

THESE THREE



written by tom PFINGSTEN



Each time a new criminal is escorted into Commissioner Chen's office on the third floor of his police department, the tall, serious chief has a routine. First, he cuffs the suspect to a heavy wooden chair by the door. Then he unpins his badge and sets it just out of sight—behind a stack of reports or in an open drawer. Next he removes his handgun and places it somewhere prominent on the desk, muzzle pointing in the general direction of the perpetrator. Elbows on desktop, arms tilted up into a perfect triangle and, beneath his chin, hands clasped: This is how he sizes up a culprit.

But this one. This one has already received uncharacteristic leniency, including the free use of his little hands. Both gun and badge are out of sight. The commissioner is no stranger to criminals-in-training—at least that's what the deputies call them here in the eastern Chinese province of Anhui. Shoplifters. Worse. It's sad how corrupt some of this city's youngsters are becoming, he thinks. But this one—there's something different about him.

Across the desk a scrawny boy does his best to fill the old wooden chair that's held murderers and grieving mothers in turn. The handcuff marks on his wrists are fading as he struggles to get comfortable, trying somehow to make his arms seem at ease on the armrests, which are up around his shoulders. His feet swing five inches off the ground and he seems strangely content—cheerful even. He compliments Supervisor Chen on his wooden chair, praising its sturdiness. He looks around the office like he's sizing it up for new curtains. He does not seem at all concerned that he's just been arrested, nor that a senior officer is considering him in cold silence.

Finally Chen leans back and squints.

“Okay, boy. How old are you?”

“Eight,” says the boy.

“Eight?” the commissioner replies, eyebrows rising. “You're a small eight. What's your name?”

“Junjie,” he chirps.

Outside the office is a clear view of downtown, where thousands of people are walking to work, haggling with street vendors and enjoying a brief interlude of winter sunshine.

“Well, Junjie,” says the officer, “it's time for you to explain why you were shoplifting this morning.”

A flash of unease crosses the boy's face, but no remorse. He fingers a series of notches carved into the chair by a previous lawbreaker.

“Look,” Chen continues, “if it was just a couple pears, I’m not going to lock you up. But unless you start talking, I will be forced to treat you like any other criminal.”

Nothing.

“All right, let’s get you booked,” says the commissioner, reaching for his telephone.

“Where do I start?” the boy interjects quietly, as if to himself.

The officer loosens his tie and reclines.

“The beginning,” he says.

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Well, first there were the frozen toes, and my nose was throbbing from the cold howling wind that came in from the mountains yesterday to sting any part of me that did not fit into this ratty jacket and sorry shoes that have been too small since last summer.

Smokes and liquor, my father’s two true loves—they and thievery are what keep him alive. Me? I just try to stay warm in the winter and out of trouble the rest of the time.

I’m in trouble now, I know. I know.

But as I was saying: Yesterday. Smokes. Father left me there on the sidewalk—my usual spot—and went inside to buy a pack. I started counting city busses. They run every ten minutes—twelve when it snows—and I had counted at least four when I started to wonder. Usually I see just one and then we’re on our way. But four. I knew something had to be wrong.

I ran up the steps and inside and I remember thinking, so that’s what the shopkeeper looks like. Shorter than I imagined. I asked him where my father was and he just started yelling.

“How old are you?” he said.

I told him ten and he called me a liar.

“You’re no more than six,” he shouted. “And even if you were ten, you couldn’t be in here. I sell liquor and tobacco. You go!”

But I was not leaving until I found that no-good father of mine, and I told him that. Even with the dim light from a single bulb, I could see that he wasn’t in the front of the shop. The owner jabbed his cigarette toward the door to an unlit stock room.

“That’s the only other room in this place,” he said. “Maybe he went in there.”

I stepped quickly toward the back of the store, calling for him.

“Father?” I said. “Are you in here?”

I saw a string and pulled it. Nothing happened for a moment—then a flicker. The room lit up and father wasn’t there. I heard footsteps behind me and turned right into the handle of a broom. It hit my jaw—smack!—and I saw the storekeeper smirk before my head hit a shelf and I blacked out.

I woke up with a sore neck in the back of a strange car. I laid still for a few minutes, trying to recall what had happened. I raised my head enough to see the shopkeeper's face in the rear view mirror, suddenly remembering his sinister face and the crack of the broom handle.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked him. I sat up, angry and scared. I didn't want to let the scared show.

He smiled and grunted. "You think this is the first time I've busted a punk shoplifter?"

