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6/4/89: The Night of No Moon

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This piece is excerpted from the manuscript of Philip J. Cunningham’s forthcoming book, Tiananmen Moon, part of an on-going China Beat feature of excerpts from Cunningham’s book. Interested readers can see more at Cunningham’s website.

(June 4, 1989 excerpt from Tiananmen Moon)

You didn’t have to be a fortune-teller to know Tiananmen was the target, but what were they going to hit it with and when? The long anticipated crackdown had been postponed so long, getting it over with might resolve the political impasse, but it wouldn’t bring justice, it wouldn’t buy back the mandate of heaven.

Being part of the teeming mass as the army approached, I had little choice but move in tandem. It was well nigh impossible to stand still, to move against the flow would beg injury. Only when I reached the concrete and steel divider in the middle of Chang’an Boulevard, guided by those in front, pushed by those behind me, could I pause and wring myself free of the seething throng long enough to climb on top of a cement road barrier to get a better view of what was going on.

A military vehicle that looked like a tank came careening recklessly through the sea of people like an icebreaker cracking through thin ice. Tanks on Tiananmen Square! It was crazy, what was the PLA doing, what did they think this could achieve? The armored vehicle roared down thickly people Chang’an Boulevard as fast as its heavy treads would permit, not as a peacekeeper, but provocateur. Then there appeared another metallic monster, begging for a clash, beckoning blood.

The reckless charging of two heavy vehicles in the middle of a crowd of thousands shocked me; the rules of engagement had changed. The military’s admirable discipline and restraint had been abandoned, giving way to reckless, violent acts. The armored vehicle was so unforgiving, so heavy, so hard, the bodies it bolted past so vulnerable and soft.

So far, no one had been hit or run over but it could happen any second now. It was a deadly game of “chicken” in which the winner was the last one to flinch, but the rules were supremely unfair, pitting tank against man. I shuddered in dread of seeing people mowed over, but amazingly the men and women around me seemed emboldened by the prospect of conflict.
It was as if the daredevils possessed a belief in mind-over-matter, like the martial arts warriors of the late Qing Boxer Rebellion who convinced themselves they were invulnerable to bullets. I'd seen plenty of people tempt fate crossing streets in busy traffic, but never did I dream it possible to slow a tank's advance by jumping in front of it!

Numb and immobilized I watched the vanguard dart back and forth in front of the armored vehicle, taunting the unseen driver. The armored continued to penetrate the crowd, slowing to turn around, speeding up on the straightaway, heading directly at the flag and banner-waving provocateurs like a mad bull aiming for a matador. With each sweep, the crowd parted, some running for their lives, others, tempting fate, holding their ground.

The passionate insanity of the moment was contagious, after a second silent signal, which caused the people immediately around me to snap into action, I stumbled, and then without really thinking about it, joined the fray.

The heavy concrete and steel road divider that I had been standing jerked sharply and suddenly lurched into the air. I lost balance fell hard, the shock of my tumble softened by the unfortunate people I landed on. I tried to right myself, feeling like a surfer who had just wiped out only to get caught in the undertow. My first reaction was annoyance at having the ground pulled out from under my feet, and being at the mercy of agitated strangers.

I was floundering below a turbulent crowd that was attempting to yank a heavy road divider from its moorings. A lengthy section of the concrete and iron barrier, once broken free, was rotated 90 degrees, from its original east-west mooring to block traffic on the boulevard. The heavy railing, momentarily made featherlight by hundreds of hands, was dropped to the ground with a thud.

Once I regained my footing, with the unexpectedly attentive assistance of the two young men closest to me, I joined the crowd in its tug of war with the barrier. We rotated it in slow increments, like the jerking second hand on an old clock, lift, drop, lift, drop. Whose idea it had been was impossible to say, for nobody was really in charge. No one had told me what to do either, for that matter, rather it was instinctive, a collective move to slow the arrival of hostile invaders. I doubted it would seriously deter the movement of army vehicles such as the ones we saw buzzing the crowd, but taking fate into one's hands and doing something felt better than doing nothing.

