**Dominance**

The headmistress possessed fine-boned elegance. That had been agreed upon by Lin and the girls, who wanted fine-boned elegance and every other attribute of hers for themselves. Standing next to the headmistress, The Leader just looked plump and arrogant. Lin saw it all change within an hour. From the moment that she started watching the two of them outside the assembly hall, she felt things starting to slide.

It was clear that he was doing all the talking and the headmistress was having to listen. She was a quiet woman anyway, that was one of her gifts, but in this case Lin doubted that she was quiet out of choice. The conversation was not between equals. Lin got closer, pretending to make her way to the door of the assembly hall and she listened without looking over.

“Don't let them read their own books. Set a text and get them to read aloud. Reading aloud is the way to learn to pronounce words properly.”

“Yes,” said the headmistress and Lin longed to look now, because it surely wasn't possible that she could even simulate belief in such an idea. She encouraged the girls to read all the time and to write their own poetry and stories. Reading out loud, which they had done a lot in their previous schools, now seemed babyish.

The Leader's own pronunciation wasn't even very good. They had listened to him on the radio many times and he often sounded bored and unemotional and not even very educated. They had discussed this amongst themselves but not with the headmistress, though they were sure that she would be of the same opinion.

The girls gathered in the assembly hall. Lin was one of the last in. There were no prefects, but she knew she would have been one if the system had allowed. All of the girls of her level were in a group which had extra tuition on non-specific subjects- known as Cultural Studies but not called that on any timetable- given by the headmistress. Now, in the assembly hall, the group sat in the front row and tried to look implacable and fine-boned like her. Yet already Lin was not so happy with that image. Already it felt less infallible.

The Leader was applauded and immediately launched into his speech. He spoke without notes but also without any sense of drama. His plumpness and closed expression suited his voice, which nonetheless after ten minutes became mesmeric. Despite the dull tone there was an absolute sureness about what he said. The phrases were familiar, soft exhortations to be dutiful and disciplined and resist bourgeois temptations. All eyes had to be straight ahead, but Lin wished again that she could look at the headmistress. The Leader may have been talking to her more than to the pupils. Was she a bourgeois woman? Not in her manner or her private life as far as could be observed, but maybe it was more subtle than that. Now that Lin had seen the way The Leader had acted towards her, so sternly, without the deference which everyone- pupils, teachers, parents, ancillary workers- always showed, the world had shifted. Lin didn't feel defensive on behalf of her supposed mentor. She felt disappointment in the lack of strength.

He continued to speak for over an hour and the room was his. After the speech, there was a meeting with the girls like Lin, the ones who were senior but not officially acknowledged as such. The headmistress escorted The Leader to a classroom and then there was a pause of a few seconds. The Leader and his entourage looked at her and she looked back, smiling. It was a different kind of smile entirely to the one to which the girls were accustomed.

One of the entourage nodded at her and this clearly meant that she was to leave now. She nodded too, bowed almost and she walked away, watched by everyone. Then the door was closed and the girls sat down while The Leader spoke.

It wasn't much different to what he had said in the assembly hall, but now he asked questions too. It was clear enough what answers were expected.

“What is more important? Listening to music on the radio or studying?”

“Studying!”

“Which subject is most beneficial: languages or mathematics?”

“Mathematics!” There was no language option anyway.

They continued and there was a certain delight in the childishness of the call and response routine. The Leader didn't smile but it felt good to please him and to be in agreement. Lin felt happy and she stopped thinking about the headmistress. Then The Leader asked a harder question

“What do you do if you are taught bourgeois ideas?”

They didn't respond as a group this time, it demanded a different kind of answer, not a simple yes/no. Lin had trouble with the word 'bourgeois'. In effect it seemed to mean anything bad, anything which they should not believe in, but beyond that she didn't know how to define it. Laziness was bourgeois, gorgeous clothes were bourgeois, music and art and books could often be bourgeois, though that was where it started to get more difficult to make a judgement.

“You,” said The Leader to Lin. He said it quietly, but it frightened her. She resentfully sensed the relief of all the other girls. She couldn't think about the question for a moment. Why had he picked on her? Because she was at the front, or because she looked the most confident? Or he might have spotted her after all when she had eavesdropped on his conversation with the headmistress earlier.

“A bourgeois idea,” she said. She tried to speak clearly. “It's not a good thing to be taught, it must be rejected.”

