

# Chapter 15

# The Knock at Dawn

A Japanese writer once wrote a short article titled "The Midnight Knock," discussing how unpredictable a person's fate can be. This was likely in Japan before the Second World War, when there was a so-called "white terror" threatening left-wing individuals. At that time, there were no televisions, radios, or phones, so after nightfall, people could only read, chat, or sleep. Night owls weren't as common as they are today. Imagine if, in the dead of night, someone knocked on your

door—what would happen? Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky was arrested in a similar manner by the police and narrowly escaped execution. In Fengxiang's Jingcun Middle School, incidents like these also occurred from time to time. However, there's no need to always be pessimistic. That Japanese writer mentioned that perhaps the person knocking could be bringing unexpected good news. For instance, your unmarried aunt who passed away might have left you as the sole inheritor of her estate.

The sound of a knock at midnight can make your heart race—will it bring disaster or good news? Perhaps it's neither; maybe an old friend arrives bearing a bottle of fine wine, with the mood of asking, "Would you like a drink before the snow comes at night?"
I also had a similar experience, which happened in the early hours of the morning. It wasn't good news or fine wine from a friend—it was a brush with incarceration. I've never shared this story with anyone, as after retiring from the Air Force, I worked in state-run enterprises controlled by the

Party and any hint of connection with "bandits" would've cost me my job. Now that I have no job to lose, I'm not afraid of losing it anymore. Let me tell you truthfully.

The incident took place in the autumn of the 42nd year of the Republic of China. I had been married for just over a year, and my wife was expecting our first child. I can't recall the exact date but it might have been the day after watching "The White-Haired Girl." Reflecting on it now, it's been less than four years since arriving in Taiwan, and just

sixteen years since the start of the War of Resistance against

Japan on July 7th (七七, Lit.

"seven-seven"). Those sixteen years were difficult to endure, filled with many memories. For someone my age, though, sixteen years of living seems relatively manageable. As time has passed, nearly six years have gone by since leaving my job, yet nothing worthwhile or memorable has happened. Apparently, the easy days fly by while the times of hardship drag on endlessly. And during times of collective poverty, a person in power must derive

some sense of peace and contentment from witnessing the suffering of others—that's how my imprisonment occurred, inflicting a bit of pain on my wife, friends, and me, solely for the fleeting happiness of that person of authority.

The knock at the door came from the clerk from our meteorological station, with the borrowed Jeep parked outside. He said there was an urgent matter, and the station chief wanted me to come by. When I asked what the urgency was about, he didn't know. So, I got

into the Jeep and told my heavily pregnant wife that I would be back soon.

When I arrived at the meteorological station, the chief didn't show his face but had someone remove my shoulder boards—I was a captain at that time. Having graduated five years prior, passing the normal promotional exams could lead to becoming a captain. They took off my captain's shoulder boards and made me get into the Jeep to be taken to the military court.

"What? What military court?"

"You've violated military law. The station chief reported it up the chain of command; you're being sent for legal processing."

"What military law did I break?" I was on the verge of getting angry, almost wanting to punch the clerk in the face. Yet, at that moment, I heard my wife's voice in my mind, "Don't act impulsively, don't speak, don't reveal weaknesses, especially any thoughts you might have. Remember, your wife is pregnant with a child; this is no

time to be a martyr." So, I had to reluctantly request, "Could you please take me home first to let my wife know?"

"The station chief said to take you straight to the military court."

And that's how the Jeep drove me to the guardhouse, where the clerk took care of the paperwork, then left in the original car while passing me off to the prison staff. This must've been the so-called prison guard? Clad in military uniform, he had me remove my hat, followed by handing over

my belt, any small items from my clothes, including loose change. They collected everything and placed it in a large paper bag labeled with my name and number, sealed it, and set it on a shelf beside my cap. Without being issued a set of the typical striped prison uniform, I was left in my original military outfit and led into the cell. Inside the cell were five other people, with bunk beds, a squat toilet, and a basin with a faucet attached. The details of my five cellmates will be discussed later; first, let's talk about the station chief who orchestrated

my imprisonment.