I told him it wasn't the first time I'd been busted. I said, "This is illegal, even if I had been shoplifting, which I wasn't. You're just a no-good cashier, you have no right to hit me, take me hostage."

He said I wasn't hostage, said if he'd called the police I would be in the back seat of a car with a sore head anyways. He told me to shut up.

We must have been miles away from the store because I didn't recognize any of the buildings outside the fogged-up windows. It was dusk, and snowing. It had gotten colder. I asked him if he was taking me to the police station.

"You wish." That was the last thing he said, and he was right.

Five minutes later, we turned off the boulevard into an alley and rolled to a stop behind another car, only this one was sleek and black—the kind I've only seen on TV. They drive them in Beijing, Shanghai. Not here.

The shopkeeper killed the engine and honked twice, and three men in expensive clothes got out of the other car. Two of them were tall and muscular, the third was short and thin, like a blade of grass. He had long hair and rings on most of his fingers, and his eyes were blank, like they were saying, Whatever it is, I don't care. He scared me like stray dogs scare me.

When the three men were standing in a line behind their car, facing ours, the shopkeeper seemed spooked—maybe more than me—and after a few seconds, he told me to get out. I shook my head.

"You will exit the car here," he said, turning his head to look at me. I buckled my seat belt. He looked again at the man with the ponytail, who held out a hand, like this, like he was in a hurry. The shopkeeper turned back to me, and I could see panic and anger on his face. He started to say something, then yanked his door open and jumped out into the alley, moving toward the rear door.

I hit the lock, wishing I had already tried to run. The keys were still in the ignition, so I locked the driver's door, as well, sealing myself off from the men in the alley. One of the tall men walked down the right side of the car, crossing his hands in front of him while the shopkeeper kicked the door on my left and cursed. The boss from the black car said something; he didn't sound impressed.

"No, I've got it," said the liquor store man. He took off his jacket and wrapped it around his fist. When he looked at me again through the window, he looked different. "I've got him"—that's what he said.

Then—I couldn't believe it—he punched the glass. It didn't break the first time so he pulled back for a second hit. My heart was already beating hard in my chest, but until then, I hadn't panicked. I had been through worse. As the shopkeeper's fist thudded against the glass a second time,

I knew I was in serious trouble. Through the windshield, I could see the boss man blowing into his hands. Steam from the fancy car's tailpipe filled the alley. The gray dusk grew darker, swirls of snow descended. And I prayed. Mother told me I could if I ever got in trouble.

The shopkeeper's third punch cracked the window in several directions. I looked over just as his arm was swinging for the last time. Little cubes of glass exploded into the car, peppering my face and scattering across the vinyl seat. He stuck both arms through the window, in one motion unbuckling my seat belt and grabbing a handful of my hair. I tried to resist, tried to hold onto the seat in front of me, but he was too strong. He yanked once and I tumbled into the street. My stomach scraped against the broken glass left on the window frame and I noticed several cuts on his arms, as well. I prepared for a beating.

Instead, the next thing I felt was a warm hand on my neck. Then one on my arm. I peeked over my shoulder to see the man with the ponytail crouching behind me.

"You're hurt, child," he said, "but we'll fix you up. Let me see your belly." I rolled over and he pulled up my bloody shirt, then snapped his fingers behind him. One of his men brought a first-aid kit, and he spent the next five minutes cleaning and bandaging my skin. I was surprised by how gentle he was—like a real doctor. He even smiled and made small talk while he was cleaning the cuts, but his eyes were still empty and cold.

When he was done, I sat up and the shopkeeper looked like he would have beaten me to death there in the alley if not for the three strangers. His hands were shiny red from trying to stop the bleeding on his forearms. He stepped forward and reached for the first-aid kit, but the boss man yanked it away.

I remember exactly what he said, because it was the first time he raised his voice. "That's for our clients," he said, "not for half-witted shopkeepers who hurt themselves because of their stupidity." Then he stood up and snapped again, wiping my blood off his hands. A sidekick took the first-aid kit and handed him a roll of bills, hundred-Yuan notes bundled tightly with a rubber band. Then he looked at my kidnapper, who was becoming more anxious by the minute. Tapping the roll of money on his leg, the man looked like he was making a decision.

"Look," said the shopkeeper, "just pay me and I'll go." He held his arms out in front of him; blood was dripping onto the snow. "Look what I've been through today."

The other man scoffed, said he didn't deserve the money. He said, "You deliver me a damaged boy and expect full payment?"

The liquor store man started to say something about me, about being spirited and how that was worth extra, but the boss slapped him and he fell against the brick wall.