“Good,” said The Leader.

Lin nodded and felt calmer but suddenly exhausted. She wanted the meeting to end, to get out of the room without having to answer any more questions.

“How would you reject it?” he asked.

“We would not follow the idea,” said Lin. “We would not be persuaded.”

The Leader nodded and looked at her and his eyes closed a little, making him look slyer. She knew it had been a non-committal answer but she didn't know what he wanted to hear. She wished that she did know.

“Do you believe that your school is more successful than others?” he said.

She was nonplussed. This seemed to have nothing to do with the other questions. The school got very good results which had been published in the newspaper and the pupils had been congratulated and photographed with men from the local administration

“We are successful,” she said.

“More successful than other schools?”

“Yes.”

She didn't know what else success could mean, but The Leader shouted “No!” and the room seemed to shake.

“No?” she said, terrified.

“That is a bourgeois idea,” he said pointing at her. “All schools must be successful, not just one. We must make everything in the country successful. All schools, all factories, all workers, all departments.” He kept on looking at her and she could feel that her mouth was open and her face hot. “We work in unity, not in competition.”

“Of course,” she said. “Yes, we all must be successful.”

There was a moment's silence. She was still nodding, still wanting him to see that she understood. She did understand. She hoped that he could see this, that she wasn't just trying to please him but agreed with all her heart that what he said about success was right.

He turned to address the entire group again.

“So if anyone teaches you bourgeois ideas, then you must reject them.” Lin was pleased that he had picked up on her word. “Reject them. Do what you have to do. Take action.” He stopped and lowered his head. He looked much more menacing now and he must have known it. It seemed he was capable of the drama after all and when it came it was all the more impressive. “Take real action. No-one will stop you.” He shrugged. “If you are right to reject the ideas, no-one will stop you. Not the police, not anyone.” He looked very casual suddenly, as if he hadn't said anything which they didn't already know.

Then the speech came to a close and there was a sudden rush of applause and the headmistress was summoned to escort the guests out. Only when the whole entourage had disappeared down the corridor did Lin sit down on a desk and breathe deeply, while the other girls gathered round and asked her how it had felt, how she had managed to keep her nerve.

They talked jokingly and foolishly for a while and so did she, coming down from the stresses of the previous half-hour. But then they began to discuss what he had said. They talked about him and the entourage and they talked a lot about the headmistress too. No-one said too much, but enough for everyone to know how the group was now thinking.

“Well,” said the headmistress when she returned. “I hope you found that interesting.”

They looked at her. Nobody said anything. Lin wasn't sure if anyone nodded or smiled but she made sure that her own expression offered nothing. If this had happened two hours ago, the girls would all have burst out with nervous and excited chatter and tried to impress. But now things had changed and the atmosphere in the room was weirdly quiet.

“We talked about bourgeois ideas,” said Lin. She knew that someone had to speak. “About the danger of bourgeois ideas.”

“I see.”

“We have to reject them.”

“Of course.”

The strange, icy conversation continued for a few minutes and Lin watched the face of the headmistress. Were there any signs of self-indulgence? Hair-styling, beauty treatments even? In fact there were not, the fine-boned beauty looked natural, but that in itself might be enough to convict her. Lin didn't want to emulate her anymore. This was what bourgeois looked like.

“Shall we go back to our own classroom?” said the headmistress, trying to end the exchange in which Lin had tried to use the word 'bourgeois' in every sentence.

There was a murmur from the other girls, for which Lin was glad. She had clearly taken the part of the organiser, the facilitator, but she needed support. The murmur was not coherent but it expressed a feeling which she could understand, which everyone in the room could understand.

“Why?” she said, sharply.

“To discuss what you have learned this afternoon?” said the headmistress. It was a question and it sounded as if she was asking for permission.

Lin paused for a moment and took a breath. “No,” she said. The silence was even deeper than before. “No, we should study. That's what we need to do.”

Two of the other girls repeated the phrase ‘we should study’ and nodded and then all of their friends nodded too.

“Very well. What do you wish to study?”

“We need to look at test papers,” said Lin. She had an idea. It was harsh and it thrilled her to have invented it so easily. “We need old examination papers. You must copy them for us.”

“I'll dictate them.”

