

He took his new team of eight to the banquet room of the Communist Party headquarters. The servants, dressed identically in regulation blue Party uniform, brought in plate after plate of luxury foods - rare fruits shipped in from the southwest, expensive rice wines and fine lamb cuts, the likes of which we had not seen for years - including a few customary nods to local culture. The rice - we showed him - had to be scooped up in the fingers of the right hand. I watched him as he sniffed his fingers, furtively at first, before dipping them into the bowl.

Li didn't even try to conceal his disdain for the procedure. He sniffed his fingers again, licked them, and dug them into the bowl again.

"Your people are still peasants, nomads," he said, his mouth still full, damp rice dripping from his lips. "Your thinking is still backward and parasitical.

You do not try to create economic value from the land, but exploit the value created by others."

He turned to Zhen and said, “Get me some chopsticks.”

As Zhen rose from his seat, my comrade Tu Qing interjected. “My family have been here for seventy years,” he said quietly. “There has always been a powerful but misdirected passion for justice here. I joined the Party because only the Party is capable of uniting us and building a new China and a new Xinjiang.”

“If it wasn’t for the Chinese and the Russians,” Li replied, nodding, “they’d still be tearing yourself to pieces.”

Such prejudices seemed to surge all the way through history, I thought. They stank of the past, with the barbarians of the Steppe, the Xiongnu, the vile Tartars, the vicious Mongols and the Great Wall that was built to try to keep them out. Now, the framework of class war was superimposed on top of the old stereotypes, but it was still pretty much the same as before. I thought of the tales that Asim's father had told me, and it occurred to me that the entire province – the whole region – was being punished for the virgins stolen from the Imperial Court more than 1,500 years ago.

"Consciousness lags behind objective economic change," Li recited as he grabbed the chopsticks that Zhen – panting like a hound – was handing to him.

None of us knew what on earth we were doing, but Li said that he and his colleagues in Beijing had drawn up the "Six Removals" plan for Yeshiltagh, "a test case in bringing the next stage of the revolution to the Xinjiang region."

Li enthusiastically handed out copies of the document to every member of our team. It was marked "top secret."

"The selected special ideological workers will be entrusted with the task of identifying the six threats to the state in the region and removing them," it said.

The first three "removals" were obvious. Ethnic separatists, religious extremists and counter-revolutionaries were to be rooted out and eliminated. The next three targets were rather more nebulous. "Bourgeois accommodationists" were those accused of being insufficiently zealous in their pursuit of the revolution. They were, I believed, the same as the "revisionists", but perhaps worse.

"Poison apple opportunists" were those adjudged to be "red on the outside and white within", who were fomenting confusion in order to further unspecified counter-revolutionary goals. Those would presumably also include separatism and Islamic revival. The sixth category was the "infantile leftists", thereby covering the final permutation of dissent: excessive fealty to a regime that was constantly changing its mind.

“We’ve got to be ruthless in pulling out these poisonous weeds by their roots,” Li said. “If we do not, they will grow back. This is *all* or *nothing*. We win or they win. There is no compromise.”

This, we knew, was the start of a ruthless war on Islam. We didn’t know it would eventually undermine Chinese self-interest in the region. We didn’t care. It was the *hajj*, but no one was allowed to go to Mecca. Instead, they would be urged to

march on their own governments for being insufficiently anti-Muslim.

Our list of targets - if implemented fully - could conceivably include every man, woman and child in Yeshiltagh. Brilliantly, the final category also allowed the whole campaign to be turned against the people carrying it out, including Li himself. It was an exemplary piece of Maoism.

In small groups, we spent a week devising our devious plans. Day after day we competed in our attempts to be more anti-Islamic than everyone else. Only Iqbal remained subdued. I hated him for it. He was suspicious of everyone.

The campaign was due to begin on April 22, the start of the Islamic new year. This would be Year Zero in Yeshiltagh, where some of the most dubious "leftist infantilist" radicalism had emerged.

Our task, Li said, was to foment discord in a way that would divide true loyalists from the counterrevolutionary snakes in the grass. Our team would soon be dispatched to Yeshiltagh, my home town, he said, "an important battleground on the ideological front" that had attracted the attention of Mao himself.

Enthusiasm was not enough. I was the local informant, with intimate knowledge of the geography of the town, the hiding places, the secluded areas, the spots where most of the damage could be done. Our presence in the town, we agreed, had to be kept completely secret if we were to remain effective. We still had no specific idea about what our real purpose was. Who were the counter-revolutionaries and what would we do to them?

Twelve of us took the dusty road to Yeshiltagh in an old bus. It took eight hours, driving along the southern fringe of the Taklamakan, edging in and out of the oases on the edges of the Tarim river.

We would hide ourselves in the depths of the *karez*, in the secret tunnels and chambers built within them. We would be Abay and Udul, two families and two factions both too fearful to return to the surface.

As Li looked on, fanning himself, Iqbal and I directed our team to find a way into the abandoned *karez*. The old entrance had been covered in rubble and stacks of coal. There were nine of us, but only five shovels. Four of us worked with planks and our bare hands. Abdurehim leant against a wall and used his crutch to sweep the rubble away.

Sweating and filthy, we worked all day. Ouyang, one of Li's men, a young dock worker from Shandong province, disappeared for an hour and returned with a chunk of explosive he had found at in one of the sheds next to the abandoned mine. He cleared us all away and a few minutes later, blew himself up.

Led by Abdurehim, who quickly waded into the smoke and gore, we cleared away Ouyang's remains with surprisingly little fuss.

I felt safer with Abdurehim around, even though he was lame. His boasts were as rich and as endearing as ever. Only Li seemed to dislike him.

We eventually cleared our way through and clambered down into the *karez,* stumbling over dead rats and pye-dogs. Li immediately commandeered one of the underground chambers.

"I have been fighting all my life," said Abdurehim. "I'm not an intellectual – I'm a fighter.

But I'm hearing things. I'm hearing things about a *new army*. Everyone seems *angry*. Dissatisfaction is everywhere. Everyone wants things to change."

There were rumours around, he said, rumours of a saviour from the west racing across the Kunlun Mountains to rescue his Muslim brothers. He said his heart was full of uncertainty and foreboding. The army, I was sure, didn't exist, but it was being wished into Xinjiang's macabre fantasy world and jostling along side all the other ghosts. We were, I thought, still proxies in an imaginary war fought by the *djinn* still soaring above us, and not even the most powerful human – not even Chairman Mao himself – could wrest control from these timeless spirits.

Asim, who had just watched his father die, had also told me that many in his family were bracing themselves for the end of days. Goats and camels were restless. Clouds were bursting. The earth was rumbling. The world was riddled with fear and doubt. But the cataclysm was not brought by God.

9.

Before Chairman Mao made his famous announcement effectively launching the Cultural Revolution in May, there was already trouble in Yeshiltagh. The region had effectively been sealed off from the rest of the country, and mosques throughout Xinjiang were going up in flames. Meanwhile, the People's Patriotic Muslim Alliance (PPMA) and the People's Islamic Front for the Mass Line (PIFML) had already been involved in a number of brief but violent skirmishes. It wasn't quite clear what each group stood for, but they both claimed to be fighting for the Revolution.

What I didn't know was that at the same time, a group of separatists had set up their own shadow organization, the East Turkestan People's Revolutionary Party (ETPRP), which – it turned out - was genuinely opposed to the Chinese Communist Party and to the Chinese in general. We had all reached such extremes that it was difficult to tell the difference between the various factions with their spurious martial titles and revolutionary blazons.

