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From Chapter 2

Changes in the Air, Tiananmen Square

In the spring of 1989, Jim and I were swept up by the events of "Beijing Spring," the student democracy movement. On April 15, Hu Yaobang, the popular but disgraced former Communist Party general secretary who had been banished because of his liberal views, suddenly died. In the days that followed, hundreds, then thousands of students at Beijing University (Beida) and other universities and colleges began calling for recognition of Hu Yaobang, which gradually turned into a call for greater democracy.

Jim's major professor from the University of North Carolina, Michael Hunt, was then doing research for a book at Beijing University. Three days after Hu's death, we went with him to see a film on campus about the Korean War from the Chinese point of view. I was shocked to see how Americans were portrayed as the bad guys attacking the brave, selfless Chinese soldiers, the very reverse of all that I had learned about the Korean War growing up in America. When we came out of the campus movie theater, we found students milling about "the Triangle," reading slogans tacked to the walls and holding impromptu discussions unprecedented in Communist China. We mingled among the students and listened to some of their ideas. Seeing us, they thanked us for coming, saying "*Meiguo hen hao*" (America is good) and asked us how students in the United States demonstrated and about our student days during the Vietnam War era. A large crowd gathered around us as we tried to discuss our experiences demonstrating against the Vietnam War in the United States.

Over the next week we watched the movement grow, each day expecting the government to crack down. On May 4, the sacred anniversary of the 1919 May 4th Student movement, students poured out of university campuses into the streets. The numbers increased each day, first hundreds, then thousands of students marching around the second ring road encircling Beijing, calling for freedom, for the right to be heard, and for dialogue with party leaders. Amazingly, the government leaders did not respond but stayed secluded in their privileged refuge of Zhongnanhai adjacent to the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square. A Beijing Normal University student named Chai Ling made an emotional plea for the government to engage in talks with the students; otherwise they were going to stage a hunger strike to demand direct negotiations with party leaders. When no response was forthcoming from Zhongnanhai, the students descended by the thousands on Tiananmen Square, set up camp at the foot of Mao Zedong's mausoleum, and launched the hunger strike on May 13. Mao must have been turning over in his grave! Although he knew all too well the power of mobilized students driven by nationalistic fervor, as the Red Guards had been during the Cultural Revolution, he would have been horrified to think that students would actually call for democracy and freedom *from* the Communist party!

Meanwhile, Lu Yong continued my Chinese lessons. With the streets full of people, we had so much to discuss. Most of what was happening in Beijing that spring was a new phenomenon for Lu. We had animated conversations trying to predict where all this was leading. My vocabulary was full of new Chinese words that had not been spoken in China in decades—words like democracy, freedom, demonstration, protest. The air was electric. Over the next week, the square filled with colorful banners,

loudspeakers blaring, and hundreds of tents with thousands of people. It was an amazing event to be living through! In mid-May, Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev arrived in Beijing on an official visit. The first Russian head of state to visit China in thirty years, Gorbachev arrived at the Great Hall of the People for his historic meeting with Deng Xiaoping. The entire international press corps came to Beijing to cover the momentous meeting between the Chinese and the Soviets. Much to the embarrassment of the Chinese government, however, what they ended up covering was the student movement and occupation of Tiananmen Square, which turned out to be a far more interesting story.

ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, BBC, and international press from all over the world set up cameras in Tiananmen Square awaiting Gorbachev's arrival and, in the meantime, focused on the fasting students. The night before the Gorbachev visit, students confronted police on the steps of the Great Hall of the People, which runs along the Western side of Tiananmen Square. Because the media was at the ready and captured the drama, the entire world was drawn into the student movement. The video images of Chinese students broadcast worldwide aroused international sympathy for their struggle.