“No,” said Lin, very quickly. “We need the papers, we can't waste time and effort. You can't dictate them, that's not what your here for.” Lin was bewildered by her own behaviour, at the feelings of righteous cruelty which had taken hold of her. “Copy them, then give them to us. We must study.”

The other girls were enthusiastic now. They insisted that they wanted the headmistress to copy the papers for them. No alternative would do. The headmistress look shocked and the skin seemed to be stretched tighter over her high cheekbones. Her eyes didn't water but they looked as though they might and Lin had never seen that before.

“I don't know why you're all behaving like this.”

“We have been told to reject bourgeois ideas,” said Lin. She knew it didn't exactly make sense, that dictating the questions didn't have much, if anything, to do with bourgeois ideas. But the word was like a magic charm. It reminded everyone of The Leader and the power he had passed over to them.

“Well, if that's what you want. This time.”

“Every time,” said Lin. She felt bigger now, physically. “We'll go to the classroom and study what we can but you bring in each test paper as soon as you’ve finished. You should have thought about this before.”

For the second time that day they watched the headmistress walk away. She walked quickly but looked weak enough to stumble.

It took her three hours to copy the test papers for the whole class. Lin looked over each one. They were meticulously copied. She had planned to make some criticisms, but decided that it was best to be fair. She didn't praise the work, but accepted it. It was satisfactory. After the copying was done, the girls only studied for another half-hour. Then they went for supper, washed and got ready for bed. They were allowed to read, but none of them did. They lay down and didn't talk and then the house mistress came up to put out the lights and Lin made plans in the dark. The copying of the test papers had been a success. The momentum had to continue.

The next morning in class, the headmistress was summoned. The class teacher protested but Lin and the girls closest to her insisted and got their way.

“Good morning,” said the headmistress.

“We need to study national history today,” said Lin. She hadn't discussed her plan with the other girls, but it was clear that there was no need, they would agree anyway. “You haven't taught us enough about national history. Bring us all the books from the library.”

“All the books?”

“There is a section, clearly marked.”

“I know. But there are several hundred books.”

“I know. Bring them.”

Lin thought that it was a subject in which they were genuinely weak. She wanted to be more knowledgeable about the issues The Leader had raised. She wanted to know about the meaning of bourgeois and its opposites, the concrete meanings and examples so she could make speeches about them to the other girls. The Leader had spoken for an hour without notes and it sounded as if he could have spoken for another ten hours. That was how expert she wished to become eventually, after years of disciplined study. The fact that national history was the biggest section in the library was a convenient coincidence.

They sat in the classroom while the headmistress fetched the books, carrying six at a time, on Lin's orders, so that there was less of a risk of her dropping them.

“Books are valuable,” said Lin.

“Yes,” said the headmistress

The class teacher wanted to help but Lin said they needed to have a teacher in the classroom with them, it would be wrong to leave the pupils by themselves. They were just girls, liable to get up to all kinds of nonsense. The teacher looked unhappy, unable to agree or disagree.

It was cold out and the headmistress was shivering each time she came into the classroom to put more books on the table. After ten journeys Lin looked up from her desk and told her she could have a cup of hot tea.

“Thank you,” said the headmistress.

“And make everybody one while you're in the kitchen.”

There was soft laughter from the girls, for the first time. This was the kind of spite that they might indulge in against a weaker pupil. She made the tea and brought it in and after quickly drinking hers, returned to the drudgery of her task. The girls drank their tea and took a break from studying. They discussed possibilities. The class teacher was told to wait outside, she was now allowed to leave her charges alone as long as she was close by. The girls plotted diligently.

Progress was swift. Lin had thought that she might build up her new regime over a number of weeks but even within one day things escalated. In the afternoon, the headmistress was told to move bricks from a yard at the back of the school into a shed.

“They've been there for too long, for no reason,” said Lin. “And they shouldn't be there.”

This time the class teacher was allowed to help and several other members of staff too. The message had spread very effectively. To the girls' delight it had started to rain and they watched six adults traipsing back and forth, their pale hands- usually used to nothing heavier than pens and chalk- dirtied by mud and brick-dust.

“You need to know what it is like to be a worker,” said Lin. She was addressing them after the bricks had been moved. “Your lives are very easy, you don't understand the effort and value of real, substantial work which benefits the country. If you don't understand these things, how can you teach us?”

They looked doleful and said nothing. Lin continued with her speechifying. Even after only a few hours of studying the books on national history, she had memorised phrases. She had become quite eloquent and continued for another ten minutes.

