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The Shanghai Factor

Written by Charles McCarry

Published by Head of Zeus

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CHARLES McCARRY

**THE
SHANGHAI
FACTOR**



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for Head of Zeus

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ONE

1

Those who keep an eye on me think I have a weakness for Chinese women. This is true as far as it goes, but it goes both ways. I am a hairy man, and certain East Asian women like that. My first Chinese girl called sex with me “sleeping with the chimpanzee.” Her name was Mei, easy for a chimp to pronounce and remember. We met cute. One day, as I pedaled along Zhongshan Road, she crashed her bicycle into mine. In those days I was new to the life of a spy, so my paranoia wasn’t yet fully developed, but I immediately suspected that this was no accident. My first thought was that Chinese counterintelligence had sniffed me out and sent this temptress to entrap me. Then I took a look at the temptress and wondered why I should mind. She was lying facedown, miniskirt awry, next to the wreckage of our two bikes—curtain of blue-black hair, slender legs the color of honey, snow-white virginal panties covering her round bottom. She was in pain—writhing, moaning, sucking in air through her teeth. I crouched beside her and in my stumbling Mandarin asked the usual stupid question. She turned her head and looked at me—starlet’s face, unblinking dark eyes filled with tears. I asked the same question again, “Are you all

right?” First she heard me, now she saw me. And smelled me. It was a hot, muggy day. I needed a haircut. I hadn’t shaved. Chest hair tufted from the open neck of a shirt I had been wearing for three days. Her lips twisted, her eyes blazed. All expression drained from her face. She said nothing. I might as well have been attempting to communicate in American Sign Language. Then she sat up. Her face, her whole person radiating anger, as if I had pinched her in her sleep. Her eyes went cold. She shouted at me. At length. In Shanghai dialect. I understood almost nothing she said, but had no difficulty grasping her meaning. A little crowd gathered. They understood every word, and it made them laugh. When she stopped talking, the crowd drifted away.

The girl got to her feet. Her knees were scraped. She bled from an elbow. She cradled the wounded arm in her other arm, as if in a sling.

Taking great care with the tones, I attempted to say, “Please speak Mandarin so I can understand the insults.”

Daggers. She kicked her bike—the front wheel was as bent out of shape as she was—and said, “Your fault.”

I said, “You hit me.”

“My machine is ruined. Look at the front wheel.”

“That proves you hit me. If I had hit you, my bike would be the one with the broken wheel.”

“You speak this language like you ride a bicycle. Ugly Chengdu accent. Was that clear enough for you to understand?”

“I think so.”

“It thinks!” she said. “I think it had better give me some money for a new bike before I call the police. They’ll be here any minute anyway, so hurry up.”

“Good. The police will see who was at fault.”

“Ha.”

In the middle distance I saw a knot of witnesses leading a policeman to the scene of the crime. The girl saw them, too.

“Now you will find out about China,” she said.

I didn’t doubt that she was right. Getting mixed up with the police was the last thing I was supposed to let happen to me. I was in Shanghai to speak Chinese, not to get the cops interested in me.

I said, “I’ll go with you to a bicycle shop and pay for the repairs. But no money.”

“*New bike.*”

The cop and the witnesses were getting closer. I said, “Let’s talk about it on the way.”

She smiled triumphantly, lips pressed together. “I ride. You carry my bike.”

I picked up the wreckage. She vaulted onto the saddle of my machine, a four-thousand-dollar one bought on the expense account, as if she were leaving Lourdes after being cured by the patron saint of lady bicyclists. I watched her go—her legs and the rest of her, in motion now. She was even better to look at. Dutiful to my vocation, I wondered why would she wear a miniskirt and that skimpy top instead of jeans and long sleeves if she had planned this collision or had it planned for her? Paranoia 101, as taught to novices in a secret installation in Virginia, answered the question: precisely because her handlers knew that her tiny wounds, her lovely face, her shining hair, her sweet body, her sharp tongue, her crackling intelligence, would cause me to think with some other organ than my brain. It was obvious that this girl had been born knowing this.

