

IVAN 1948

By Jim Wesneski

Chang, first name Ivan. Perched on forward edge of couch. Head tilted, mouth agape. American-born, though somewhat Asian features: eyes pinched lightly at the corners. Tongue jabs back and forth quickly while speaking. A light lisp.

Hair is color of pitch. So soft and full at the sideburns - but no conforming to the Western comb.

Age 43, his IQ quivering a few octaves higher, Ivan is squirming with anticipation. He's finished watching

afternoon cartoons and wants only one thing - to show his psychologist the rice-paddy bowler his mother gave him as a boy. "All true working peoples wear one," father used to tell him. There was a collective power in the hat, power to change the planet. The world was waking up! Honest, sweaty folk, the black, productive soil of the earth -- they wore hats like Ivan's.

Father was always teaching Ivan. "Our friends are only ninety miles from us here in Florida. Soon they'll be ready to liberate us." And crush the oppressors.

"I know my calculus," Ivan muttered mechanically, recalling father's favorite line during the long, one-sided talks they'd had, Ivan staring out the window at kids playing stickball.

.....

"All my thoughts kick up into a cloud of yellowbrown dust."

"Why yellow and brown?"

"I thought you would tell me. You get money to find why yellow and brown."

"Ivan. If you're not going..."

Ivan cut him short, mimicking his learned opposite.

"Ivan please,,," then, "You're not going to say 'cooperating' again, are you?"

"I can't help you if you won't work with me."

"I'm sorry." He so wanted to show off his real-worker hat. "Sorry, my comrade."

Ivan Chang looked at the ceiling. He began to serenade himself. His thumbs circled as he hummed an old Doris Day standard. "Kay sera sera hmm mmm hmm la la da da."

He noticed a fist-sized knot of rope fastened to the psychologist's dark wooden desk. Ebony, he thought. Mother had ebony chairs. Father did not approve.

The thick braid reminded him of ship's moorings. It rose in a straight, then pythagorean angle over a pulley nailed to the ceiling. The rope curved over the pulley, a bulging netfull of crockery dangling at the other end, tempting the office gravity.

Ivan was aghast. His eyes bulged at the heavy spectacle, his mouth unhinged. Psychologists were special. Like clowns. So tricky and intelligent...

Ivan's questioner feigned surprise at his curiosity. Of course he'd planned things so. A cheap - no stupid - affectation. But one which likely bordered on the fantastic in the mind of the bedeviled, somewhat-savant man-boy that burst into his office each week. In any case he was getting

paid regularly. Actually, both of them were, according to Ivan. He worked a cash register at a local grocery. Sessions with the Psy were courtesy of the State, most likely.

.....

Ivan slowly lowered his head in the doctor's direction. Their eyes locked. Ivan sensed it was one of the 'techniques'. He tensed. The psychologist lifted a hand and moved it towards the knot slowly, delicately, teasing the few inches of loose end. The Psy relished the feeling of control, and a rush of blood had him momentarily giddy.

Suddenly he understood why they said power was the ultimate aphrodisiac.

"You won't!" Ivan shrieked.

A quick yank. The rope accelerated with a whir. The wooden floor smashed and shuddered; the downstairs tenant sent up a dull curse, choked silent by the dry office air as the bits of crockery came clanking to a halt.

Ivan let out a breath. "I didn't believe you'd do it!"

"You have beliefs? You're religious!"

Ivan half reeled at the notion. "Did I say anything about religion?" He could be quite lucid at times, which

threw the psychiatrist off balance at times, bereft of ideas which way to steer his subject.

"You didn't literally utter the word 'religion'. No."

Ivan pointed at the shards. "Mister Psy, shouldn't you pick up the pieces?"

The psy: "What for? Do you have a personal stake in this? What I mean is, does it bother you?"

"Professional appearances?" Ivan offered.

He became quiet, surveying the office and ceiling with vacant emotion. Looking up made him drowsy. His eyelids drooped just enough to be comfortable and his eyes crossed. "Feels like I'm floating, mister psy. You know you have two ceilings? One's lower than the other. How do you do that? Two of everything."

"Just relax a few minutes then. I'll call you out of it when I want you back."

.....

He revisited their past sessions, gliding silently over the dark family waters they'd traversed. What kind of people name a kid Ivan Chang in 1948? The populace paralyzed with fear of the Red Hordes. Hoover's special agents scattered like spiders, fangs primed, dripping, eager to destroy with pointing finger and cries of

conspiracy. And Ivan's family rooted grotesquely among the straight and loyal citizenry, a black rose in full, necrotic bloom.

It was all rhetorical now. The strange man in his office was the outcome of such insanity. To keep pondering Ivan's upbringing was a moot point. Ivan was a moot point. Nothing's changing here, the Psy thought. The damage had been done; though a near-normal Ivan at times tore free of the mouldering chrysalis of childhood, the sanctum that had never allowed its decaying seed to mature, and which still bound up his interior in a tangle of sticky webbing.

Time to bring him back. "Ivan, you have a coolie hat with you today."

"Mother gave it to me. It was so important to father and her. They always talked of the people who wore them. Mother was half-Chinese. She came to America. She said her people worked in the fields, everyone wearing his own straw hat. Everyone the same."

"Please, mister psy, can you put it on for me?"

"You mean on me or on you?"

Ivan was amused. "On you. I've worn it since I was real young."

He was hesitant. It wasn't protocol to let the patient direct. In the end he compromised.

"If you tell me some more about growing up again. I'll put it on if you tell me some more."

Ivan held his head in his hands, still thinking of father and mother. The psychologist adjusted his new accoutrement.