Busy and emboldened by the worldwide attention and support, students continued streaming into the square. People arrived from the countryside by the train carload and poured into Beijing, turning Tiananmen Square into a people's camp. It was memorable for Jim and me to witness this thawing and awakening of the people of China. The air was electric with the excitement of debate, criticism, and new ideas. Students were speaking publicly and testing their skills with new political slogans. Each day, Jim and I wandered through throngs of students on street corners and in parks, deep in heretofore-prohibited political debate. We watched them grow bolder by the day and increasingly vocal and sure of their ideas. We saw average Beijingers wake up from the years of intellectual slumber and oppression and begin to smile and express a sense of hope. The movement spread from street corner to street corner, to offices, shops, and worker cooperatives. We would stand discreetly on the margins and listen to the conversations. We could almost feel the opening up of people's hearts and minds, like watching a dead flower come back to life. It was an astounding experience. Students, workers, old and young people, shopkeepers, even Communist Party members—people who had been numb for years—all began smiling, greeting each other, speaking out in public, and defending their rights in the street. By the end of May, tens of thousands of permanent demonstrators occupied Tiananmen Square.

After a while, the student hunger strike began to lose force. Medical supplies flowed in from Hong Kong. Students on cots in hospital tents lay in the square with IV's in their arms. Medics rushed in and out of the square offering first aid. Order began to deteriorate, as garbage grew in mountains all over the square. The students established volunteer brigades to direct traffic, transport food and medical supplies, and patrol the streets and *hutongs*. It was amazing and unprecedented in Maoist China—the students and their supporters were effectively in control of large swaths of Beijing, as police and soldiers stayed out of sight and Beijing's leaders hovered deep inside Zhongnanhai. The students proclaimed they were setting up “a real people's government.”

Meanwhile, Communist Party leaders seemed hesitant and confused. They did not respond to calls for dialogue; there appeared to be no leadership. Finally, on May 19, Premier Zhao Ziyang, the most liberal-minded person in the ruling Politburo, went out to meet with the students in the square. With tears in his eyes, he pleaded with them to stop their hunger strike and leave. We later learned that he knew what was about to happen. Late on May 30, Vice Premier Li Peng went on television surrounded by members of the Politburo, stiffly dressed in Mao suits. He soberly announced that the government was sending troops in to restore order. By this time, Premier Zhao Ziyang had disappeared from sight, ousted for disagreeing with the hard-liners' decision to move in on the students. Zhao was placed under house arrest and was never seen in public again. Many years later, however, his memoir was released posthumously and published. In it he described the events inside the leadership during that trying time for the Communist party.

On the night of June 1, Jim went to Tiananmen Square at around 7 p.m. as he had done each evening. He watched as young, unarmed PLA troops tried to reach the square only to be turned back by the students and workers, who convinced the soldiers not to hurt their fellow Beijingers. Before midnight, joyful celebrations rippled through the square as the students realized they had actually stopped the army from entering the city!

The next morning, the government announced martial law and clamped down on all media. With the entire world watching, broadcasters were shut down, some right in mid-sentence. Tom Brokaw was pushed off the set while broadcasting, and the screen went black as millions of people in America watched. International reporters were physically and visibly forced to leave the square. The airwaves from China to the rest of the world went black. Nevertheless, on June 2, thousands of people ignored martial law and rode their bicycles to Tiananmen Square in support of the students. Jim and I, too, solemnly biked with them through the streets and around the square. We could sense a

strange mixture of exhilaration and foreboding, as no one was certain what would happen next. No police were even visible. The students seemed to be running the city—directing traffic and maintaining order. They set up checkpoints at all of the entrances to the city. I continued to drive our ancient Toyota, which with its diplomatic license plates plowed through the sea of demonstrators, who parted like the Red Sea. Giving me the V-for-victory sign, they would shout “*Lao Wai*” (honorable outsider) and wave me through.

After foreign media broadcasts were cut off, it became difficult to find out what was happening. The government began broadcasting over loudspeakers in the square and on street corners, with heavy surrealistic propaganda proclaiming, “The army loves the people, and the people love the army.” The airwaves were filled with PLA martial choruses singing patriotic marching songs and pledging to restore peace. On television, PLA soldiers, caked in makeup, danced in flowing white chiffon capes to marching music. The only way to know what was really happening, however, was to make the long trek down to Tiananmen Square and watch. Jim and I went each evening that week.