Oh, she was wily. So were her handlers. Nevertheless—couldn’t help it—I thought *poor kid* as she weaved her way through the river of bicycles. Her figure grew smaller and smaller as she pedaled faster and faster. She turned recklessly across traffic into a side street, leaning the bicycle within centimeters of the horizontal, sprocket, pedals and feet a blur. I kissed my bike good-bye. I thought I’d never see it or her again.

I was wrong. A short way down the side street, she waited in front of a bicycle shop. Band-Aids now covered her wounds. She must have had

them in her backpack just in case. Inside the shop, bicycles hung from the ceiling.

She pointed. "That one."

The proprietor got it down. It was the very best bicycle available in China, therefore in the world, he said, the only one of its kind in the store, and perhaps in all of Shanghai, since this model flew out of the shops and the manufacturer was in despair because he could not keep up with demand. He named the price. I flinched.

I still held her wrecked machine in my arms. I said, "Wait a minute. What we want is to have this one repaired."

"New bike," she said.

To the proprietor, I said, "How much to fix this bike?" He looked at me blankly but did not answer.

She said, "This man does not do repairs."

"Then we'll find someone who does."

The girl said something to the proprietor in Shanghainese. He went to the door of his shop and shouted. In seconds a very stern policeman appeared.

In English the girl said, "Shall I tell him you assaulted me?"

"And if you do?"

"Investigation."

I didn't reply. She studied my face and apparently saw what she had been hoping to see—profound anxiety. In Mandarin she said to the policeman, "This man is new to our country. He wants to know if this is a good bike."

"The best," the policeman said. "Very expensive. Worth the price."

He left without even asking for my passport. Another little thrill of suspicion ran through my mind. How did this policeman happen to be nearby? Why did he turn himself into a sales assistant? Where was his officiousness? The girl did not trouble to read my mind. She was bargaining with the proprietor. Or seemed to be. They were speaking

Shanghainese, a language I didn't understand. Long minutes passed. The volume rose. At last they stopped talking. Proudly the girl told me the staggering price she had negotiated—a month's pay for a rookie spook. Fortunately, I had just been to the money changer, so I had enough yuan in my pocket to pay the bill. I got out my wallet. She smiled happily, but at the bicycle, not me.

Outside, she said in Bostonian English, "What made you hire a teacher from Chengdu?"

"It was all Chinese to me. Where in the States did you go to school?"

"Concord-Carlisle High School, in Massachusetts."

"Exchange student?"

She nodded.

"Cheerleader?"

"Volleyball."

"College?"

"I came home for that."

"To which college?"

"Questions, questions. What are you, an American spy?"

She was watching my face. I asked her name. "Mei," she said, and in Mandarin asked if I could remember that. She asked my name. I provided an alias. It was a difficult name, Polish with many syllables and odd diphthongs, that belonged to a Hessian running back who played my position for my school while I sat out my senior year on the bench.

She said, "I'm supposed to take that seriously?"

"Why not? Are you some kind of racist?"

"Of course I am—I'm Han. We look down on everybody. I'll call you Dude. It suits you."

"We're going to be friends?"

"Up to you, Dude."

"Fine," I said. "Let's give it a try. One thing I insist upon. Never speak English to me again. You can have your way in everything else."

Apparently this was okay by her. She called me Dude for the next two years. I called her by the only name I knew, Mei. I never asked—never—what her real name might be. Who cared?

On the day of the bicycle wreck, I took her to lunch, then showed her where I lived. Later I took her dancing and, at her suggestion, to a rave where I was the only foreigner. We went for rides on our new bikes, picnicked in parks, found a group to join for morning calisthenics. Soon we were making love three times a night, twenty-six times a month, and sometimes, when the coast was clear, in the daytime. I was twenty-nine. She was five or six years younger, so we were both indefatigable. It was not part of her assignment, or in her nature, to love me. In that we were alike. In bed she was a comic. Everything about copulation, my simian body especially, struck her as funny, and laughter excited her almost as much as fur. She giggled during foreplay, guffawed with joy after her orgasms and made funny noises during them. When we were not going at it, she loved to talk about books and movies and television shows. So did I, so we had a lot to talk about. We watched television and went to the movies, sitting in different rows. She read to me in Mandarin and required me to do the same and get it right before we got into bed. She insisted that I make phone calls to numbers she provided—friends of hers, she said—on the theory that no one really understands a foreign language unless he can understand it over the telephone. For the same reason she taught me songs in Mandarin, and we sang them to each other. Many laughs about my mistakes at first, but my Mandarin improved as my ear quickened in a hopeless attempt to keep up with her. I even learned to flounder around in Shanghainese, a Wu language that is incomprehensible to speakers of most other Chinese tongues.