“Oh this is intolerable!” shouted the headmistress. “This is a farce. No-one gave you permission to do this!”

There was a swaying of the other teachers, Lin could sense it, a swaying back towards dominance.

“We have permission!” she said. She faced the headmistress and looked into her eyes.

“No. This must stop. It is enough, I should never have let you get away with it.”

“The Leader said we must question bourgeois teaching.”

“This is not bourgeois teaching. You have no idea what you are talking about you little fool.”

“He said we must reject it and no-one would stop us. Not anyone. Not even the police! He said that. Not even the police.” Then Lin stepped forward and slapped the headmistress hard across the face, three times.

The headmistress screamed and held her face and cowered. Some of the other teachers came forward but Lin held up a hand and began to talk very loudly, repeating much of what she had already said but emphasising the leader's words. No-one would stop them, that had been clear. She left no spaces for anyone to interrupt. Physically, the room returned to its previous formation. The girls stood stronger. The teachers were dumb and the headmistress had not yet stood up straight. Lin's hand had cracked against the fine bones.

“I'll punish you as you have punished us,” she said.

“I never punished you,” whimpered the woman.

It was true, but some of the teachers had given out thrashings and the headmistress was responsible for what went on in her classrooms. Lin asked for a belt from one of the girls. The headmistress was dragged forwards. The girls knew what to do, Lin didn't need to give orders. But it was she who had to perform the rituals. She tore the back of the dress, from the neck to the waist.

“No! Please.” The headmistress was weeping now.

“Silence,” murmured Lin.

She thrashed the slim back. Lin had not been thrashed herself for years. She recalled that it was the humiliation rather than the pain that was effective. But it should be painful too. It was justified.

The thrashing was the beginning of a new stage. Lin insisted that everything must be a task or a punishment, not torture, but beyond this the range was unlimited. The teachers were told to scythe an acre of weeds behind the fence at the back of the school yard, while the headmistress, in view of everyone, mowed the grass on the playing fields. She had to wear the gardener's clothes, which were far too big and looked absurd. The boots gave her blisters which bled.

When it rained, Lin said they must check for leaks, so they were sent up to the roof. One of the teachers slid down the wet slates and broke her shin on a metal gutter. One of the other teachers was allowed to take her to the hospital, but all of the others had to carry on working, pretending to find holes and mixing cement to repair them. Lin wondered if the two who had gone to the hospital would try to raise the alarm, but they came back that evening and the injured woman was made to do all the washing up for the day, sitting perilously on a high chair in front of the sink.

“This is what it is like to be a worker,” said Lin during one of her nightly speeches. “This is how to learn the value of work and reject the bourgeois values you have become obsessed with.”

The teachers still had to give classes. The headmistress, now clearly very ill, still had to teach her special group and sat at the front of the room in what had become a parody of her previous role.

Lin discovered the value of anger, of unpredictability, of moments of kindness followed by hysteria. The teachers were exhausted by the physical work and she scorned them. There were beatings most days. When the headmistress tried to remonstrate again, when she yelled at her colleagues that it was time to see sense and put an end to this obscene reversal of the way things should be, Lin had her dragged to the kitchens. She took a pot from the stove and poured boiling water over the shoulders of the headmistress.

Everyone screamed except Lin. She had shocked herself, but she managed to maintain her composure. She looked at the broken woman kneeling before her and holding up her hands, crying out with pain. Lin looked down at her and then she looked across at everyone else. The Leader had been right. No-one would stop her.

After less than two weeks, the headmistress collapsed while digging a drainage ditch. Lin came out to check. She had decided to be in one of her merciful moods.

“Bring water,” she said. “She needs water.”

She knelt down by the side of the woman, whose breaths were shallow and who appeared to have gone into some kind of fit.

“Bring the sweet wine,” said Lin. “And a pillow. And paper and a pen.”

The items were dutifully brought and Lin poured the water and wine and asked quietly, but not so quietly that the others couldn't hear, what her wishes were. Though struggling to maintain consciousness, the headmistress knew what was meant. She dictated messages to her family. She stated where she wanted to be buried.

Lin wrote everything down and watched the headmistress give up life. The girl was dazzled by the possibilities now. Kneeling by the corpse as the sun went down, she held a small picture of The Leader to her chest, like a small god, but a companion too.