Li and his brethren had already been doing their utmost to stir it up even further, urging us to spread propaganda that suggested that the local authorities were simultaneously anti-Islamic and counter-revolutionary, that they had continuously betrayed the masses and allowed the mosques to become a breeding ground for "antagonistic contradictory elements".

Contradiction was certainly the word. Another mosque burnt down in early May was accused of being both in the pay of the "revisionist" local government and of "fomenting" reactionary pan-Islamic theories. The evidence? My own pamphlets, which had now been disavowed by the local propaganda bureau that had been responsible for publishing them.

“The intention all along was to bring the snakes out of the grass,” I told Iqbal.

Burning the mosques down was almost a sign of respect compared to what was to come. Local thugs under the command of Li finally made good on their plan to turn Yeshiltagh’s two biggest mosques into pig farms and to shoot anyone who protested against “the Party’s benevolent plans to feed the people”.

The local garrison was already incapacitated by its own ideological struggle against "reactionaries in the heart of the Party," while the denizens of the town hall, including Uncle Samir, were now close to a state of siege. They tried throwing a few bones and bits of rancid meat to the crowd, dismissing and denouncing a couple of powerless low-level local bureau chiefs – one of them, I recall, was in charge of Yeshiltagh’s “civil affairs” while the other was a trained meteorologist who because of his management skills and an ability to think clearly, had been put in charge of local agricultural matters - but it seemed to fire the crowd up still further.

Back in Urumchi, Peng Qing, the harmless regional propaganda chief, was also tossed to the wolves at the behest of the local leadership. His office was ransacked, and his collection of Uighur memorabilia – long regarded as suspect – was torn

up and burnt. The mob leaders accused him of being the "foremost representative of revisionist splittism" in the local party.

The newspaper said he admitted his guilt immediately, and was repentent and eager to reform his thinking. In the code of the propaganda bureau at the time, that usually meant the authorities themselves were full of regret but had no choice, and that the workings of the Party's destiny had conspired against them. Still, that didn't help Peng, who was never seen again.

"I suppose we always should have known he was a counter-revolutionary," Iqbal said, sadly.

At a meeting we held the day after the fire, Li gave no indication that anything had gone beyond his expectations. He gleefully rubbed his hands together, saying that "things had only just begun" and making the usual connection between the spirit of the revolution and the need to spill blood. My own team were in a state of hysteria, caught between ecstacy and terror and increasingly vulnerable to Li's emotional manipulations. People rose, ready to pounce with their denunciations. The true believers struggled to reconcile the madness with their faith; the cynical thrived because they cared little about ideological integrity and consistency and only considered their own survival. Was I a believer or a cynic? My father's great talent, I thought, was the mental flexibility to rearrange his passions to suit the prevailing political winds and to believe fervently in the new order for however long it lasted. Perhaps I was the same. Perhaps I was so cynical that after each and every ridiculous *volte face*, after each contradiction, I had

managed to convince my heart that I was still a believer.

Ordinary life actually went on as best it could. Uncle Samir managed to get out of the government buildings to celebrate the birth of his grandson, the child of my cousin. My father, who made an even more difficult journey from Urumchi, decided to give a speech about "aspiration." I had heard similar things before.

The normal pageantry – the songs, the dances, the drink, the feast – was stifled by the ominous hum of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. All the ordinary rituals were now suspect. The musicians struggled to be heard as the audience's minds drifted elsewhere.

My father seemed frightened and vague, and for once, I felt *in charge*. He told me that the political upheavals were caused by youths, like myself, who had never really done a day of proper work in their whole lives. Opportunists and adventurists with no connection to the productive forces of society who did not understand the consequences of their actions.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" I told him, still pretending to talk about the revolution in general. "Complaining about the pace of change, complaining about weakness. Now we are finally pushing forward, ripping out the backward heart of this country, and you are still unhappy."

He walked away, shaking his head. I noticed how *small* he looked as he elbowed his way to the front of the courtyard, where a couple of tired looking women were handing out bags of raisins.

I saw Uncle Samir and moved towards him.

"Of course, Li Jianguo is crazy," I told my uncle. "Probably mentally unstable. He has a grudge against everyone. But this is a revolution."

Uncle Samir looked exhausted. His thin, elegant face was pale and stretched. "Revolution is not a tea party," he said, his placid smile fading.

"Everything seems to have gone further than expected," I said, reaching out for reassurance. "But I'm sure you agree that we are going in the right direction. We've been playing a game and now's the time for it to get serious."

He looked towards me, calm but suddenly hostile. "You are all still playing. You've just changed the rules." He sighed. "This, of course, is now a young man's game, and that's not a good thing."

I returned to our cave with a feeling of unease.

Iqbal seemed even more worried than he had been when I left. He hadn't been the same since he returned from his year in Beijing. He would speak darkly, conspiratorially, about the manipulation of "the Party spirit" and the "triumph of personal ambition over social justice."

Li was in the middle of a speech. My own little team – Iqbal along with Jamil and Abdurehim – were listening intently, and looking for guidance.

"I know that we are not harbouring any counter-revolutionaries in our team," Li said more than once, chopping his hand in front of him like a blade and looking around at no one in particular, "but I am concerned that you people aren't tough enough to fight the enemy."

The problem, I thought, was that we had no idea who our enemies were. Personally, I wondered if I really was a secret revisionist. The arcane doctrinal disputes had no grounding in my own cluttered

thoughts, which continued to drift uncontrollably towards my next meal. We wanted to be machines, but we were not machines.

Li explained that the time had come to root out the enemies within. We'd spent the last few years cultivating the Red Skullcaps and the Red Stars and now were were going to cull them, thin them out, strike blows against the counter-revolution within. It was clear Li didn't trust any of them – but it was equally clear he was less concerned about their doctrinal purity than with the colour of their skin, my skin.

"We have two groups and our task is to decide whether they are counter-revolutionary or not," he said.

"What about the ETPRP?" asked the hulking, lugubrious Zhang, another one of Li's old army cronies.

"Forget about them," Zhen said brusquely. "They are not relevant to the struggle."

Li stood up and addressed the group.

"Trust no one," Li said. He looked in my direction with what I could only interpret as a deliberate, ominous gaze.

"The counter-revolutionaries are everywhere," he said.

And so, we emerged from our cloisters as ideological warriors, and our foes were manifold. The *djinn* were circling and occupying soul after soul. The Patriotic People's Muslim Alliance – encouraged by rabble rousers from the east – had already denounced the local authorities, and its hundred or so members - not only from Yeshiltagh, but from Turpan and Urumchi - were now gathering, day after day, around People's Square

carrying banners and placards featuring the hated Liu Shaoqi, the despised Khrushchev and idolatrous images of a haloed Chairman Mao as the prophet Muhammad surging towards Beijing in a golden chariot, clutching a refulgent red sword.

It all seemed beyond our control already, but Li – he kept saying – had a plan. Nothing could ever surprise him because everything was part of his plan.

His big idea was to let the lunatics take over the asylum.

10.

The ETPRP may not have been relevant to the struggle, but they were already burning down labour camps in Khotan and had the local government and PLA garrison surrounded. Reinforcements were given time off from their ideological struggle sessions and sent out to slaughter the insurgents. An official I met in the labour camp some years later told me they almost lost when they insisted on trying to "purify" the local population before going in.

The official, called Tang but now beyond the point where names were still necessary, was filthy and stinking. His eyes were bloodshot. Only when he described the fire and slaughter did he become lucid. Someone, he said, claimed the rebels could be defeated with left hands only because left was always superior to right. He then repeated, over and over again, the phrase "left is superior to right", "left is superior to right", before returning to the scene of the revolt, describing in disgusting detail the screams and the stench of a city descending into Hell.