I was sure from the start that she was on duty, that she reported everything, that she had bugged my room. The funny thing was, she never asked for information, never probed. She showed no curiosity about my family, my education, my politics, my first love, or the girls I

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had slept with in high school and college and afterward. Probably this was because she had been briefed about these matters by the folks at Guoanbu, the Chinese intelligence service (within Headquarters called “MSS,” short for Ministry of State Security) and had no reason to ask. I never questioned her, either. She dressed well, she glowed with health, she had money, she disappeared in the daylight hours, so presumably she had a job or another lover. She explained nothing, never mentioned her primary life, not a single detail, though I did learn that she had gone to Shanghai University, where I was auditing a couple of courses, when I ran into someone who knew her and this person seemed to know about us. Just another inscrutable encounter. I didn’t bother to be suspicious. Either Mei was an agent or she was a lunatic. If the former, we were both on duty. If the latter, the benefits were terrific. Besides, I was fulfilling my mission. I had been sent to China to learn to talk like a native, and I was certainly making progress with that. Mei insisted on living entirely in the here and now. That was okay by me. In time we got to know each other very well indeed.

The learning process was wonderful. Liberating. I had never before lived in the total absence of emotional clutter, let alone complete sexual gratification. Nor had I ever imagined it was possible to know a woman this well while knowing next to nothing about her, or that the key to such hidden knowledge was to know nothing about her except what the five senses told you. I wondered if any other American boy, living or dead, had ever been so fortunate. If I did not love Mei, I liked the hell out of her, and I was as mesmerized by her smooth, perfect body as she seemed to be by my Paleolithic one. I certainly did not even want to think about saying good-bye to her and going back to the land of the crazy women.

2

While in Shanghai I was, in the jargon, a sleeper, meaning that I was supposed to wait for instructions, lead a transparent, predictable life, and do nothing that would call attention to myself—such as messing around with a girl like Mei, or buying her a bicycle with a thousand dollars of the taxpayers’ money, or getting hammered with strangers at parties where everyone except me was Chinese. I had no contact with anyone in the local base of U.S. intelligence and didn’t even know for sure if such an office existed. I hardly ever talked to a Caucasian, though I was accosted by many. I was under orders to avoid Americans, but they were everywhere, and could never discipline themselves to just walk on by when they saw what they thought was a fellow countryman. “You *American?*” Then came the standard student center quiz. It was no different in this exotic place than it had been back home—where was I from, where had I gone to college, how liberal was I? What was my major, did I hate my parents (“You *don’t?* Wow!”), was I, um, straight or gay, where did I live, what was my phone number, my favorite band, movie, song, author, microbrew? As Mei and my training had taught me, I provided no answers, asked no questions in return. At first

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I pretended to be a Canadian, anti-American to the bone and proud of it. This worked too well. Most American expatriates detested the U.S.A., too, so my progressive gibberish made them want to strike up a friendship. I learned to say I had to run—that cheap Chinese food!

My only American friend was a fellow who went by the fictitious name of Tom Simpson, a nobody like me who worked in Headquarters. Once a month he and I exchanged e-mails. Simpson seemed to have nothing better to do than keep up our correspondence, and it was easy to see he put a lot of work into his messages. Probably he wanted to be a writer when he retired thirty years down the line. Many spies are aspiring novelists, and Headquarters values a way with words above almost everything else. Partly because he was so eager to do well at something that did not matter, I supposed Simpson was low man on the China desk. As time went by, we developed an old drinking buddy joviality, and the correspondence was a pleasure in its way. More important, it told me I had not been forgotten, though someone smarter than me might have hoped for the opposite. The idea—I should say the hope—at Headquarters was that Guoanbu's hackers would read my mail and conclude that I was just another American clod they could safely ignore, maybe for the rest of my life. This is called building cover. In fact it is giddy optimism. Like much else in the practice of espionage, it is built on hope, denial of reality, wishful thinking, ignorance, the tendency to look upon insignificant results as important outcomes, and the Panglossian belief that those who spy by the rules don't get caught.