His last name was * (omitted), and I won't mention his first name. He was in his forties and was my senior in training, having qualified as a meteorologist after six months of training. He had attended my wedding, and I vaguely remember him commenting, "Your wife is very beautiful!" There were no formal congratulations or pleasantries apart from that. Whether he was married or not was unknown to me, but I do know we held the same rank of captain. When the military

judge asked if we were of the same rank, I answered in the affirmative. It seemed he enjoyed his role as the station chief, sometimes drinking peanuts and drink during office hours. What exactly went through his mind at those times, I couldn't fathom. Did he yearn for his homeland on the mainland? Did his wife and children remain behind there, separated for over four years, causing him inner torment? I have no way of knowing. Regardless, there must've been some reasons beyond his control.

As I entered the cell, almost simultaneously, my five cellmates asked:

"What did you do?"
"I don't know."

These three words sparked five different reactions from my cellmates. During that era, when involved in cases related to bandit activities, not only should you prepare yourself mentally, but others would also know to keep their distance. They seemed to understand the meaning behind "I don't know" and refrained from further probing. However, they

couldn't resist discussing among themselves.

So, being assigned to the top bunk, the limited space on the ground didn't allow me to "pace around the room" like a caged animal fresh in captivity. Climbing onto the bed, devoid of any belongings, let alone a blanket, I sat cross-legged. Failing to engage in any pretense of tidying up or anything productive, I instead exchanged friendly glances with each of my five cellmates and listened to their conversations.

They seemed to reach a conclusion that I was not involved in bandit activities because only one bandit suspect had been held in the detention center before and was transferred out the next day. While the place was named a "detention center," it functioned more like a large prison for serving sentences; for example, a convict sentenced to seven years for corruption had already served half their term there but had yet to be transferred to a formal prison. If it was related to bandit activities, they would likely be swiftly sent

elsewhere.

It was one of the most unbearable nights. While they believed I shouldn't be a bandit suspect, I couldn't be sure. Self-reflecting, I acknowledged I was at least an associate of the "bandits," but then I thought about the depiction often seen in movies or novels where suspects were tortured to extract confessions, especially to reveal their accomplices. Should I confess, or should I emulate a true hero and remain silent till the end? Even if I were to confess, they would have no power over me.

The only ones I could implicate were Li Yulin and Ma Dingxiang, who were not in Taiwan. Similarly-minded individuals I knew in Taiwan hadn't crossed paths with me in the past three years.

There might not even be a need to confess anything, as they could quickly impose the death penalty. I recollected witnessing many differently-reacting individuals who faced execution during my junior high years in Baoji. Some bravely sang lines from Peking Opera along the way, even stopping to ask for food or drink from

shops while being escorted, as they were already bound and had to be fed by accompanying soldiers. However, some condemned criminals were less dignified, already collapsing and needing support as they walked through the streets. Our classmates mostly joined from another street, and at the West Gate, some refused to kneel, prompting the person behind to nudge them with a knee, while others instantly knelt upon orders, immediately collapsing when released—truly a pitiful sight.

As for me? I had to brace myself and not crumble embarrassingly before my execution or disgracefully in death. At the very least, before facing the firing squad, I had to muster the courage to shout: "Long live the People's Republic of China!"

Lost in thought all night, that night, the muse didn't visit me. I noticed that she seemed to be absent precisely when her presence was most needed.

The next morning, I can't recall what I had for breakfast, as it was over fifty years ago.

Shortly after breakfast, perhaps around mid-morning, I was ordered to go outside, as someone wanted to see me. In the visiting room, I found my wife and my good friend from class, Mr. L. At that time, my wife was only twenty-one, carrying a six-month-old child in her belly. Looking back now, twenty-one still seems like such a young age. Mr. L was mature beyond his years, unlike me and my wife's immaturity. He informed me that he knew the details of the incident, had evidence to support my innocence, and reassured me that everything

would be fine. With a monitor present, he couldn't delve too deep into specifics. My wife also instructed me to take care and trust that everything would be alright.