By the time we had the concrete barrier in place, the offending vehicle had moved on. The men around me breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Only after the intense and immediate sense of danger had subsided did anyone realize, or have the time to react to the unusual fact that there was a foreigner on the team. Several sweaty men in T-shirts, arms and wrists no doubt aching after the sudden bout of weightlifting, offered trembling hands. One man welcomed me, the other called me friend.

"Huanying ni!"
"Pengyou!"

Their words moved me, almost to tears. The verbal embrace was at once formulaic and reassuringly real.

... Menge, who had been separated from me by the erratic movement of bodies when the APC came streaming through, had closely observed the roadblock incident from the other side of the divider.
"I saw that. They are taunting us," he muttered bitterly. "They are trying to break our will. They are trying to incite violence."

"So, what's next?" I ask, wanting to know, wanting him to have the answer.

"Nothing will happen, I think. The government is just trying to scare the people."

We backed away from the crew, scanning the swarming multitude for some indication of what might happen next. Suddenly Meng's face lit up in recognition of some familiar faces coming our way. Two women were walking their bicycles, weaving through the jumpy crowd in front of Tiananmen Gate. After negotiating the uppity throng gracefully, they parked their bikes next to the BBC's tripod as if it were a parking meter.

Soon they were deep in a whispery conversation with Meng, pouring out words too fast for me to keep up with. I stood back, content to watch the beautiful, expressive faces of three people who knew each other well, baring their souls in the subdued lamplight on the Square.

"Jin Peili," Meng said, pulling me over, trying to include me. "These are my classmates. They study acting at the Central Drama Academy."

We all shook hands, exchanging smiles. Despite the unsettled if frightening outlook of the evening so far, time was had become malleable and that fleeting but somehow poignant encounter was imbued with an enduring beauty. Ordinary life, as we had come to know it, was slipping away by the minute. Nothing would be the same, nothing could be taken for granted. Win or lose, the final showdown was at hand. I observed the drama school comrades as they huddled close, the pale outlines of the Goddess of Democracy glowing behind the trio in the darkness. The night sky was absolutely black – no moon, no stars.

... Here on the northern periphery of the square, there were no workers manning barricades, or students urging restraint or marchers singing the Internationale, not even the usual idle onlookers. The unsung, unseen heroes who had kept the peace for over a month could retroactively be appreciated by their absence. Student types were in scant evidence this night. Instead there were warriors with agendas unknown pressing in on us. No overt hostility was directed at the crew, but the seething anger and lust for violence was palpable.

The May Fourth spirit was gone, replaced by something murky and malevolent. There was a new element I hadn't noticed much of before, young punks decidedly less than student-like in appearance. In the place of headbands and signed shirts with university pins they wore cheap, ill-fitting polyester clothes and loose windbreakers. Under our lights, their eyes gleaming with mischief, they brazenly revealed hidden Molotov cocktails.

The camera lights, in this dark and troubling hour, seemed to attract all species of insect. "Turn off the lights!" I yelled at Wang Li. "This isn't working, turn off the lights! We better get out of here!"

Who were these punks in shorts and sandals, carrying petrol bombs? Gasoline is tightly rationed, they could not come up with these things spontaneously. Who taught them to make bottle bombs and for whom were the incendiary devices intended?

Lights still blazing, Ingo started shooting from the hip to capture some pictures of the provocateurs. The noose of spectators tightened.

Lights out, the shoving match subsided. But the troublemakers lingered, smiling inappropriately as they stared at us. Frustrated, I led the crew to the most obscure and least crowded spot I could find,
aiming for the massive outer wall of the Forbidden City. Not surprisingly, we were jeered for making an apparent retreat.

“Look, foreigners! Ha ha!”

“What are they doing there?”

“The foreigners are scared!”

“Hello? Where are you going?”

“They don’t care about China!”

“Cowards!”

“They are running away!”

Some of the comments sounded like veiled threats. I pretended not to understand in order not to have to react. We were not running away, but I didn’t owe them an explanation. The technical requirements for a well-lit interview were hard to meet under such agitated conditions.

Could the mass yet turn on us? Were we dealing with rational individuals or an irrational collective?

How could one possibly distinguish good from bad in such a vast gathering of people?