In the middle of all this turbulence and uncertainty, Jim’s sixty-seven-year-old mother, Helen Morris, arrived from Alabama for a visit. We took her to visit the square, where she talked with students and inescapably got swept up in the events with us. She went to see the twenty-one-foot alabaster white statue, modeled after the Statue of Liberty, that the students had erected in the middle of the square and named the “Goddess of Democracy.” Helen snapped photographs of the statue and all that she witnessed in the square. Although the students occupied Tiananmen and were camped out at the entrance to Zhongnanhai, where the party leaders lived, the leadership maintained an eerie quiet.

On the evening of June 2, another brigade of PLA troops, this time from remote villages, nearly succeeded in reaching the square. Several thousand young men, appearing no older than fifteen years, marched west along Jianguomen Boulevard toward the square. The people surrounded them, however, and convinced them not to attack. The young boy soldiers were dazed and scared, holding hands like children on a playground. Sent in fresh from the countryside, they had no idea what they were getting into. Their trucks were surrounded by swarms of demonstrators, who smothered them in kindness and tried to educate them about the events in Beijing and urge them to join in. Jim, Helen, and I walked among the dialoguing groups as victory again reverberated across the square. Celebrations went on until the early morning hours of June 3rd.

The evening of June 3 seemed to be a repeat of the preceding nights. Helen, Jim and I spent the early evening walking around the square talking to the students. Helen and I

said goodnight to Jim around 9:30 p.m. and took a cab back to our apartment on the second ring road, leaving Jim behind in the square. On our way home, we stopped at the Great Wall Hotel, where we sensed a lot of anxiety among the press gathered there. Many thought some kind of confrontation was inevitable, otherwise the government would just cease to exist. We then returned to our apartment. At about ten in the evening, just before Helen went to bed, Jim called and told me to come back to the square.

Before she slept, Helen said, "This day has been amazing, the students have such zeal. The democracy movement seems so strong that the government can't stop them."

"I know," I said, "It is unbelievable that the students could turn back the army night after night. What a remarkable thing to live through!" I kissed her goodnight and decided to go back to the square to meet Jim and join them celebrating in Tiananmen Square once again.

I jumped into a cab and tried to get back into the square, but this time people surrounded my cab and told me to go back and leave. People sensed danger. With fear in their eyes, they anxiously shouted, "Go home, quickly, you can't go through. It is not safe!" I went home and waited on pins and needles.

Once I returned to my apartment, I heard a rising roar in the streets below and the apartments began to shake a bit. My heart sank. I looked out and saw a seemingly endless column of tanks rolling swiftly towards the city center. Knowing that Jim was in Tiananmen Square, I frantically called the embassy.

"Do you know where Jim Huskey is? Have you heard from him?" I asked the Marine guard on duty.

"Sorry Madame, we have no contact," he responded. "Things are a bit confusing right now."

For the next few hours, no one at the Embassy knew Jim's whereabouts.

As it turned out, Jim was one of the key embassy officers to witness firsthand the nightlong massacre at Tiananmen. When the shooting started as the tanks advanced toward Tiananmen Square from the West along Changan Boulevard, students and workers ran westward from Tiananmen to meet the long column of soldiers and tanks, and Jim ran with them. Everyone assumed the bullets were rubber until people started falling to the pavement in pools of blood. One little old lady ran toward the advancing soldiers and tanks crying, "*Zhongguo ren bu neng sha Zhongguo ren*" (Chinese cannot kill Chinese). A man standing next to Jim was hit in the middle of his forehead. Jim ducked behind trees in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peace of the Forbidden City, then retreated eastward along Jianguomen Boulevard, the Avenue of Eternal Peace, watching as people

were machine-gunned by their own government. He saw people run out in front of the tanks and stand in protest. He and a CNN cameraman saw one armored personnel carrier set on fire, a PLA soldier dragged from it and beaten to death by the angry crowds. Jim spent the night watching wave after wave of PLA machine guns mow down protesters all around the area. From midnight to dawn, he ran on and off Jianguomen Boulevard following each round of shooting to count the wounded and the dead.

