BARBERSHOP

 Such a place could be found in almost any small town in middle-America, little changed since the 1950s.

 A red- and white-striped barber pole was affixed outside near the open shop entrance, turning lazily.

 Inside the tidy interior, there were two padded brown leather chairs, which could be spun on their bases or tilted when necessary. The shiny linoleum floor was set in a black and white checkerboard pattern. The room was brightly lit, and smelled of bay rum lotion, talcum powder, and shaving cream. There were large mirrors hanging behind the sole water sink and the shop's white counters and drawers. On the back wall, a stuffed buck's head with impressive antlers had been mounted next to a large calendar. The shop's work shelves held a few 'tools of the trade': pairs of different-sized scissors, some combs and hair brushes, a straight-edged razor, a set of electric clippers, and various bottles of aftershave, along with a hand mirror. There was also a ceiling fan swirling the air in an attempt to keep anyone cool on this already humid but quiet July morning.

 In the waiting section of the small shop, there were three well-worn black leather and chrome chairs for the patrons. But where there were once piles of well-thumbed magazines like Field & Stream, Sports Illustrated, and Gun Digest (as well as the town's weekly newspaper), the little reading table was now bare.

 The barber's name was Earl. He had been born and raised in town, and had been cutting hair for more than thirty years. He wore a clean, short-sleeved white smock, with a black comb jutting out of its chest pocket.

 His old friend, Frank, came in for his usual haircut, which he always tried to have on the first day of every month.

 Earl greeted him as he brought out a crisp grey and white striped covering sheet and briskly shook it out. This would be the barber's first job of the day. The large sheet still faintly smelled of detergent. Earl carefully put a disposable sheet of tissue paper around Frank's neck, then attached the covering sheet over it and used a big safety pin to hold everything neatly in place. Frank didn't need to tell Earl how he wanted his hair cut. The barber already knew.

 "It's hard to believe how much this country has changed," Frank spoke in a low voice at last while Earl went to work, clipping and snipping. "What the hell happened, Earl? When did everything go wrong?"

 Earl tapped his friend gently on the shoulder, then pointed to the far corner of the shop that once proudly featured a red, white, and blue flag of the United States, and grunted.

 It had, of course, been replaced with the red banner and the five yellow stars of the People's Republic of China...

 An angry, uniformed Chinese soldier brandishing a rifle poked his head inside the barbershop doorway at that moment. He looked around in disgust and scowled, and then yelled, "You...Americans! No speaking English! You must speak Mandarin only now!"

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 November 17, 2021