Those who knew how close they were to falling would never admit it, he said. That's why he was in the camp.

I listened to him for months, having little else to do. He was covered in his own filth, and the other inmates – crooks and perverts as well as ideological criminals like me – kicked him like a dog. By the end of his life, which came about a year later, he spent the day chained to a wooden post, his mouth

stuffed with ill-fitting teeth, laughing at everyone who passed him and kicked him and spat at him.

He would have ideological arguments with himself. Maoism, recited by a madman, had never seemed so *sane*. From the very beginning, he would say, our movement had sought to burrow beneath the orchards and flowerbeds of bourgeois thinking and expose the roots, the filthy twisted stubs that underpinned everything. It was urgent and violent and literally *radical*. But now, he said, we were just lies and surface noise. We were just disguise upon disguise upon disguise with nothing beneath it. None of our squabbles meant anything. They were mere distractions, and behind it all were the same, shallow and brutal struggles that had blighted the lives of almost all of our ancestors.

In Xinjiang we have known brutality and depredation. I had seen slaughter from an early age. Crooks and gangsters carving out their little territories, printing money with abandon, stealing everything they could from their subjects before someone equally brutal slays them and takes their place. Everything was employed as an instrument of torture. The only technology was the technology of death.

I had heard of cruxifixions, mutilations, feasts stocked with the hearts and livers of slain enemies. Tribal heads beheaded with scimitars, border tribes poisoned with Soviet gas. Tyrants brutalized tyrants as they fought for the right to torment the people, until the people rebelled and hoisted their own leader into power, and the leader would surge forward on waves of public acclaim and indignation and prove every bit as brutal and corrupt as the

gangsters he had personally decapitated and replaced.

But I always felt that the cruelty of the Party was different. Its dynamics were more precise, its motives more pure, its methods cleaner and more refined. Leaders would not be beheaded during feasts or subject to death by a thousand cuts. They were targeted and shot – feudal remnants, exploitative nobles and stinking landlords. There was a purpose above the mere exercising of arbitrary power. Cruelty was a science, an act of surgery.

But by 1966, we were back to the same old mayhem.

"We are purifying the revolution," said Li. "All kinds of vermin will appear, but never underestimate our spirit."

Iqbal knew what had been decided in my absence. Li had ordered the two of us to burn down the biggest mosque in Yeshiltagh.

"He wants to test our loyalty," said Iqbal, his face drained of colour.

"We have to do it," I said.

We emerged in the night. The town's only gas station was controlled by rebels, so we drained a can of diesel from Li's state-owned truck. It didn't occur to either of us to disobey. In fact, I thought I was in a dream. The mosque had already been pasted with posters and placades, its windows smashed.

We kicked in the door and collected up as much paper and fabric as we could and soaked it with diesel.

"How do we do this? Seems a bit dangerous," Iqbal said.

"Just light it. Throw a match."

Iqbal did as he was told, burning his hand – and the sleeve of his jacket – as he fled the flames.

We ran as quickly as possible, hiding in a ditch in the disused mine, stinking of oil and sweat and burning human hair.

We watched as the silhouettes gathered against the blaze of the mosque. We remained motionless and terrified as the crowds thickened, watching as the flames lurched out from the mosque and began to sniff out the buildings beside it, casting the crowd's knotted faces in a capricious yellow light. A fat woman with a bundle of rags held to her breast stumbled out of one of the houses and blinked sadly into the black smoke. She then peered solicitously into the bundle and adjusted it until a baby's head poked out.

The woman's mouth opened as if she were about to scream but she remained silent and then wandered off into the crowd.

"My God what have we done," Iqbal murmured.

I glanced at him and said nothing, turning to watch the fire dripping and drooling from the eaves in oily clumps.

11.

To the big powers, we were always the *basmachi*, the central Asian bandits and resistance fighters who had caused so much trouble for the Red Army in the 1920s. Somehow, I always felt that this made us purer in Mao's eyes – revolutionary fighters bursting through from the margins to freshen up the world with our blood.

In fact, though we were useful for a while, we remained untrustworthy. Exotics were exciting, but also dangerous. By now, everyone I knew was being persecuted. I'm not sure if I ever believed I was next. I was still trapped in a hallucination. There were reasons why members of my family were being hauled out of their offices and factories, and by identifying those reasons, I could avoid a similar fate, I thought.

There were riots on the streets on the following day, of course: that was the least we expected. It was the first day of June and thousands had gathered in roughly organised groups around the main square, outside the government buildings and at the site of the Mosque, which had now been reduced to rubble and kindling. At the square, gangs of youths were chanting "Long Live Chairman Mao" and "Allahu Akhbar" at equal volumes, and were charging one another with tools and weapons plundered from the ill-kempt local museum – primitive awls and chisels; bone-hafted shards of bronze; ornamental daggers with broken hilts; flimsy spears that were probably more than 1,000 years old. They seemed to have coalesced

into two distinct groups that appeared to correspond to the two revolutionary factions in the town, the People's Patriotic Muslim Alliance (PPMA) and the People's Islamic Front for the Mass Line (PIFML).

One kid, whose red skullcap identified him as a PPMA member, had dressed himself in the set of body armour that had hung in the museum for at least two decades. It did him no good. He was thrown to the ground by a PIFML youth carrying a bronze shield with a blood-coloured star on its back, and the ill-fitting cuirass pierced his skin as he fell.

I was with Li as his driver, the monosyllabic Zeng, rode through the town in an army truck, clapping his hands and grinning like a maniac, terrified and exultant in equal measure.

"They are ready, they are mobilized," Li said. "Revolutionary fervour is ready to overthrow the corrupt elites in the government buildings."

They were mere boys, angry but callow, a ragtag army of impoverished ethnic minority students fighting first for vengeance and now for their lives. Li, surveying the scene, said how pleased he was that they had been persuaded to abandon their old loyalties – to the mosques, the madrassas and the tithes that had bound the farmer to his feudal lord for centuries, whatever the government that happened to be in charge - and denounce the government that had let these superstitions fester for too long.

"Superstition is the friend of poverty," Li shouted triumphantly from the window of the truck. "And poverty is the enemy of socialism!"

The town was reduced to complete chaos and ruin. Li still insisted that everything was going to plan. If chaos was his objective, then I suppose he was right.

Suddenly, there was an explosion, and a burst of gunfire. Zeng steered away from the crowds and then slumped forward, his head hitting the wheel.

"I am hit," he said, the blood oozing out of two spots on his shoulder and his belly.

Iqbal sat in the back of the truck. He already sensed betrayal, and said he was on the verge of fleeing.

"How would that look?" I asked him.

He said he wanted to find what was left of his large family and the herd it ran, for generations, in the Turpan oasis.

Iqbal, not unreasonably, said he had begun to suspect that the entire operation was nothing more than a ruse aimed at exposing his own hidden, counter-revolutionary beliefs. It was, in essence, a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the meantime, I still suspected that he was only saying this in order to draw a counter-revolutionary confession out of me, and I remained silent.

I managed to persuade my closest comrade to stay. Iqbal thought he was the only one having doubts about this mission.

He said that friends of his, respected members of the local Communist Youth League, had already spent time in the labour camps for a few minor ideological indiscretions that no one could quite put their finger on - perhaps an ill-judged Koranic proverb here and there, or an overly zealous concern for the treatment of the local madrassas, mosques or minarets.

Maybe I should have let him leave and run for the hills. The disorder was far worse than we had imagined. The government buildings were surrounded by baying masses carrying contradictory placards, many of which I had written myself. The old adobe houses in the hillsides were in flames and the rioters – presumably from one of the two rebel groups – thought it would be amusing to tear the skullcaps off the heads of the elderly residents and stuff them down their throats. Meanwhile, the dormitories at Yeshiltagh's two main schools had also been destroyed.