Needless to say I told Simpson only the barest details where Mei was concerned—the accident, the new bike as an expense account item, that was it. Even to a babe in the woods like me, it was obvious that discovery of my indiscretions would not be good for my career. Yet somehow, the folks back home got wind of Mei. Maybe one of those Budweiser guys I met at the wild Chinese parties Mei dragged me to knew someone I didn't know—such as a case officer from the local Headquarters outpost. It was

Simpson who clued me in. He and I seeded our e-mails with code phrases we called wild cards. “Horny as hell,” for example, meant that everything was just fine. “Pain in the ass” meant get me out of here fast. In theory I had committed all these phrases and their real meanings to memory, but even when you’re not trying to learn Mandarin, the brain in its infinite playfulness will, as we all know, move memories from one part of the frontal lobe to another. Therefore when I read the words “It’s raining possums and rednecks in the Old Dominion” in a message from Tom, I drew a blank. I knew it was a wild card because such phrases were always signaled by a semicolon in the preceding sentence. That archaic punctuation mark was never otherwise used in our correspondence. Of course that made the code easier to spot if you were a snoop, but if you didn’t know what the following wild card meant, you couldn’t figure it out. It was undecipherable because it wasn’t a cipher. Or so the catechism insisted.

Mei arrived moments after I received Simpson’s e-mail—a happy coincidence, since what followed for the next two or three hours cleared my mind like nothing and nobody else could do. Mei liked foreplay games. Usually these consisted of a feat of Mandarin recitation performed by myself (with my eyes closed) while Mei messed around. No penetration allowed until my feat of memory was perfectly executed, though unlimited cock teasing was okay under the rules, and that’s what Mei liked about the game. A couple of days earlier, she had given me these lines, composed around 200 B.C. by the poet and statesman Qu Yuan:

廣開兮天門 紛吾乘兮玄雲
令飄風兮先驅 使凍雨兮灑塵

In English, the poem, called “Da Si Ming,” reads something like this:

*Open wide the door of heaven!
On a black cloud I ride in splendor*

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*Bidding the whirlwind drive before me,
Causing the rainstorm to lay dust.*

It reads better in the original language. I had memorized these lines as ordered, suffering the usual flashes of agony, and now, while Mei rubbed her unclothed body and fingertips against my Esau-like pelt, I recited it in Mandarin. “Flawless!” Mei said. “You’re getting too good. Make mistakes so we can go slower!” I said that rules were rules. Midway through the third act of our daily scenario, my mind awakened and I remembered that “raining possums and rednecks” meant that I was summoned to a meeting with someone from inside the apparatus, and “Old Dominion” meant that Headquarters had reason to believe that I was under surveillance. Of course it did. I had reported this to Tom Simpson weeks before. Instructions would follow.

“Shit,” I said.

Between outcries, Mei said, “Speak Mandarin.”

Tom’s e-mail had told me nothing I didn’t already know. I had noticed that I was being watched months before, or soon after the surveillance began. I assumed it was routine, not worth reporting, because I had been forewarned that Chinese eyes would be watching me as a matter of course. I had been told to keep my tradecraft sharp by exercising its rules at all times, so I did what I could to be the Mr. Goodspy I was being paid to be. I studied faces in the crowd in case I ever saw one of them again. This might seem like a hopeless undertaking in China, but in fact the Chinese look no more alike—and no more unlike—than any other people with the exception of Americans, whose five centuries of interbreeding has produced an almost infinite number of countenances. The French, for example, have eight or nine faces to go around, the Germans, the Italians, the Indians, and the Arabs roughly the same number. The Han have only a few more than that. There are subtle variations, of course, but in order to remember a face you have only to recognize its

category and remember a variation or two in order to know whether you are looking at a person you have seen before.

