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WHEN HUAI FLOWERS BLOOM

Stories of the Cultural Revolution

Shu Jiang Lu

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Stories of the
Cultural Revolution

Shu Jiang Lu

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To my father
For everything you have taught me

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Prologue

Once upon a time, there is a mountain.

In the mountain, there is a temple.

In the temple, there is an old monk who lives with a young monk.

One day, the old monk tells the young monk a story.

He starts: "Once upon a time, there is a mountain, and in the mountain, there is a temple, and in the temple, there is a monk who lives with a young monk. One day the old monk tells the young monk a story. He says: 'Once upon a time . . .'"

So the telling continues, never ending. Like a bird, it wings its way through the thickest forest of the mountain, over its valley and up to its top. As darkness falls, it perches quietly on the clear full moon hanging over the edge of the vast dark blue skyline. Every now and then, large pieces of clouds scud over the moon, shredding it into strips that seem to be falling into the darkness below. But each time the moon emerges, full as ever, so does the bird, waiting in the quiet darkness for the break of the dawn when it will fly, sing, and tell stories, for another day.

And another, another, and another. It never ends.

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槐花 1

I Heard a Bird Singing

Once upon a time, there was a Dragon King who lived on the top of a big mountain in a palace built with golden bricks and covered with silver shingles. The King, dressed in a sparkling yellow dragon robe and sitting high above on his dragon throne, issued his royal commands to his subjects. One day, the King ordered that trees be planted around the palace. And they must be the same kind with the same shape and same color. The King's wish was immediately fulfilled. Trees of the same bright red color and the same heart-shaped leaves were planted around the palace. The King, looking down from the top of the mountain, was pleased with what he saw and further demanded, "You are all my subjects." His thunderous voice echoed through the hill and valley." You must always strive to maintain your color, mind you, because that is the color of loyalty, your loyalty to me, your King. You must not let the color fade; you must not change the shape. Keep still and quiet unless I tell you otherwise." All the trees cringed. Awed and silenced by those words, they offered their leaves—their hearts—for the King to play with, to tear, or to burn, at the mercy of his boundless power.

As days went by, some of the younger trees became more and more restless and resentful. "Our eyes are so burned all day by this red color," they burst out one day, "that our vision is all but a blur now; our sight is trapped in the forest and we can hardly see a meter away. Our voices have

been silenced for so long that our throats are growing rusty and our words caged within like dead birds." Adult trees nervously turned to these grumbling youngsters, hushing and shushing them. Their trunks were shivering with panic and their voices shaking with fear. "What do you need your voice for? You should be grateful just to be alive. Understand? You'd better watch out your mouth, or you will bring disasters to your families and yourselves. The King is on the top of the mountain. He knows everything about us. So you'd better shut your mouths, now and forever."

That was the warning I grew up on, the warning that was passed on to us from our parents' generation who had learned through endless class struggles and political movements how words—a slip of the tongue or a single sentence spoken ten years earlier—could turn one into an enemy of the state and wipe out one's existence.

"You know how your father escaped being smeared as a rightist in the 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement?" My mother often reminded us. "He didn't say anything during those arranged study sessions and meetings. If he had, this family wouldn't be here, I tell you. We would be plowing fields and planting rice in some remote village. We would grow old and die there. So would you."

And she was right. In the chilly early spring of 1957, the Party called for all intellectuals, Party members and nonmembers alike, to voice their views to help the Party improve itself. Not knowing that this was a trap set up by the Party and its Great Leader to identify and capture any potential enemies, or—to use Chairman Mao's own words—to "lure snakes out of their lairs," many authors, poets, artists, researchers, and professors spoke their minds freely. As a result, they were labeled as anti-Party rightists and were uprooted from cities and forced into exile in rural areas and labor reform farms. If my father had done the same, he would have had his city residential permit revoked like many others and been sent to a labor farm or back to his home village. If my mother chose not to divorce him, like many other wives were forced to do—for their children's sake—she would have been expelled from the city along with her husband. My second sister, my brother, and I would have been born peasants.

The lesson was learned by all. Watch your mouth. Say the right things. Follow the crowd. Parrot the words. Grown-ups warned themselves, each other, and their children. Remember, the sun is always shining, the east is always red, and the Party is forever great. To survive was to say what everyone else said and be able to show that you were the same as everyone else. Think as stipulated by our Great Leader and his Party, cast away all doubts, and keep to the slogans. Learn to lie, to wear a mask, and to extinguish your voice or else hide it deep at the bottom of your heart. Words could get you into trouble and disaster always came from your mouth.