That night, after the students tarried and grumbled after being ordered to disperse by the local troops, Iqbal and I took our usual table at the small, insanitary canteen on Liberation Lane, formerly Western Street, next to the People's Square, formerly Grapevine Square. I said, "I think we might be the only sane ones left."

The crackdown was about to begin. Hardened fighters heading to the border regions had been diverted to Yeshiltagh to frighten the locals into acquiescence. Seeing them drive into town in their trucks, I felt ashamed – again, I felt we had been playing around, like children.

On June 2, the first day of their arrival, the soldiers remained steadfastly on the sidelines and scrupulously refused to intervene as the skirmishes between the two rival groups continued, even though I am sure they could have destroyed them all in an instant.

At People's Square, a soldier with a loudspeaker was urging the youths to disperse, but they refused to move, instead accusing the soldiers of betraying the revolution.

I returned to the catacombs wondering what Li's instructions would be. The main entrance was guarded by a couple of Li's cronies trying to appear inconspicuous. They frisked me and allowed me to pass.

Li looked troubled.

"Zhen is dead," he said, trying to appear unmoved. "Counter-revolutionaries are taking over."

He explained – not entirely convincingly – that he was still in charge of the mission, and that the army intervention was part of his overall plan, but that "certain unreliable elements" amongst the troops had been suborned by Khruschevite right-wing deviationists into killing him and all his men. He said Zhen had been to Urumchi to seek reinforcements, and was shot at point-blank range by the army officer he consulted as soon as he had returned.

"This proves that the counter-revolutionary elements are more entrenched than we thought," he said.

He said he could not leave the *karez* until reinforcements came from Beijing, but he asked me to sneak out and deliver a message to the army captain camped out in the main square.

When I had climbed out of the *karez*, much of the mayhem seemed to be over, but the hot stench remained, wafting across the deserted streets.

In the town and most of its half-empty rural outskirts, crackling speakers – a bulk issue from the Xinjiang Construction Corps in Urumchi - hung precariously from trees and vines and on the jambs of doorways, and a voice would repeatedly denounce unnamed "traitors" who "wore the

clothes of Islam underneath the uniform of the revolution". Or was it the other way around? No one could really be convinced of themselves amid the chants and denunciations of a regime that had, effectively, gone mad.

One evening near the end of June, Abdurehim was teasing Feng, calling him a mummy's boy and prodding him with his crutch. Abdurehim never knew when to stop. Feng returned and shot him in the chest.

The first thing I thought – what am I going to tell my father?

The second thing - what's the expression about living by the sword and dying by it? That didn't seem quite accurate, but there was something grimly appropriate about this bold and boastful great warrior slain by a cowardly Party functionary who had never fought for anything or anyone other than himself.

Our team, now consisting of eight members, including five Uighurs, one Kazakh and a Han Chinese, were running around, scribbling down declarations and memoranda and minutes from meetings that had never been held but had stressed, they said, our undying commitment to the cause of revolution and to the rooting out of hidden class and state enemies. Iqbal was pensive, pacing around trying to figure out what was going on.

The members of the team were, I thought, little more than children, but their faces were already stretched and weathered like old, dried paper. We waited, waiting for Li's next move.

Li. This was a man who knew nothing and seemed proud of it – a man in a world that had been turned on its head, a world run by idiot

tyrants who could not bear to be reminded that there were people smarter than themselves and thus made wisdom and learning a crime. A man standing in the bowels of a town he had done so much to wreck. Him, and me. Revolution changes nothing: it just turns everything upside down and those who used to live in the shit and filth and piss can happily watch as it cascades away from them.

I was sent out again to reconnoitre the town. Li was scared he would be recognised and arrested. He still insisted the local garrison had been taken over by a counter-revolutionary clique responsible for stirring up local Islamic resentments in order to restor capitalist rule in China. I couldn't be sure if he actually believed this.

Outside, I was duly recognized, by Asim, my old friend, who was still doing nothing more than growing and selling fruit at the Bountiful Plaza where I would meet my father after he finished work.

"What's going on?" he said, nonchalantly juggling three red apples. He didn't appear too concerned by the chaos going on around him. Even rioters still needed fruit.

Many of the PLA reinforcements had apparently departed, and the remaining soldiers seemed frail and insignificant in the face of the protesters. Several dozen Chinese youths in sweat-stained fatigues, wielding their rifles that would, in any case, probably lock and jam as a result of the heat. Surrounding them, widening concentric circles of students and activists, some of them shipped in from Qinghai and Gansu and even further east.

"Seems the *hitay* are finally moving in and taking over," Asim said.

Asim let out a high-pitched screech and his elderly donkey shuddered into action. He dragged the creature to the edge of the square and started selling his fruit to the crowds.

At least half of the protestors were Uighur, but they had already formed their separate groups and stood in separate sections of the square. I read the banners and blazons. The Patriotic People's Islamic Front. The Red Islamic Banner. "Down with 'Big Han Chauvinism'." "Down with the Liu Shaoqi Counter-Revolutionary Clique". I read my own particular ideological innovations in the slogan, "Islam is the Revolution!", which was being held aloft by about a dozen representatives of the Islamic Communist Youth League, which I knew to be a relatively well-paid front organization run by the regional government in Urumchi.

That might have been the case with all of the groups, but the positions encapsulated by the slogans already seemed dangerous, pushing at the fringes of the legitimate. Revolution seemed to lie at the heart of every word, including officially approved words like "revolution". This was all performed at Chairman Mao's instigation, in theory at least, and maybe he understood, more than anyone, that history simply recurred under different guises, that the same *djinn* emerged, wearing different masks. He would say that he was just the First Emperor, razing the country to the ground, amputating and cauterizing in order to begin anew. He would say we were all blank pieces of canvas on which he could paint his beautiful pictures - battle scenes in blood red and gore-brown and bile-yellow, scored in with the faint images of old ghosts.

It wasn't easy to remain calm. I spent my day concealed, waiting for the mayhem in the streets to subside. It seemed to me that the ethnic tensions, never far away from the surface, were manifesting themselves in a quasi-ideological struggle that had, effectively, been imposed from above. In Urumchi and Turpan, the few mosques that remained upright had been defaced with graffitti about the backwardness of religion, and according to rumours, alleged Muslim "splittists" had been marched to the centre of the cities, or to the grounds of the universities, and smeared with pig's blood before being denounced, locked up and left for dead.

The *djinn* seemed to have inhabited all of us, like the shadows of sand that crept across the deserts – shifting dunes in a city of ghosts. In the learned journals of the east, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution sounded like a mere doctrinal squabble – heated of course, but still fraternal. Here on the ground, it was childish and vicious and like a pogrom. And the locals weren't standing for it. They marched into the main square brandishing fire and what was left of the PLA were in no position to fight back.

It didn't feel that different, in substance, from what I had seen of the religious riots during my childhood. In fact, it seemed very much like an outbreak of rabies. And if we couldn't tell the difference, then how could ordinary people?

12.

The heat was already intense, and that provided the rioters – it was unclear, and remains unclear, which side they were on – with their own unique form of torture. My uncle, along with a number of hapless Party bureaucrats, was dragged out of his office in the middle of June, forced to perform a perfunctory self-criticism in front of the baying crowds, and was then stripped naked, tied up and wrapped in corrugated iron before being left, hanging from a monument on People's Square, to slowly boil to death.

My father was locked up somewhere, and I remember telling myself not to care. The revolution, I told myself, was not a tea party. Somehow, as a matter of instinct, I thought he *deserved* all this, and was ultimately responsible.