"Father's name was Alan Chang. He was in something called a radical work party. They painted "Red lover" on our door and people were angry that father took up mother's last name. Is there something wrong with 'Chang' or red?"

The psychologist's thin, jacketed frame clashed with the pointy bamboo cone adorning his head. The taut chinstrap and headdress lent him the appearance of a zoot-suited lamp.

Ivan went on at length about his early years, unable to comprehend the confusion and shunning he'd endured. All the kids looked at him funny. Ivan the Red drank his milk alone in school...

Minutes passed. His narrative died down in volume. He felt his front teeth touch his bottom lip and wondered if he were still speaking or just mouthing words to himself.

The psychologist sat unmoving, eyes glazed and fixated on the crooked stacks of professional journals weighing down the heavy ebony desk. Ivan had once said the huge

textbooks in the office reminded him of 'Das Kap', which father often read.

.....

The psychologist involuntarily sucked a deep breath and recovered from the daze both men had fallen into. Ivan remained still, pondering the bland carpet. The clinician used the vacuum of conversation to further mull the fractured pieces of his patient. "Ivan...Chang. Great experiment that. Let's name the kid something Sino-Soviet. An example to the working classes. Social eugenics in the emerging new Motherland. What they did...to a child. Galled the neighborhood into treating him like Opie's evil twin. I hope there's a Hell for those people. Or at least a Heck." He forced himself to chuckle, but a sickening inertia arose within him. Anger. Were things going anywhere at all? Seven weeks...

Ivan jolted from the dreary wasteland that had settled over the office like a dusting of coarse pumice.

"Mister psy...those sharp pieces. I want to ask you: are you... ?"

"I'm ignoring your request!" The psychologist's rebuff shot back cannonade-like. Ivan was afraid.

It was dangerous to make smart people mad. Father had warned of Intelleks.

The therapist steadied himself, annoyed at the ever-sluggish pace. "Can we just backtrack a bit please? Remember we talked about religion...you did not express your observance of a base system of beliefs through the precise use of the word 'religion'. I mean, you didn't say 'religion' or that you were religious."

.....

"Do you care if I believe?" Ivan whispered. Father would be red with rage at the prospect.

Religion was opium. Ivan knew religion was opium, but he didn't know what opium was.

"You seem to. To care. To believe. I think. You cared enough to bring your hat." He undid the chinstrap and handed the wok-shaped triangle back to his subject. He ran his fingers through his hair but a thin red line remained under chin and cheeks.

"No, I don't believe in anything...or didn't. Until I got 'old tyme' religion." The psychologist shook with laughter. Ivan finally smiled.

"Let's continue..."

Emboldened by the suddenly playful atmosphere, Ivan aped after his inquisitor. The fingertips of both hands met under his chin. He leant forward, a show of concern on his face. "Yes, we need to discuss this, my son."

The Psy: "I appreciate your sense of humor."

Ivan began humming again.

The doctor felt his grip slipping. Reorient him, he thought. Don't let him get away. God he's revving up for the usual outburst. "Well. We know you can carry a tune, Ivan. Shall we get down to brass tacks?"

Ivan's mind flooded unbearably at the prompting.

"Ahh. The 'point' technique, right? Roger that! Let me tell you something. Comrade psy, I had 'a point' thing today behind the cash register in my red vest! The store's made me an 'Associate', how's that for rising fast?" Ivan blurted out, unable to constrain his pride.

"You must be a hard wor..." Ivan pounced to cut him off.

"Not a worker -- Associate, mister psy."

He raced along in stacatto-like riffs, exhaling hard down to his diaphragm between breaths.

"Anyhow there I am, counting change real slow in my hand, watching the skin underneath it mostly. Thinking a lot about the dark places in the cash drawer where the

green bills and coins go. So smooth and shiny. I love letting money slip through my fingers. Money is sooo sexy. I was too happy. I yelled!

"You ought to see the colors. Copper and green and silver! Hours and hours and hours of the money rainbow! I was in such a good mood, mister psy. I took off my vest, dropped it next to the register and got in line with a smile. I have real good teeth. See?" Ivan curled his upper lip back, showing the psychologist his upper row. His dogteeth were two thorns in a field of crooked corn.

.....

"Ivan, back to ground now. Remember how I showed you how to get back to ground?" The clinician knew his urgings would go unheeded. He would let Ivan sputter to a halt, much as he had each time they met.

"Mister psy, I got in line with the customers. I had joined the consumer revolution! Such fun... Even though I felt bad for that last guy. I'm not unfeeling, you know. He said he gave me a twenty and wanted his change. I said 'you don't get any change, I'm freed up now'.

"That's when the Jewish managers hustled me out. Two of them. It was a real "point-like" experience like you say, 'always make a point Ivan'."

Ivan's mind began to spin like a child's whirligig.
His cheeks shot beet-red.

"They yanked me outside the store and shoved me into the parking lot saying goodbye or something real loud in Jewish. I waved and smiled and they kept saying goodbye so loud and moving their arms up and down throwing good luck my way probably. I knew I was onto something big, 'cause I stood there quietly, turning in all directions...no more customers, no more cabbage to ring up, no more registers. Something was right about it all.

"I made it to the work paradise, I think. Like father used to say, we'd win in time. When the people woke up. Said one day there'd be no money or work. Not anyone who needed or even wanted money! The work paradise!"

Ivan lunged to his feet, cocking his head and firing a fist high into the air. His blood-swollen face was purple and he smiled in wretched triumph through hot, broken tears. He drifted into the only lullaby he recalled his mother having sung. He barely knew the first two lines:
'Viva la revolucion! Viva la revolucion!'

FINIS.