After a night of counting bodies and helping Americans and others get out of the area, Jim ended up exhausted at the Beijing Hotel in the early morning in the embassy's 17th floor room overlooking the destruction on Jianguomen Boulevard and Tiananmen Square. He returned to the Embassy midmorning on June 4. In a fury of emotion, he wrote a long descriptive cable to the State Department outlining minute by minute what he had seen on the night of June 3–4, the night the Chinese government killed its own people. His key eyewitness report detailed the events of the night.

A few days later, Ambassador Lilley sent a letter to President George H. W. Bush calling Jim “a hero among men” for helping to get people to safety that night. When the Chinese government later tried to deny that anyone was killed in the square that night, Jim’s account was one piece of evidence that reported the truth of what actually happened in Tiananmen Square.

He made his way home late on June 5, utterly shaken by what he had witnessed. At last, relief and joy at seeing him safe replaced my anxiety.

Evacuation

In the chaotic days that followed, I joined other embassy members in manning the phones at the Embassy, calling all Americans in the Beijing consular district who had registered with the embassy and answering questions from Americans calling in from across China. Many were panicked and didn’t know if they should stay where they were or leave China. Thousands of people thronged the Beijing airport trying to leave.

On June 5, I decided to take Jim's mother to the airport to try to get her out of China. With thousands of desperate foreigners crowding the terminal at the airport, there seemed no hope that she would find a seat. After hours of waiting in unmoving lines, and with the chutzpah and ingenuity that one develops living in the Third World, I walked around the long lines of people waiting at the chaotic ticket counters, entered through the back door of the ticket office, grabbed an official seal, and stamped Helen’s ticket to verify the date change. As government clerks protested in Chinese, “*Ni bu Keyi*”

(You can't do that), I ran out with the altered and stamped ticket, replying in English, "I don't understand Chinese" (although I understood every word) and pushed Helen through lines and lines of people and right onto a plane. After thirty-six hours, when she arrived back in Dothan, Alabama, she was a local heroine, appearing on television and in the local press describing and showing photos of her ordeal in tumultuous China.

In Beijing a few days later, as the security situation continued to deteriorate, Ambassador Lilley called a meeting of all embassy families and told us that he was ordering a "voluntary evacuation." While he was speaking, however, a barrage of gunfire broke out in front of the Embassy and the ambassador changed his order on the spot to mandatory evacuation of all nonessential personnel. He gave us an hour to prepare to leave China. Anxious and upset by the sudden turn of events, I wanted to say good-bye to Jim, who was out convoying American students and tourists from their university campuses and hotels in northwestern Beijing toward the airport on the east side of the city. Nervously, I waited at the Embassy for him to return. As I waited, Chinese troops opened fire again, this time on the nearby diplomatic high-rise apartments on Jianguomenwai Street. Someone shoved a phone in my hand and said, "Help them!" I started talking with embassy families over the telephone as the soldiers were shooting up their apartments. I urged them to run for the U.S. Marine van waiting outside the compound. "Leave your things behind. Just go quickly!" I told them. The family of the regional security officer was literally under their beds talking to me on the phone while bullets bounced off the walls in their apartment. They eventually made it to safety. Luckily no American was hurt during the attack. Senseless violence and anarchy seemed to prevail in the streets of Beijing.

Along with all the other embassy families and nonessential personnel, I was evacuated and transported to wait for the night at the Lido Hotel on the airport road. The evacuees had brought the oddest assortment of things. What do you take with you when you have a half hour to pack and don't know if you will ever return? Foreign Service families have faced similar evacuations again and again in countries around the world. Some people grabbed their children from school, others their dogs, sterling silverware, or important papers. Luckily, we did not have any children then to worry about.

Preparing to leave, I was alone, since Jim was still out ferrying Americans to safety. I wasn't sure I would even get to see him before I left China the next morning. I also didn't know if I would ever come back to China. With foreboding in my heart that night of June 8, I had closed the door to our apartment in Beijing, leaving everything behind, including my husband.