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GIRL  
UNDER  
A RED  
MOON

DA CHEN

SCHOLASTIC  
FOCUS  
NEW YORK

# Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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**LATE 1960s**  
**SOUTHERN CHINA**

Sisi awoke to Grandpa's hacking coughs from his bedchamber across the courtyard. It was still dark. The cold spring morning must have chilled Grandpa's lungs. He would want his hot tea soon.

She rolled out of her bed and lit a kerosene lantern. Hurriedly, she put on the set of matching blue jacket and trousers that Mama had stitched for her during last Spring Festival; they were her newest clothes. It was the Red Guards' Dedication Day at her middle school, and she had to wear her best clothing.

## DA CHEN

She gazed at herself in a narrow mirror and saw that her trousers had shrunk so that the bottoms barely reached her ankles. She tugged the waistband down a little and pulled the tops of her socks up, then scrutinized herself again. It would have to do, she decided, as Grandpa coughed violently. The sound of thick phlegm hitting the spittoon followed.

Lantern in hand, Sisi quickly entered the courtyard, where a pale moon gleamed behind the gentle arc of the roof and illuminated the paving stones, dewy from the sea breeze, and the courtyard well, sunken years ago by Grandpa.

She hung the lantern on an iron hook and tossed the tin can, tied to a rope, down the narrow mouth of the well and listened to it clink its way down to the bottom. She pulled on the rope and noted that the night tide had raised the water. The first draw of the day would be full and sweet, ideal for brewing Grandpa's tea.

Baba used to get up early to warm Grandpa's tea, but he had been sent away for another year of hard digging at Yellow Stone Labor Camp. With each political movement, which came now in surges, the commune cadres would arrest old regulars like Baba and send them away to dig irrigation ditches up in the mountains. Sisi had taken on the duty of rising early so Mama could stay in bed a bit longer. Mama toiled late into the night on her sewing machine, making clothes for her customers.

At thirteen, Sisi was the eldest. My brother, Jin, twelve, was next. Then came my sisters, Keke, eleven, and Huang Huang, ten. I, Da, was the youngest at eight. Due to the wide age gap, Sisi was thrust into a motherly role and often treated me like a young son instead of a little brother.

I shared a bedroom with Sisi, and the usual morning noises could be easily heard through the thin door she left ajar.

## DA CHEN

Sisi poured the cold water into a kettle and lit a bundle of rice straw, making a fire in the earthen stove. Grandpa's wooden door squeaked open, and in the dim light, his thin, shadowy figure shuffled toward her. His wooden sandals dragged along the cold stone, and his breath labored audibly. Ever since he had contracted a lung ailment, he'd been breathing like an old rusty saw. Frequent coughing spasms would leave him shaking like a windblown tree.

He mumbled his thanks as Sisi pulled out a bamboo stool for him. He sat, looking like an old sage, the light from the fire sparking a glint in his deep-set eyes and highlighting his sharp cheekbones and prominent nose ridge. He looked like a hungry cave-man seeing day's first light.

Sisi lit his water pipe, and he puckered his lips and sucked hard and deep on his pipe, making the tobacco burn furiously with dancing little fizzles that brightened the semidarkness. He held the smoke inside his chest, letting it infiltrate and

satiate every particle of his inner tissues before releasing it all out again like two tusks from his flaring nostrils with a glazed look of satisfaction, ready now for the chilly day.

The water boiled, shaking the kettle lid frantically with steam.

Sisi retrieved a folded wad of paper hidden behind a bundle of rice stalks next to her seat and pinched up a few leaves, dropping them inside his teapot. She poured the hot tea into his cup. Just as quickly, he re-poured the tea back into the teapot. Never the first brew, always the second one, he constantly said.

After a short wait, he filled his cup and drank it down swiftly in one gulp. He sighed with satisfaction and asked her to pour another cup for Grandma. Rising on shaky legs, he took the cup she filled and started shuffling back to his room, muttering something about Grandma's demonic cancer.

Sisi heard the door squeak closed, followed by Grandma's low groan and the protesting rustle of the

## DA CHEN

dry rice-stalk mattress as Grandpa sat down next to her. There was the soft sound of slurping and the ensuing sigh of temporary relief.

Sisi started cooking rice porridge for the family. Placing the blackened wok on the stove, she filled it with water, then fed the earthen stove some more stalks. She scooped up the last cup of rice from the urn, washed it, and poured it into the wok. Mama would be worrying about the impending shortage; Sisi sighed as she fed another bundle of dried stalk into the fiery belly.