The regional government in Urumchi, led by Wang Enmao, was powerless to intervene. More Red Guards had arrived from the rest of the country to prolong a struggle that had actually moved beyond them.

It was July 1, and the 12th of Raby' al-awal, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad and the day that the statue of revolutionary martyr Lin Jilu (died 1943) was torn down by the mob gathering in People's Square. The statue had angered Muslims for decades, but the fake marble was shattered into powder within an hour by groups castigating him as a class traitor and rightist deviationist.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, a squadron of Red Guards – formed by the hundred or so Han Chinese students who had not yet fled – marked the Prophet's birthday by burning what they claimed to be a pile of Korans. In fact, there were only two Korans, and the blaze was eked out by anything else they could find – including copies of my own pamphlets.

Backed by the beleaguered PLA garrison, they vowed to reclaim the Square for the motherland and for the revolution. They surged into the centre of the town carrying knives and spades and pitchforks, as well as a large quantity of explosives stolen from the Yeshiltagh Mining Bureau. They drove out the rebels and set up camp under the impassive statue of Chairman Mao. Wretched clerics were dragged onto the square and force-fed pork and beaten mercilessly until their faces were a blurry pulp of blood and hair and skin and their mouths flapped open like fish.

But something else was stirring. Trucks of Soviet armaments had been smuggled in across the border, rather more easily than expected, with much of the PLA distracted by nationwide bloodletting.

The devil itself was coming. The East Turkestan People's Revolutionary Party, now heavily armed, had gathered strength and a day later launched their own attack on the square. The statue of Chairman Mao collapsed in a pile of white dust and rubble.

13.

Iqbal and I returned to the stinking, sweltering catacombs. Much of the town was ablaze over the course of July. The rattle of gunfire in the distance was unsettling. We didn't even know who was firing on whom.

"We could run," Iqbal said.

"Where would that get us. The *karez* are the safest place around."

Li tried to retain his dignity by persuading the group that he knew what he was doing, that everything was a part of his plans. But his cronies were getting edgy. The food was starting to run out.

On August 8, the Politburo in Beijing approved the Sixteen Point Decision, which among other things said Xinjiang was not aligned with "the socialist economic base" and was therefore "targets of the struggle". In Beijing, they were still somehow under the impression that we were living in capitalist-feudal luxury and now we had to suffer just as much as everyone else. Special treatment, thought Mao, had encouraged separatism. Now everyone was being burnt in the white-hot melting pot of the Cultural Revolution, boiled down to our constituent parts - our feudal superstitions, our "atavistic" ethnic rages.

We were safe from it all, for now, in our redoubt, but were not safe from one another. Li snapped at Jing, who had taken the late Zhen's role as "chief of staff".

Li shot in him the chest. If the chamber of his pistol was full, he would have five left. Enough for all of us. Only Zhang seemed to be keeping Li calm.

A day seemed to go by. "You know?" whispered Iqbal, "we might be hungry but at least we can talk again."

"What do you mean?"

"Up there." His eyes rose to the dank stone ceiling. "Up there, it was all about saying the right thing and I can't stand it any more. As if words make the difference. People have no idea what to do so they pretend it is all about the words. Even mentioning a crime becomes a crime itself."

Li was hungry, and so decided we needed food.

Being the least conspicuous, Jamil and I were entrusted with the task of securing supplies from the town above us.

"The situation is not yet lost," Li said, waving a pistol in the air. "Our reinforcements should be here soon. Look out for them. Use my name."

"What about the separatists?" I said. "As far as we know they are still controlling the place."

"Do you really think the Party would allow these people to thrive if we did not control them? They are ours. We know exactly what they are doing."

He still talked as if everything was still somehow going to plan, but he knew he was running out of options. And he knew I knew. "We will be back soon," I said.

"Don't think about running away," he said. "Zhang," he said. "You go with them. And you," he added, pointing at Iqbal. "You're staying here."

He ordered his new "chief of staff", the brutal Feng, to bind my friend up with wire. Iqbal glanced resentfully at me.

"We expect you back within the day," Li said.

I assented. I was desperately hungry. I was also claustrophobic. Zhang, Jamil and I crawled out of the redoubt and climbed out into the adjoining tunnel. I felt the chinks of light touch my skin and bathed for a few moments in the *karez* streams before climbing up the slope towards the light, towards Yeshiltagh.

As soon as I had shifted the heavy stone tablets and emerged into the old shed and then out into the daylight, I was surrounded by two battered Red Guards.

"Who are you?" the bedraggled Red Guard leader – no more than 20 years old – barked at me.

I told them I had been sick, that I had been hiding in the *karez* because I couldn't even move.

I could tell they wanted to kill me, but no longer had the strength, the resolve, or the courage. I needn't have explained anything to them. They were waiting for their deaths, or for salvation – for the same *deus ex machina* that had preoccupied Li for the last three weeks.

Zhang climbed out. Suddenly, the Red Guards stepped back and muttered to one another.

"Back away," Zhang shouted at them. "I am in charge of this operation."

Jamil climbed out and looked around and blinked and then ran as fast as he could.

"Please," I said to Zhang, "don't do it. I'll talk to him."

I saw only a blur as Zhang raised his right hand and fired a few shots. Jamil fell to the ground. I started moving towards him and Zhang's right hand then pointed at me. My eyes focused and I

saw the sun and the glint of the gun and then the panic in the eyes of the two terrified Red Guards.

We scrambled away, limping across the now empty coal mine towards the town itself. Chaos still reigned. The last two surviving mosques in Yeshiltagh – which had already converted into pig farms - were now ablaze, adding the offensive odour of pork to the sweltering, stinking heat of the town. When the Chinese wanted to say a border minority had been assimilated, they would say they had been "cooked", homogenised and saturated with the spices of Chinese culture. By now, the whole of Yeshiltagh stank of festering, rancid meat and the pavements ran with blood and human juices. There were people still hanging around in listless clusters – shell-shocked and silent and looking down at their stinking, bloody feet. Corpses were stripped bare by hungry scavengers. Haloes of flies danced above them. Bewildered pye-dogs limped through the stench in search of scraps.

The PLA had deserted the scene, presumably to nurse their wounds or fight their bigger battles closer to the borders, and the East Turkestan People's Revolutionary Party remained in charge of the city square and the government buildings that overlooked it.

We wandered slowly towards the square. I hoped that Asim would be there, still selling fruit – a symbol of calm, a ghost from the past who was somehow untouched and untainted by anything that had happened. I looked around for him, ignoring Zhang as he cocked his gun and told me to stay close, glancing at a bloated rat leading a grimy brood out from a sewer that had been blasted open.

From the crowd that occupied the centre of the square, a figure emerged – taller than the rest, not handsome but striking, with huge white teeth. I saw the trails of old blood running along his back as he turned away and waved on his comrades. His hair was longer, and his beard was fuller, but it was unmistakably Iskander, the classmate I betrayed.

"I thought you were dead," I said quietly, still thinking I was in the middle of a hallucination as he walked towards me.

"I thought you were dead too," he said, not quite managing to restrain his smile.

"Do you know who we are?" he said.

His comrades trained their guns on me.

"Please, I'm not armed."

They looked at Zhang. He puffed out his chest and said, "I am an officer with the People's Liberation Army - "

They opened fire. Zhang collapsed to the ground. His face remained the same mask of contempt and indignation, and his eyes blinked slowly before Iskander shot him in the forehead.