It was soon after Mei and I got together that I noticed men and women whose faces I soon began to recognize had taken up positions outside my apartment building. There were twelve of them who worked two-hour shifts as three-person teams. The group watching me was composed of professionals. Seldom did I see the same three faces on the same team, and when they followed me, or followed Mei and me when we were together, the faces changed as they were replaced every block or two by folks from the other two teams. Like almost everyone else in Shanghai, they talked nonstop on cell phones, presumably to each other or a controller. As I was not engaged in espionage and had nothing to hide except a Han girlfriend who had little interest in hiding, I did not mention the surveillance to Mei and she did not remark on it, though it's hard to believe that anyone as wide-awake as she was could have failed to notice. If she wasn't worried, I supposed I had nothing to fear. It was fun in its way.

Headquarters took it more seriously. I heard from Tom again within the week. He told me that the Cardinals were burning up the National League central division, and were in first place with a 7.5-game lead. This hand of wild cards decoded as an instruction to meet a Headquarters man ("first place") who wore a red necktie ("burning") at noon ($7 + 5 = 12$) on Wednesday next ("central division") at the bar of the Marriott Hotel ("National League") and to use a certain recognition phrase ("game.")

I was followed to the rendezvous as usual, but as far as I could see, no one followed me inside the hotel. At 12:17 P.M. on Wednesday, seventeen minutes after the meeting time dictated by the wild card, a man in a wrinkled blue blazer and a red necktie approached me in the bar of the designated hotel. He was fortyish, tall, skinny, balding, bespectacled, unsmiling. He wore a Joe Stalin mustache.

He said, "Ever been to Katmandu?"

"Not yet," I said. "But I'm hoping to get there someday."

That nonsensical exchange was the recognition code I had been told to use in case of a clandestine meeting with one of our people. The stranger shook hands with me, pressing a fingernail into my wrist. If this too was part of the ritual, nobody had forewarned me, but I responded by squeezing his hand until I saw pain in his eyes. He let go. Dead eyes. The bartender approached. I had already drunk my Coke. The stranger waved him away and said, "Follow me. Don't walk with me. *Follow me.*"

He was a fast walker, so I did follow him as he led me through jammed back streets that smelled of sweat and bad breath and rang with shouts to get out of the way. At last we came to a restaurant and went inside. It was almost as noisy and crowded as the streets. He was well known to the host and the waiters, who greeted him with happy grins and bursts of Shanghainese. I was a little shocked by this reception because in my newborn way, I had the idea that seasoned operatives kept themselves to themselves and faithfully practiced tradecraft at all times. For all I knew, that was exactly what this guy thought he was doing.

When we were alone, I said, "What do I call you?"

"Try Steve."

"I'm—"

"Nameless."

The host showed us to a table. He hovered for quite a long time while a smiling Steve bantered with him, ordering lunch for both of us. His mood changed as soon as the fellow departed. He looked me over with his unwavering lifeless eyes, which were slightly magnified by the lenses of his glasses. Beer was brought, then an appetizer. The food was very good. Figuring that Steve didn't care whether I was enjoying my lunch, I didn't bother to comment. Nor did I ask any questions or otherwise say a word. It was obvious that Steve was not happy to be wasting his time on an *Untermensch* like me. Skinny or not, he was an industrious eater,

and when the host came by after each course to ask how he had liked it, Steve reverted to his jollier self, smiling through his mustache. He spoke not a word to me.

At last we came to the end of the meal. I expected that we would now retire to a soundproof room hidden inside a safe house and have a serious talk, but instead, Steve decided to have the discussion right where we were. He had a really loud voice, the ear-splitting kind you hear bellowing at the umpire at baseball games. He talked freely, as if we were indeed in an unbuggable bubble in the basement of an American embassy. The adjoining tables were inches away. This didn't really matter, since everyone else was shouting, too, and maybe because the adage that no one eavesdrops on a loudmouth but strains to hear a whisperer applied in this place. The restaurant was ostentatiously humble but in truth it was upscale, full of sleek, expensively dressed Han who almost certainly went to college in the United States and spoke excellent English.

He said, "So you think you're being watched."

"You could say that."

"It's your job to say it, kid. Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"Why?" He spoke with his mouth full.

"Because I see the same twelve faces every time I go out."

"*Twelve?*"

"Four rotating teams of three."

"Wow. You can remember twelve Chinese faces? Describe them."

I did as he asked. He went back to his fish, all the while staring at me out of that mask. Flecks of carp had lodged in his mustache.