"I need unharmed boys!" he shouted. "Unharmed!" He smoothed his coat and his jet-black hair. The shopkeeper was holding his face, and I could see anger returning where a minute ago there was just fear. He bent over like he was going to collapse, inhaled, and then lunged at the ponytailed man. But one of the sidekicks took a fast step forward and punched the shopkeeper in the side of the head with a gloved fist. I admit I did like to see him get handled like that, put down in the snow.

The boss insulted him again, then motioned both of us toward the idling vehicle. I knew I couldn't mess with this guy, so I went. Before all the doors were even shut, the driver hit the gas and we flew out the other end of the alley. I was wedged between the bleeding shopkeeper and one of the hired men in the backseat, but I could see out the front as we weaved at top speed through empty streets and narrow corridors that were obviously familiar to the driver.

After ten minutes, I noticed that the buildings had changed. Instead of storefronts peddling vacuum cleaners and cheap clothes, there were empty industrial hangars on both sides. The driver slowed, slipped between two of the buildings, and honked at the brick wall in front of us. It began to rise, and light flooded out into the street.

Inside was a wide, tall room with several other sleek vehicles and weapons on the walls. When the wall had risen just high enough, we pulled in and I noticed a man flip a switch by a doorway on the far side of the room, lowering it again behind us.

I was the last to exit the car, and when I did someone shoved a cloth bag over my head, fastening both my hands behind me with a plastic tie wrap. I didn't dare struggle. I still wasn't sure what these men wanted with me, but it was not the time to make trouble for myself. When I was prodded, I walked, and the men guided me through several doorways and up a flight of stairs. At one point I knew we had gone outside because of the temperature—freezing, like the night air back in the alley. After a few minutes, we stopped walking, and the bag was removed.

This new room didn't have a single bed or sofa—only three computer workstations and a row of telephones on the wall. It was well-lit and warm, but oddly disturbing. Just standing there, looking around, I thought I was going to pass out. I've been in some tight spots before, had some close calls, but I've never felt anything like what I felt in that room.

I was told to sit, so I sat, sliding to the floor next to a doorway that led into another room with a refrigerator and a sink. As the two sidekicks sat down at their workstations, the boss shouted toward the kitchen.

“We're thirsty, girl,” he yelled.

In a moment, a girl about my age came around the corner with a tray of beverages. She glanced at me as she walked by, and the look in her eyes sent shivers down my spine. It wasn't fear or anger or pain written on her face—it was hopelessness, a blank and distanced stare. She served the men, then tucked the tray under her arm and started back-pedaling toward the kitchen.

“And something for our guest,” the boss told her, nodding toward me. She hurried back a few seconds later with a juice box, holding the straw to my lips. I started to whisper a question, but she shoved the straw in my mouth and squeezed the box. She was watching the men closely, never changing her expression.

She was terrifying, this ghost. Emotionless, calculating and guarded. When she finally looked at me, I had to turn away because her eyes were like knives cutting into my skin. With my hands still bound, I finished the juice and she vanished.

At least an hour passed while the men clicked away on their keyboards and occasionally talked into telephones about prices and locations and times. One of them picked me up and snapped a photograph, the white flash burning my eyes. It was the first time in my life that anyone had taken my picture.

The shopkeeper had cleaned the blood off his arms with paper towels and was dozing in a chair across from me when my bladder began to ache. I told the boss I had to use the bathroom, and he pointed to the kitchen. I rose and walked into the other room, then through another door in the rear. Inside was a Western toilet, the kind they only have in nice restaurants. As I was trying to figure out what to do with my hands tied behind me, I heard the door open.

It was her. My heart began to pound.

“What’s happening?” I asked quietly. “Where am I? Who are those men?”

I felt cold metal against my wrists, then heard a snap. My hands fell free and, for the first time, I saw a flash of feeling cross her face. She spoke only a single word, but it was filled with years of anger and the warning of a wise soul.

*“Run.”*

Then she was gone again. I was in shock, and a little bit scared to attempt an escape, but there was no time to waste. I retied my shoes, trying to remember how many right turns and left turns and steps and doorways had been in our path while I was blindfolded. I knew they would see me as I ran through the room, knew my escape would fail if I encountered anyone in the passages leading out to the street, or if any of the doors were locked.

I breathed deep a few times, then stepped into the kitchen. The girl was not there. From the other room, I heard a crash, glass breaking, a tray hitting the floor. I peaked around the corner and she was thrashing around at the men’s feet. It looked like she was having a violent seizure, and all four men huddled around her, asking each other what to do. Their backs were to me. This must have been part of her plan.