Iskander led me away into the courtyard of the government buildings and towards the police headquarters that stood behind them. I looked around and nothing seemed amiss. There were no bodies or bullet holes, and a small lawn remained unscorched and surrounded by a neat row of recently planted saplings. I caught a glimpse of the walled gardens, where government staff planted their potatoes and carrots, and noticed it had been stripped bare.

Iskander opened the door of the police building and I followed him in, squeezing past two bored youths in tattered uniforms who were bickering

over who got to guard the entrance and who would hold the biggest gun. I looked around and saw a room full of weapons – not just ordinary police ordinance, but a box of grenades, half a dozen machine guns, at least one flame thrower and all kinds of matt-black contraptions I had never seen before. I grabbed a small knife from one of the tables and thought about stabbing Iskander in the back. The moment passed. He turned around and waved a hand around the room.

"You see all these?" he said.

My former classmate explained the weapons had been supplied by Chinese intelligence to rebels in Afghanistan in exchange for copious quantities of opium that were then processed and transported into Vietnam, where it would be sold to US soldiers as some sort of retribution for CIA funding of freedom fighters in Tibet. "It is complicated, no?"

"When did you get involved in all this?" I asked him. "After your arrest? Before it? Is that how you managed to get away?"

Iskander smiled gently, and I thought I saw again the gentle but determined student I used to know. "The Communists aren't as pure as you think they are. No one is as pure as you think they are. The only thing pure in all this is the heroin."

"I, I know nothing about that," I said, unable to think of any other response.

"You are uncommon," he said, smiling. "You understand two different sides. Me too. The *hitay* call me Uighur but my family is from the steppe, not the oases. We are fighters, not farmers. It is their blood that runs through me. But you, you understand the heart of the Uighur and the head of the *hitay*, and it has always been tearing you apart.

The two sides just cannot mix. You yourself are an unfortunate experiment that has failed. Just like the whole of 'Xinjiang'."

He took me into an adjoining interrogation room. Stacks of propaganda pamphlets – including my own – had been shredded and thrown in big piles on the floor, one of which spilled over as I climbed into the chair Iskander had pointed me towards.

"Where is your man Li? We need to talk to him."

"I don't know," I said, forcing myself upright and trying to hold his gaze. "I expect he's dead. I know some of his men are."

"Those weapons: they used people like us to get them to the Uighurs in Kazakhstan and elsewhere to use against the Russians. They weren't supposed to come back here. We took delivery of them a few months ago and we were supposed to ship them out, but we kept them. That's probably why Li's been sent back here," he said.

"I doubt it," I said, finding relief from his gaze by glancing briefly at the desk in front of me and then out of the window, where a single muddy cloud slipped gently across the sky. "You make the mistake of thinking Li is... *competent*. Or that he even knows anything about all this - "

"Oh no, I am not saying he is *competent*. Actually, I want to *thank* him. Before I *kill* him. He and his sort, *you* included, have done more for the cause of Turkestan independence than Atub Beg!"

I sat there in silence, trying to think as my heart drummed. I remember thinking – the machine may malfunction once in a while, but it is still a *machine*. I will not bend. I will not lose my discipline. The insurrection in my heart will be calmed.

He left the interrogation room and then returned five minutes later with a guard he called Abdulahat. I noticed the room stank of meat. The two warriors, clad in their thick leather cuirasses and their camelskin smocks, seemed completely out of place in a small office filled with shelves and papers. Romantics from the steppe they might be: they couldn't possibly run a country.

"One thing I want to know," I said. "Do you really think this is going to work in the end? I mean this rebellion."

"We didn't start this," Iskander said. "The *hitay* want Turkestan. The Russians want Turkestan. They have tried to play with us like toys but we will play with them. This rebellion: just an excuse to destroy us and take our land. And first they arm us against the Russians so they can't come and take over."

"You mean this Cultural Revolution was just a way of encouraging you to come out of the woodwork?" I'd heard similar conspiracies on the streets. Elderly survivors from previous bloodbaths explaining that it was always the same, that history repeated itself and it was always squalid and vicious.

"Oh, it is a dangerous game they are playing," said Iskander. "All this is a war against Moscow. Russia trains rebels against China. China trains rebels against Moscow. The problem is the rebels are the same and we believe neither in Moscow nor in Beijing."

"But what are you going to get from all this? The *sharia* and the the Quran and death to all infidels?"

"Don't make it sound like we are making the wrong choice. You know? At least in Islam, slaves can still buy their freedom. Here in Xinjiang we

have had decades of illiterate savages telling us we are monsters lost in superstition, telling us to burn our books, telling us to live together like pigs and to work like camels. And this is supposed to be the future, the ideal, the Heaven on Earth."

I said nothing.

"As I say, by launching this thing, this so-called Cultural Revolution, Mao has done us a service, and for that, we must be grateful."

I looked up as another one of his comrades walked through the door. They whispered to each other. He turned towards me.

"It starts today," he said. "In five cities. Kashgar. Ili. Khotan. Urumchi. Yeshiltagh. Your people are dead. Your game is over."

"What game?" I asked.

"You thought you were in control of us? You thought you could manipulate us. Never. Only Allah is in control. You tried to destroy us but you are destroying yourselves."

Iskander's movement, if that is what it was, had actually been strengthened by the thousands of minority people being evacuated from the border regions in order to make way for Han Chinese settlers, who – the authorities thought – would be rather less likely to betray China to the now inimical Soviet Union. Now, the rebels were spread everywhere.

It was disappointing to learn that none of the ETPRP's activities, and none of their ideological mishmashes, were down to me and the work I did. I just provided one of the various complicated cover stories, one of a thousand acts of misdirection, and had maybe been little more than a dupe since the day I started the job.

Of course, we had all been deluding ourselves, including Li. Eventually, nothing we did in 1966 or the years that followed made much of a difference to anything. We liked to think the nuances and refinements of our ideological discussions would be reflected precisely in society – that we were somehow setting the terms and boundaries of a whole nation's thoughts. In fact, maybe a slogan or two was smuggled into the barracks and the campuses and used to justify one additional defenestration, or one more needle in the fingernails, but these were forces beyond our control – mass shiftings driven by desire on the one hand (the desire for glory, the desire for conquest, the simple desire for *food*) and *inertia* on the other hand. Beyond the squabbles about and between the Khruschev revisionists and leftist infantilists, this was really about primitive power, and Mao himself must have known that. Dressed in the jargon of the Cultural Revolution were the age-old myths of an infallible Emperor locked in a pact with the Heavens but betrayed by drearily sublunary lackeys like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. This was about envy, lust, vengeance, power, treasures in this world and the next.

I would have been surprised if it had turned out that Li was not in the slightest bit interested in the Cultural Revolution and was motivated by a higher intelligence mission to locate missing weapons. Li was venal and cunning, but he did not seem capable of the levels of subterfuge that this mission would require. I learned much later that the top brass at the People's Liberation Army had indeed sought a deniable way of helping our comrades in North Vietnam and avenging the Americans for

their support for the insurgents of Tibet throughout the decade. Weapons and drugs: somebody always wanted weapons and drugs.

All this might have been a game, or several different games being played on the same board. But try telling the rioting youths – now with their spiritual hotline to Allah and Chairman Mao - that all this was fake.

As I sat there while Iskander lectured me about East Turkestan's inalienable right to self-determination, I suspected my days were numbered. I knew a place to hide, if only I could reach it – the former idyll of the *karez*, once the haven of emirs and princes and heresiarchs and now a network of stinking caves on the far side of a derelict coal mine, where my friend was now being held at gunpoint by a man who appeared to be on the verge of going mad.

Iskander left a guard in charge and contemplated what he should do with me. I was too untrustworthy to be recruited, but Iskander was too refulgent with ancient honour to strike down a former friend and classmate without observing some form of protocol.