We walked with our heads down in silence, a solemn file of five Caucasians and two Chinese. Finally we set up tripod and camera next to some trees along side the majestic vermilion wall lining Worker’s Park on the northeast corner of the Square. On the other side of the wall was a potential sanctuary, the entrance courtyard to the Forbidden City.

The relatively secluded location gave us about a minute to tape before things got out of control again. There were ogling onlookers as before, but the random mix of townspeople in our new location was less implicitly threatening than the Molotov cocktail gang. When things got tight, merely switching the lights off sufficed to relax the stranglehold of the instant gaggle that coalesced around us.

Looking at the indecision and fear on the strange faces watching us, I felt we were much alike in our unspoken desperation, looking to one another for cues on how to act, grasping at straws in the wind, trying to figure out what was going on. Given the communal uncertainty, it was easy to understand how an incandescent circle of light on a dark plaza might be mistaken for a meaningful vortex of activity.

While Simpson brushed his hair, Clayton made notations on her producer’s sheet, Ingo unwrapped his camera, Wang Li fumbled with the lights and Mark readied the sound gear, I would try to explain to the usual knot of people closing in on us what we were doing in order not to excite too much attention.

“We are the BBC, English television, we’re just doing a random interview, please step back, we appreciate your cooperation, thank you.”

In no time at all, interviewer became interviewee.

“What do you think will happen?”

“What information do you have?”

“How many killed at Muxudi?”

While I was trying to cope with such questions, Simpson shouted that another APC was heading our way. Everyone dropped what they were doing, immobilized by fright as the green monster bore down upon us.

As before, the horde parted only reluctantly from the path of the careening vehicle, and usually not a second too soon, leaping away left and right, defiantly till the last possible moment. The BBC crew
swiftly backed onto the sidewalk, wisely regrouping behind some trees that offered a modicum of protection. The threatening vehicle then lurched to the left, veering away.

My pace quickened as I approached the stalled vehicle, infected by the toxic glee of the mob, but then I caught myself. Why was I rushing towards trouble? Because everyone else was? I slowed down to a trot in the wake of a thundering herd of one mass mind. Breaking with the pack, I stopped running, exerting the effort necessary to free myself from the unspoken imperative to follow others forward.

Someone tossed a Molotov cocktail, setting the APC on fire. Flames spread quickly over the top of the vehicle and spilled onto the pavement. The throng roared victoriously and moved in closer, enraged faces illuminated in the orange glow.

But wait! I thought, there’s somebody still inside of that, it’s not just a machine! There must be people inside. This is not man against dinosaur, but man against man! Meng protectively pulled me away to join a handful of head-banded students who sought to exert some control. Expending what little moral capital his hunger strike signature saturated shirt still exerted, he spoke up for the soldier.

“Let the man out,” he cried. “Help the soldier, help him get out!”

The agitated congregation was in no mood for mercy. Angry, blood-curdling voices ricocheted around us.

“Kill the mother fucker!” one said. Then another voice, even more chilling than the first screamed, “He is not human, he is a thing.”

“Kill it, kill it!” shouted bystanders, bloody enthusiasm now whipped up to a high pitch.

“Stop! Don’t hurt him!” Meng pleaded, leaving me behind as he tried to reason with the vigilantes.

“Stop, he is just a soldier!”

“He is not human, kill him, kill him!” said a voice.

“Get back, get back!” Meng started screaming on the top of his lungs.

“Leave him alone, the soldiers are not our enemy, the government is the enemy!”

The former hunger striker howled until his lungs failed him, his voice weak, raspy and hoarse. Meng’s head-banded comrades descended on the stricken vehicle but were unable to placate vigilantes keyed up for action.

“Make room for the ambulance,” one of the students yelled. “Please cooperate, please step back!”

I watched from 20-30 feet away as the students tried to extract from the burning vehicle the driver who had nearly killed them. He had trouble walking, he appeared to be injured and in serious pain, but the quality of crowd mercy was uneven.

“He’s not a person, he’s a thing, kill him!” voices continued to shout out. Hotheads were deliberately instigating violence, putting them at odds with conscientious demonstrators who had no intention of hurting anyone.