I ran as quietly as I could to the door, and she screamed as I reached it, covering the sound of the knob twisting, the door swinging open and then shut. I was in the first hallway. Finding my way wasn’t as difficult as I had expected; one passage led to another, and only once did I have to choose which way to turn. I chose correctly, and before long I reached the door leading into the garage. I peeked in and the room was empty, no one in sight, so I flipped the switch to the secret garage door, dashed across the room and rolled out into the driveway.

At the corner, I headed right because it seemed like home was that way, and once on the dim boulevard I sprinted for three blocks before I started getting winded. Then I kept sprinting. My legs felt strong, but my head and stomach hurt. I could feel the taped bandage beginning to pull away, and the stinging from the cuts made it painful to move, let alone run.

I hadn’t heard anyone in pursuit when I escaped the building, but after about a minute I saw the black car speed past and skid to a stop in an alley fifty meters in front of me, blocking the sidewalk. As two of the men jumped out of the car, I heard the sound of voices on my trail. It was the shopkeeper and the boss. There was a tall, deserted building on my right that looked dangerous—the kind of place I would never go under normal circumstances. But on either side of the front door was a vertical series of small windowsills, glass broken out, that looked just big enough. The men were closing in on me and I had nowhere else to go, so I dove headfirst through the lowest window to the left of the door.

Once I was through, it was only seconds before the first man reached the door and kicked it hard enough to rattle the doorjamb. So I kept running, dodging through a maze of old, frozen machinery and plastic sheets hanging down from the ceiling. I measured the odds of outrunning four grown men, three in good shape, and decided throwing them off my trail was the only option. As I made my way to the rear of the factory, a plan started taking shape.

I knew there were several floors inside the building, but the only other time I was trying to escape in a place like this, it had been a mistake to go up. If the ground floor is the only one with exits, it is the only hope of a convincing diversion. I had been in the building less than thirty seconds, yet knew exactly what I needed to do. I’m usually not so clever—for some reason, even though I was injured and in unfamiliar territory, I was thinking more clearly. It didn’t make any sense.

As I reached the back wall of the building, I heard the front door crash open. Then voices. I felt along the wall for a door, and the first one I found was locked. The knob on the next door was ready to fall off, so I grabbed it and planned what would come next. Timing was the key. There could be no mistakes.

The men were about halfway through the factory when I pulled on the doorknob. It came off easily, and I kicked the door as hard as I could. Slamming open, it let in a shaft of orange light from a street lamp outside, and I ran back inside the factory toward a stairwell about ten meters away. There was a hollow space filled with garbage beneath the first flight, garbage that I hoped would conceal me and save my life. I burrowed in and cleared a hole in front of my face so I could see.

Three of the four men reached the door around the same time, while the shopkeeper lagged behind, out of breath. The boss stuck his head out the door, then cursed and ordered his men to search the alleys behind the factory. He was furious when he turned toward the man who had knocked me out in his filthy store a couple hours earlier.

“If he goes to the police...” His voice trailed off, trembling with emotion. He kicked a bucket, sent it flying through the cold, musty air. “He’s been to the office! He knows what I look like!”

The shopkeeper cowered. Once or twice, it looked like he was about to talk, but he kept silent. The boss was staring at him like he was already trying to decide how to get rid of the body. “If we don’t find him, you will have proven yourself to be a liability,” he said finally, calmly. “I do not tolerate liabilities.”

Five minutes later, the two men came in from the alley. “Well?” he asked. The smaller one shook his head, and the boss pulled a cylinder of black metal from his coat pocket. His right hand rose in front of him with a pistol, and he threaded the piece of metal onto the end of the gun. The shopkeeper dropped to his knees and begged for his life. He was shaking, crying, and I felt bad for him then. I didn’t want him to die; I wanted him to go back to his store and keep selling cigarettes. But without a word, the man with the ponytail shot him three times in the chest, each shot echoing like a slap through the factory.

I am no stranger to hiding—I hide from my father all the time, that cheap, violent excuse for a man. Less than a week ago, he came home from losing his last Yuan at mahjonn and threw me against the television, which fell to the ground and broke into pieces. He was just getting warmed up when I dove by him, escaped onto the roof of our building and hid until morning.

Maybe you should know some things about him. I wouldn’t say there were never good times. I remember him buying me a popsicle once and smiling down at me as we walked on a summer afternoon. He brought home a bicycle for me last year, and we used to watch the news together sometimes. His fits and abuse are more common, though, and I have scars to show for it. As I’ve grown, he has gone from throwing me to hitting me, and I actually think I prefer to be thrown than hit. Hiding, of course, is one of my best skills after eight years of this.