This man was an ass, or for some reason wanted me to think that he was an ass. His behavior, I knew, was meant to discomfit, to intimidate, to gain the upper hand. I had learned about the technique at

training camp from a teacher of interrogation and agent-handling methods who took these tricks as seriously as Steve seemed to do. The instructor believed it was a good idea on first contact to let the agent think he was smarter than his case officer. This made it easier to manipulate the agent. I wanted to get out of there, to get myself fired, to go back to Mei. I could teach English like the other Americans did. I was tempted to throw some money disdainfully on the table as my share of the bill and leave with dignity. But even then, green as I was, I had more sense than that. Why would Mei be interested in an English teacher? And even if she was interested, she would be lost to me because her handlers would certainly assign her to another, more productive case.

Finally Steve spoke. "I am instructed to ask you a question and give you a message," he said. "The question is, Why do you think your dirty dozen are watching *you*?"

"Who else would they be watching?"

"Very good question," he said. "You should think about it, turn it over in your mind, see if there's anyone in your life who's more interesting than you."

I said, "I'll work on that."

Steve ignored me. I took this as permission to speak. I said, "If that's the question, what's the message?"

"Good news," he said. "CI is interested in you."

He waited—intent, almost smiling—for my reaction. I probably blanched. *CI*? Counterintelligence was interested in me? My bravado wavered. CI was Headquarters's bad dream. Its job was to know everything about everybody. However, nobody was allowed to know anything about it, including its methods and its success rate. Night and day, in peace and war, the men and women of the counterintelligence division were on the lookout not only for

enemy spies, but also for traitors, for sleepers, for the inexplicably nervous, for spendthrifts who couldn't explain where their money came from. They tailed guys who chase women, women who sleep around, homosexuals, neurotic virgins. Their job was to finger the bad guy inside every good guy and banish the sinner to outer darkness. For CI, no holds were barred, no one was above suspicion except themselves, and nobody had the power to do unto them as they did unto others.

Now Steve was letting me know these demons were after me. Was it because I had committed fornication? Or was it something I had omitted to do? I was unlikely to find out tonight. Steve continued to hold me in his contemptuous gaze.

I said, "Gee, that's interesting. Did they tell you why they're interested in some Insignificant McNobody like me?"

"Interested in some what?" Steve said.

"A joke. Forget it."

"You think this is a joke?"

"No, but you're making me nervous. When I'm nervous I make jokes." I thought I owed him that much obsequiousness.

"You should try to overcome that," Steve said. "Answer the original question. Why do you think it's you who's being surveilled?"

"I thought I'd already explained that. Because these people follow me wherever I go."

"You haven't gotten beyond that simple explanation?"

"I guess not. What's the complex explanation?"

"You've got a girl, right?"

"Yes."

"Name?"

"Mei."

"Mei what, or I guess I should say What Mei. I want her full name, or the name she said was her name."

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. Have you asked?”

“That’s not the way we work. We ask each other no questions.”

“She doesn’t know your name either?”

“Unless she’s a Guoanbu asset on assignment, no.”

“How did you meet?”

“She crashed her bike into mine.”

“How long ago?”

“Months.”

“You saw no need to report this?”

“I reported the accident to my pen pal and submitted an expense account item for the new bike I bought her.”

“How much?”

“About a thousand, U.S.”

Steve whistled. “But not a word since?”

“No.”

“You really are something, kid. No wonder CI is interested in you.”

He was sneering. The temptation to make things worse was great, but I resisted it. No response from Steve, but I was used to that by now. The silence was heavy, Steve’s manner was disdainful, and Steve such a shit that summary dismissal from the service did not seem to be an unlikely next move.

I said, “So what now?”

“Carry on,” Steve said. “Change nothing. Be your usual harmless self. But be careful, my friend. You’ve got yourself into something you may not be able to get yourself out of.”

“And let me guess. I’ll get no help.”

He pointed a forefinger. “You got it. Lucky you.”

He called for the check, paid it with a big tip, kidded around with the host. Then he stood up as if to go. I stood up too. I was taller than Steve, and angrier.

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I said, "Is that the message you said you were instructed to give me?"

"No, that was just me taking pity," Steve said. "The message is, you may be traveling soon. Your pen pal will provide the details."

And then he walked out.