The assembly surrounding the armored vehicle shared a paroxysm of joy in stopping it, but was of more than one mind about what to do next. At least one surrendering soldier was safely evacuated to a waiting ambulance, but then the ambulance itself was attacked, the back door almost ripped off by protesters determined to punish the man in uniform.

Up until now, the volunteer ambulances were symbols of the movement’s caring side, carting collapsed hunger strikers away from Tiananmen to hospitals for physical restoration. Until this night,
city ambulances, plying slowly through the pack with that familiar, almost reassuring up-and-down wail, had been sacrosanct and untouchable. A man with a metal pipe smashed the rear of the ambulance, breaking the tail-light. Two or three other men pounded on the back door demanding that the limp body of the soldier be handed over. The driver desperately begged the vigilantes to leave the injured man alone, to let him be taken to the hospital. The back door of the ambulance swung open and the injured soldier was about to be extracted for a bout of “people’s” justice when the vehicle lurched forward, and raced off in the direction of the Beijing Hotel. Student traffic directors trying to impose a semblance of order did their best to hold back those seeking blood long enough for the ambulance to escape. So it had come to this. The dream was over, people were killing each other. The mutual restraint, one of the things I admired so much about all parties in this monumental conflict of wills, was breaking down. The students lost control, the crowd started cracking, and the movement was breaking up into splintered mobs. There were calls for cooperation and shouts for vengeance, the blood thirst made me nauseous. Meng was distraught. “Don’t use violence!” he yelled, straining his voice to persuade anyone who would listen. “Don’t fight!” he cried hoarsely, over and over. But whipped up into a state of true turmoil, few cared to listen. The ambulance was gone, the APC was now a flaming hulk, billowing black smoke that masked the sky. The ghoulisglow of distant fires – one could only imagine what might be going on –reinforced the gloom of this moonless night. The BBC crew reassembled, shaken but unhurt. Before we could gather our wits, however, the sky was suddenly pierced with red shooting stars. “What in the world?” I had never seen anything like it before. “Tracer bullets,” shouted Simpson. “We better get out of here!” The red traces of speeding projectiles crisscrossed Chang’an Boulevard. The cracking sound of gunfire was steadily audible in the distance. The now seething mass was not easily intimidated, and became only further enraged. Empty-handed civilians cursed the government, venting violent epithets. I looked at the anguish in Meng’s face, tears welling in his eyes. “This is no longer a student movement, he said. “This is. . .” He paused, fists clenched with rage, face lined with resignation. “This is a people’s uprising.” As the fighting worsened, with gunfire close by, I had to physically drag Meng; so reluctant was he to leave the street, towards the Beijing Hotel for shelter. There he joined the BBC crew, along with Wang Li and myself, in room 1413 to sit out the lethal madness. Patricia, the Hong Kong journalist, joined us shortly afterwards. But the Beijing Hotel was no longer a safe haven. “What are you doing here?” one of the guards had barked at Meng as we crossed the threshold. In our haste we had failed to notice the gatekeepers were in place again, guard posts fully operational. “He’s with me!” I answered firmly. Not wanting to get stuck at the guarded elevators, I took Meng by the arm and led him away from the heavily monitored entrance into the long central corridor ringed with dimly-lit lounges. The guards did not follow us, so we first lingered there, taking comfort in the incongruous fact that the deserted coffee lounge was still operational.
We gathered up an armful of yogurts and soft drinks for the crew and went up to 1413 by a less guarded passage. From my balcony high above Chang’an Boulevard, we surveyed the horizon. It looked like nothing less than war as I had imagined it as a child; fire and flares in every direction. Burning vehicles emitted an oily smoke that funneled upward, linking with its long black columns the murky sky and the ground.

Screams and gunfire could be heard almost directly below, more distant cries and rumbles intermittently carried by the breeze. Tracer bullets fired from somewhere across the street arched upwards along a parabolic path and fell behind the hotel. The frequency of gunfire intensified.

We watched in stunned silence as the tanks rolled in. As bodies were rolled out on carts. As the once defiant crowd was bent, then broken. Sporadic gunfire could be heard all night long.

Tags: 1989, 6/4. Philip J Cunningham, Tiananmen, Tiananmen Moon