But until last night, I had never hidden in a pile of trash, and I had never been in the same room as a corpse. It was all happening at once, and all I could think of is whether my father would be angry with me for being gone overnight when I finally got home. Probably will. Probably will bang me up pretty good.

I woke up to light flooding through the open doorway. The air was frigid, but I was surprisingly warm. I guess the garbage was a kind of blanket. I sat up and noticed immediately that the shopkeeper’s body was gone. Could he have survived? No, I saw him lying dead for half an hour

before I'd been able to sleep the night before. I got up and walked toward the doorway, where I saw drops of blood that led outside. In the alley the red dots mingled with footprints in about an inch of fresh snow until they disappeared at a pair of tire tracks.

Avoiding the blood and footprints and tracks, I left the alley and walked into a sunny morning on the boulevard—kept walking until I saw a fruit market. I crossed the road when there was a break in the stream of cars and mopeds, commuters who had no idea what crimes had happened—and almost happened—less than a mile away and eight hours ago.

It wasn't the best market, but there was fruit and I was hungry. I saw a stand of Asian pears that looked untended, and grabbed two. Hurrying away, I bit into one just as I was hit with the business end of a broom. I remember because the bristles stung my ears and neck. When I turned, there was an angry old woman about to swing again, so I threw up my hands and began apologizing. She called the you guys, and I found myself in the backseat of yet another car after being hit with yet another broom—only this time, the driver was wearing a crisp uniform and a gun. He brought me here. What else can I tell you?

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When Junjie had mentioned the black car and the man with the ponytail, Commissioner Chen began writing in quick, decisive strokes on a notepad, and when the story was done he picked up the phone and dispatched two cars to the old factory building. He mentioned something about a task force, a warrant and a crime syndicate. Human smuggling.

Chen's questions begin not with the ponytail and the alley and the gun and the silencer, but with the father.

"You say he bought cigarettes at that store a lot?" he asks. The boy nods. "And he always left you on the corner, but he was usually back within a few minutes?" Junjie nods again, looking sobered. "Does he ever talk about the shopkeeper?"

"Yeah, he says he likes the guy."

"I think I'm going to need to talk to your father," says the police chief. "Know where I can find him?"

The boy recites an address, and Chen picks up the receiver and dispatches another car.

"So why do you need to know all this about my father, anyway?" Junjie asks. Chen doesn't look up, doesn't answer. "Hey, mister. What does my dad have to do with this?"

The policeman stands and walks to the window, as if he is about to address the city, chastising its criminals, its evil and crooked and wayward. He sighs, crossing his arms and planting his feet.

"Son, why do you think your father left you at that store?"

"Left me? What do you mean?"

“He just disappeared, right? Knowing you were still waiting on the corner?”

“Well I don’t know what happened.”

“And the liquor man, he knew just where to take you. Knew the black car would be waiting there. That kind of meeting takes at least 24 hours to arrange.”

“I don’t understand.”

Chen turns from the window, looking older than when Junjie had been escorted into his office. He wears an emotion the boy hasn’t seen in a long time, since his mother died. Sadness.

“You don’t need to. The only thing you need to understand now is that you are an orphan.”

The words land like a physical blow. No boy wants to be an orphan, not even when his father is a drunk—a worthless, loveless man.

“No! No, I am not an orphan!” he shouts. “I have a father! We lost each other last night, that’s all.”

He is crying now, sobbing, hoping he is right. The officer sits back down behind his desk. Five minutes later, the phone rings and he picks it up, listens and sets it back down.

“He’s here,” says Chen, pointing toward the lobby.

He walks around the desk and grabs the doorknob, pausing while Junjie stands and wipes his eyes. The boy walks to his side and instinctively reaches up for his hand. Hanging his head, the police chief squeezes the poor boy’s fingers, then opens the door.

As soon as they clear the doorway, Junjie recognizes the man in handcuffs and cries his name before he can stop himself. The suspect looks up at the child, and then at the officer beside him. Then he laughs. He looks worse than ever, hair matted and clothes torn. He looks like the one who’d spent the night in a pile of trash. A deputy unlocks his cuffs and tells him to sit down.

“Mister, is this your boy?” Chen asks him.

He looks with hollow eyes, looks Junjie over from head to toe, scratches his stubble. He glances down at his feet, then back up at Junjie. Their eyes are locked when he says it.

“No, he’s not mine. I don’t have a son.”