The assurances of "everything will be fine" or "there won't be any problems" puzzled me. I was completely clueless, especially when Mr. L mentioned "evidence," leaving me baffled - was it about an article I wrote two years ago called "We've Marched 25,000 Miles"? Or something else entirely?

All these mysteries would only be unraveled during the proceeding. Fortunately, the trial swiftly commenced.

The process was worth mentioning; the court wasn't within the detention center, requiring a walk of a few hundred meters without transportation. In fear of the detainee escaping, the guards carried rifles and shackled my legs with heavy chains since I wasn't handcuffed. Regrettably, no one captured this moment on camera; otherwise, a picture or video would have brought a smile to

your face, providing an ample opportunity for a good laugh. Sadly, there's no photographic evidence of such a significant event in my life!

The courtroom was rudimentary, nothing like in the movies. There was only one military judge, with a person at the side, presumably a stenographer. The guards exited the moment I entered, leaving no spectators or defense attorneys. When I glanced around upon my entrance, I felt relieved to find no instruments like shackles present.

The military judge’s dialogue with me that I can recall is as follows:
"You are Feng Pengnian, a meteorological officer in the Air Force holding the rank of captain. Is that correct?"
"Yes."
"You are accused of insubordination before the enemy. Your station chief mentioned insubordination before the enemy is a capital offense. What do you have to say?"
"I don't know." That was the only reply I could come up with.

"You don’t know?" The military judge seemed slightly surprised, checked some documents, and said, "Come over here and take a look." I walked over to inspect a common weather chart I had completed and signed the day in question, containing dates, times, and my signature. The judge inquired, "Is that your signature?"
"Yes, this is a chart I drew and signed, as per the standard procedure."

The military judge, taking a moment to contemplate, asked

further, "Did you have a quarrel with your station chief that day? Both of you are of the rank of captain. Did you commonly display disrespect towards him?"

"No, there was no quarrel. As for respect…" Honestly, while I indeed lacked respect not just for the station chief but other superiors as well, revealing this was not the right course of action. So, I responded, "I can't say I exhibited remarkable respect. Though he is my senior, even though we are both captains, I haven't been particularly disrespectful

towards him."

"He mentioned you refused to work on that day but also attached the weather chart with specific details establishing the date and time, along with your signature. Can you recall what happened that day?"

"Ah, this!" Suddenly enlightened, knowing it wasn't related to eavesdropping on enemy radio broadcasts, I felt much relief. I gently told the military judge, "I remember the incident now."

The judge informed me that there was no such thing as "insubordination before the enemy"; enemy threats are the same for all military personnel irrespective of their branch. Hence, he instructed me to return to the detention center, where he didn't mention a release date.

I stayed in the detention center for a week before being released, where they returned my military cap and personal belongings, including loose change. This whole resolution was thanks to Mr. L's assistance; serving in a higher

meteorological unit, he was aware of the content of the report the station chief made to his higher-ups. Immediately, he submitted the weather chart I drew to the archives, solving the issue of insubordination. As for "insubordination before the enemy," the military judge didn't recognize it as an offense.

Mr. L was only three years older than me, yet he had none of the childish immaturity that plagued me. Deeply understanding me, he said, "Regarding this incident, almost half of our classmates

believed it was related to you being too casual in your speech. And some classmates from the same base as you told me that you definitely wouldn't be detained just for arguing with the station chief; there must have been some underlying issue that led to your arrest. Look, you need to be more careful from now on, don't you think?"

I earnestly listened to my friend's words. Three months later, in mid-January of 1943, my eldest son was born. Since then, I had indeed become more restrained, perhaps to

the point of feeling suppressed, producing a "peacock-like" self-blame.

After retiring, my good friend Mr. L went into the trade of handicrafts and prospered. Among over a hundred of our batchmates, he became the wealthiest. Now, he spends his twilight years peacefully in Vancouver.

As for my station chief, he retired early. Whenever we met, he warmly embraced me, creating a facade of friendship. I greeted him with a smile, leaving the past behind without

bringing up any previous conflicts.

In that era of continuous suffering for the Chinese people, who didn't harbor some hidden grievances to varying degrees? How could I truly fathom the torment in his heart? I happened to be the outlet for him to vent his frustrations.