I pulled the knife out of my pocket and stabbed the guard with slashing backhands into his face and neck, jumped through the open window and landed awkwardly before jumping up and running as quickly as I could towards the sealed north gate.

I knew the terrain and the temporary hiding places. I knew the maze of ramshackle adobe houses that still dominated our town, stacked up on the side of the Green Mountain for centuries. All I needed to do was escape from the government complex.

Iskander would never win, I thought. In his mania for glory, he had even lost the urge to survive. The PLA would eventually arrive and strike him and his men down like gnats. And all I had to do was *live*. I scaled the gate but fell on my behind. I sat there for a few moments, waiting for the gunshots.

Nothing happened.

I looked back. No one was there. I climbed the gate again, more slowly this time, and landed with a thump on the other side before running into the town.

I grabbed as much food as I could from the small plantations outside the houses. The residents had clearly fled.

14.

Li and his two surviving men – Feng and Tu – looked weak and despondent when I returned.

I dropped a sack of scraps in front of them. “There’s another one,” I said, “but we need to ration.”

Li nodded suspiciously, and pointed his gun towards me. “What’s happening up there?”

“No sign of the PLA,” I said between deep breaths. “Chaos. The separatists have the town. We have to stay down here.”

"What about the other groups?” Li asked, chewing an old potato and pawing at the juices on his chin. “They are still fighting?"

“No sign of them.”

I learnt later that the few remaining survivors of the Patriotic People’s Muslim Alliance, created by us and decimated in the Battle of Grapevine Square a few weeks earlier, had thrown in their lot with the ETPRP, that they had come to the decision that the chaos of the Cultural Revolution was the perfect stage to work their split. Wang Enmao was right: Xinjiang was too fragile to play these political games. Special treatment was still required.

Under strict supervision from Feng, I was allowed to untie Iqbal, who had been thrown in the antechamber.

“Of course I remember Iskander,” Iqbal said, “but I always believed he was dead. I never believed all those stories about him. Suppose that means they were true.”

"Yeah, not all of them I suppose. The one about him fighting his way out of prison with just his bare hands. He said they just let him go. Something about fighting the Russians."

And we talked about his mother, who was now dead, and about my uncle, who was now dead, and about Salma, who was now dead.

"She loved the attention," Iqbal said sadly. "It didn't work for her when there was only one of us."

The days passed. The food dwindled. Li accused Tu of eating more than his fill. Tu suddenly stood and hit Li across the face with the handle of his pistol. Iqbal, much to my surprise, then stood up and smashed his fists against Feng, grabbing a rock and hitting it against his skull. "You called me a dog," he said, "you wouldn't give me food."

Tu told Iqbal to stop. "Don't kill him," he said.

Feng pulled out his pistol and fired, grazing Iqbal's thigh. I raced forward, kicked the gun out of Feng's hand and then kicked him in the face. He gave out what sounded like a groan of contentment before slumping to the ground.

Iqbal limped forward, screaming, and picked up Feng's gun. He spat down on Feng's prostrate body.

Iqbal said Tu had approached him, said Feng and Li were planning to kill all of us as soon as I returned with food and information.

"He told me to keep a close eye on what he did and be ready to help out when the moment came," Iqbal said.

"Tu said there's money here," Iqbal whispered breathlessly. "Dollars. Gold. Who knows? That's why they are all still here, why they haven't run away. I heard Li talking. He knows he's dead if he

goes back. He's talking about fleeing. Getting out of the country."

Li, bound and gagged, licked his wounds for a few days, moaning about betrayal, staring into the distance.

"We have to kill them," Iqbal said in the anteroom. "Tu can't be trusted. He's on our side now, but for how long? You can see them brooding. Thinking. Waiting to kill the both of us. We've got to get them first. Or get out of here."

"You know? I'm sure there is another way out of here."

I left the antechamber and crawled into a dank tunnel leading away from the two main caves. I wandered through the streams of the *karez*, elated by the feeling of cold water on my toes. After about a hundred yards I saw a chink of light above, but climbing up to it was too dangerous. The rock was loose and could easily have collapsed.

I returned to the antechamber and felt a sharp thudding blow on the back of my head.

15

Dazed, I heard a gun being fired and then the soft, waning sound of Iqbal's voice, and a body slumping quietly to the ground.

I opened my eyes and turned around and saw Li and Feng, smiling.

"Stand up," Li said.

I rose and saw Iqbal's body in the corner of the chamber, and began to walk towards it – not quite instinctively, but because I couldn't think of anything else to do.

Li struck me in the face with his fist.

I looked at him, hurt, and hesitated for a few moments – considered my cowardice, my weakness, my fears - before finally deciding to strike back.

He stepped back and my fist hit the air. I'd taken so long to persuade myself to act, and he knew it. He could see the pause, the threshold between civilization and violence that I had just strained so hard to cross. For him there was no threshold at all. He blocked my feeble second punch with ease and instantly spotted the panic that had appeared in my eyes, that dawning sense that I had slipped into an argument I had no hope of winning and conducted in a language I had never mastered. A rain of blows followed from him and Feng, concussive but never conclusive. I fell to the ground, conscious enough to notice the blood – mine or Iqbal's – as it seeped into the dirt.

I was tied up and closely watched. "Keep an eye on this one, he knows his way around," Li said to Feng.

It turned out that Feng had persuaded Tu to untie him. Together, they had discussed the way they would kill Li and the rest of them and then flee with the stockpile of cash they claimed had been hidden in one of the adjoining rooms. As soon as Feng was set free, he dashed Tu's brains out with a rock.

I was shut in the darkness for at least twenty-four hours. It was impossible to tell exactly how long. They gave me no water, even though I could hear it trickling through the *karez*. I had no idea what Li and Feng were plotting, nor why they hadn't killed me yet.

I kept thinking – we had tried to persuade ourselves that this was a new kind of struggle, but we had merely added to the complications that had been scored into our history. Our world had been invaded, besieged, razed, raped, pillaged, blended, assimilated.. Revolution. *Inkalavi*. The same thing but worse, and somehow faster. It was supposed to be a rupture of history, but it was just a change in personnel. And here everybody is, trying so desperately hard to prove to themselves and others that everything has changed, and that historical ideas like compassion and justice can be abandoned in the same way that we abandoned feudal superstition.

We had failed to realize that thousands of "former people" and a myriad of bad elements had done exactly the same. Atub Beg, Sheng Shicai, Genghis Khan, Muhammad, Marx and Mao: all trying to erase the past, or to sanitise it, to create a story that puts themselves at the head of an inexorable historical movement.

I thought of Islam, with its intricate codes and rituals and hierarchies inscribed in the minds of all those who were brought up to believe in it. And that was it, that was *all* they had. It was natural, I thought, that they should use it as a weapon. That of course is why the instincts of the Communist Party was to raze the entire thing to the ground, despite all the pieties about respecting religions. Sitting in the depths of the city, I realised I was at a nadir of a *reductio ad absurdum*. The turmoil, and my place in it, seemed a logical inevitability, the culmination of an ineluctable dialectic process.

I was brought up without Islam, but I could suddenly understand the comforts it could bring – to have this terrifying, angry, vengeful *djinn* perched on your shoulder as the troops march in and take away everything you have.

After a while, all I could think of was the water, the slow swish of the *karez* seemed to follow the rhythm of my thumping head. The words kept descending on me: in the name of the merciful, in the name of the compassionate. Begging to God was a reflex. I tried to calm myself down, to divest myself of all self-regard and work out what had truly happened.

But what was the difference between truth and falsehood? Everything that flowed into my head seemed arbitrary, contingent, one empty drip falling on another by chance. There was stone and rock and water and more rock, and I imagined myself surging along the waters, beginning at the mountain and flowing into the caves. Suddenly, nothing I had ever done could be attributed to me. Pride and shame floated away. It no longer mattered that I was Ahmet, son of Ablaz, a respected member of

the Communist Party now held captive in the catacombs of Yeshiltagh while Iskander and his mob from the East Turkestan People's Revolutionary Party waited for the PLA to grant them release and martyrdom above ground. I could have been with them, could have been their killers, could have been in Mecca, could have been Mao or Muhammad. All, I thought, was chance –

I heard shouting, and then a gunshot.

The door swung open and a dim light swelled into the dungeon. It was Li. I looked up, wearily. "So, it was Feng this time was it?"

"Stand up," he barked, cutting the rope that bound my hands and legs.

I stood up and walked out of the chamber. Feng's lifeless body lay there.

"I could just kill you – but I *like* you," Li said. "Who would have thought it? That you, who always hated me, would be the only one I could really *trust*?"

I gulped. Had Li finally gone mad? Had that history of "neurosthenia" and psychosis finally tripped something in his brain?

"If we get out of here, we have to get our story straight," he said, quickly but emphatically. "We can even be the *heroes* in all this, but we need to *help* each other."

He plucked out a few turnip leaves from the sack and handed them to me. "I need your help, you need my help," he said. "Even if I get out of here, I will never be able to find my way around. You have friends here, still? You can get me to Urumchi. No. To the *border*. then I won't bother you again."

He said if they were caught, everything could in any case be blamed on Feng, who was known to be

a reprobate and a criminal, who would be in jail if he – Li – had not vouched for him and brought him into his team.

I said nothing, and focused on the barrel of his pistol.

"Iqbal blamed you," he said. "He died thinking his best friend had betrayed him."

"What difference does it make?" I muttered. "Just kill me."

"You know?" Li said. "You think you're the smartest. You're actually the most dangerous. I know your type. Naturally insubordinate but an innate coward. The worst possible combination."

"I'm the coward?"

"Yes. You end up making all kinds of compromises, trying to convince yourself that you are doing the right thing. All the time something is burning inside you. You are a coward who hates his own cowardice."

He pointed the gun at my head and pulled the trigger. The barrel was empty.

He cursed and hit me again. I lost consciousness and seemed to sleep for days. By the time I woke up, Li had gone.

16.

Perhaps Li had escaped to the border with a sack of ill-gotten loot, or perhaps he was arrested and executed shortly after returning to the surface. In any case, I was the only official survivor of the "Bloodbath of Yeshiltagh", as it is still referred today. I believe I would have been shot if only they were a little better organized, and a little less preoccupied with restoring social order. I was accused of stirring up "splittist elements" and "endangering national security". It became clear that the requirements of the state and the imperatives of the revolution were not exactly the same thing, and were the latter ever likely to jeopardise the former, they would be abandoned forthwith. Across the country, the army had taken over from the students. The Red Guards had been sent into exile, supposedly to "learn from the peasants" but in truth, just to get them out of the way as the army sought to reverse some of the damage they had done.

By the end of 1967, thousands of Uighurs were fully armed – possibly with the caches supplied by Li - and were still waging brutal but ultimately futile battles against the PLA. Outposts were blown up with grenades. Supply routes were booby-trapped. Army trucks were hijacked. Yeshiltagh suffered its worst winter in decades and the residents were burning everything. The boulevards had been stripped of trees. The wooden dais on the town square had been destroyed and burned. The usual supplies of coal were not coming in, and the

remaining residents were forced to huddle together. They weren't starving, not like before, but lived only on gruel and old cabbage, the taste long since frozen out of it after being left for weeks in the gutters.

Iskander and his band of romantics were ultimately wiped out in a brutal assault on Yeshiltagh by a team of special PLA forces ordered to inflict as much damage on the town as possible. But there was little left to destroy. In the end, only the government building itself remained standing.

The military affairs commission issued a directive on January 28, 1967 - declaring that the Cultural Revolution would be ended in Xinjiang.

17.

I saw my father shortly before his death. His existence seemed pathetic. Lonely and besieged in the same bungalow in which I had grown up, he was fighting the authorities who were trying to demolish his home in order to extend the grounds of a chemical plant that had been erected outside. At least he died before the fight was finally lost.

It was the first time I'd seen him in fourteen years. Even if he had wanted to visit me during my imprisonment, the authorities wouldn't have let him. As part of the conditions of his rehabilitation in 1977, he had been forced to denounce me as a "leftist opportunist" with links to the Gang of Four.

"Islam needs to be controlled with an iron hand," he said by way of reprimand for a disaster he seemed to blame entirely on me. "It is a movement that spreads like wildfire."

"It was a weapon, and it remains a weapon," he said. "To lose control over your country – that, after a while, can be accepted, because countries are just fictions, myths. But losing control over your history cannot be accepted. And that is what we sought to do. To subdue them all with our own version of history. That's what it was in the end: a war between our history and theirs."

Only a hundred years ago we were still tribesmen, nomads. This, as my father used to say, was the cost of progress. Was it worth it? If it wasn't the Chinese, it would have been the Russians, and if not the Russians, the British or the Americans, and

if not the British or the Americans, then the Persians or the Mongols, and if not the Persians or the Mongols, then ourselves. We'd have torn ourselves apart. History would have sundered us as bitterly and as surely as the Chinese Communist Party.

Things change whether you want them to or not, but changes are far better when they belong to you and not to the foreign tanks and steamrollers that are now surging across your town.

When I left Xinjiang, and China, in 1984, Yeshiltagh was already being run by hoodlums. I took advantage of my ethnic minority status, and my father's contacts, and managed to get out on one of the country's first state-sanctioned *hajj*. I never returned. On the route to Mecca, a crew of fellow Uighurs from Turkey pried us from our minders and allowed us to sink into the crowd and disappear.

Since all this passed – seven years or so in Ankara, followed by more than a decade working as a translator in New York – not a single day has gone by without my being overwhelmed by it all. I have thought about death constantly. It isn't that I have nothing to live for – it is more the indelible sense of shame, that only death can absolve.

Back home for the first time in 25 years, I traverse the desert roads and stare into the sand as it merges with the sky. The *djinn* are everywhere, I used to think, and I try to convince myself that *djinn* is all we are, all I am. Life is just a series of random and disconnected events that we try to take credit for. Continuity is all in our heads.

I never felt comfortable anywhere, not with nationalism, not with communism, not with Islam. I

suppose I am fortunate that after everything, this still pleases me. My beloved uncle Samir used to say that Xinjiang was the region of heresy, and that is true, as far as it goes. But heresies are everywhere. Orthodoxy is just heresy by the powerful.

Returning to Yeshiltagh, I try to return to the bungalow where I grew up. But it is now a chemical processing plant half-owned by a Shanghainese businessman and the son of the deputy-head of the local Party. The purple hills are still there. By now, there are slogans carved into the earth urging us to save water or plant trees or abstain from drugs or stop stealing state property. Chunks of rock have been gouged out by the quarries and used to build the roads that will enable Yeshiltagh to be just like anywhere else.

The Green Mountain itself has not been green for a long time. The trees have been ripped from its slopes, the rock and mud has been gouged out. The monkeys that used to scale it have disappeared – hunted, slaughtered, driven away.

The *djinn* have died too. As an old man, I stand where our old bungalow used to be and I remember the ghosts soaring through the desert and whispering silently in our ears as our cities and towns rumbled and raged and our bellies grumbled with hunger.

No more – for me at least.