Remember, remember.

And yet . . .

I didn't want to remember. I tried to break the imposed silence by telling stories, stories I heard from my grandmother and my father and later learned on my own. I listened to my voice flapping its wings over the silent wall into an overcast sky. Like a bird, once it has flown from its cage, it will not want to fly back into it again.

When at the age of twenty-one, my mother had her first child, my oldest sister, in the spring of 1954, my grandma moved from Bengbu, an industrial city in the north of Anhui Province, to Hefei, the provincial capital where my family lived, to help take care of her first grandchild, and three more afterward. She became a migrating bird, flying back and forth between Bengbu and Hefei. Each time she came, she had to stay longer and longer, as my parents had to leave us more and more frequently. My mother, working full time as a librarian, was obligated to go to the countryside at least once a month to assist peasants with political movements. My father, an author and also a Party member, had to spend a good six to eight months in the distant rural areas, working as a Party secretary in different communes and writing at the same time.

The void left by my parents was filled by my grandma under whose wings we all huddled, feeling her soft blue cotton dajing shirt, smelling the fragrance of her hair oil, and listening to her mellow voice from which folk tales, opera romances, and ghost stories

trickled like a clear-water creek. The heat and humidity of summers retreated as we sat on our cool bamboo bed under the dark blue starry sky. My grandmother, sitting right beside our bed, waved a big palm fan back and forth to chase away ferocious mosquitoes that otherwise would have eaten us alive. As the fan danced with a steady rhythm, it turned into a magic wand with whose help we flew to the quiet and vast Moon Palace where we would meet the beautiful Moon Lady (Chang-O) who offered us a jar of sweet osmanthus wine and invited us to dance with her. We would follow Jade Rabbit, gliding over the surface of the moon, trying to catch a floating cloud. From the moon palace, we would then fly toward the Silver River (the Milky Way) where we joined the Weaving Fairy (Vega) on one side and then the Buffalo Boy (Altair) on the other.

"Did you see those two smaller stars on each side of the Altair?" my grandma would sigh. "They are the Weaving Fairy and Buffalo Boy's children—a boy and a girl. When the Weaving Fairy fell in love with Buffalo Boy, she sneaked out of the Heavenly Palace and married him. They lived a happy and peaceful life on earth, the Buffalo Boy plowing in the field and the Fairy weaving cloth at home. But the Fairy's mother, the Western Celestial Queen, had her snatched back to the palace and forbade her to return to earth. The Buffalo Boy, with the help of a magic water buffalo, flew all the way to the Heavenly Palace, carrying their children on a shoulder pole, one on each side. When he was near the entrance of the palace, the Queen pulled out her hair pin and scratched a Silver River in the sky that forever separated the Buffalo Boy and the Weaving Fairy. But every year, on the seventh day in the seventh month of each lunar year, magpies with red, orange, blue, silver, and golden feathers gather from all corners of China to build a bridge across the Silver River so that the Weaving Fairy and the Buffalo Boy can be together for that day."

The icy chill of the roaring north wind subsided as we curled up inside our cotton quilt, watching different dramas unfold from behind my grandmother's magical curtain of words. We followed Liniang to the Peony Pavilion where she secretly became engaged to

her lover against her father's wishes. We followed the route of the Princess of White Snake to the Broken Bridge over the West Lake in the city of Hang Zhou, an earthly paradise, where she fell in love with a handsome and kind-hearted scholar and fought to the death for their love against an evil monk. Then we listened to the wrongly accused Dou O, her voice of protest echoing through the heavens, declaring that on the day she was to be beheaded, the river would turn red and there would be a snow storm in June (the Sixth Month according to the lunar calendar). Everything happened exactly as she predicted. The power of her words finally carried out vengeance for the injustice done to her.

After each story, my grandma never forgot to add, "What I have told you, do not tell to anyone else, hear me? Those are all old stories. Don't tell them outside the house. Remember."

We all nodded, knowing well that the word "old," as in the old society, always carried with it a derogatory connotation. The Party and its Leader called on people to build a shining brand-new society and urged them to transform themselves into new people with pure revolutionary minds and spirits. These stories about fairies, spirits, ghosts, and immortals were the "remains of a feudalist society" that didn't fit into the new revolutionary era. But to me, these magical "Once upon a Times" took me on an unfettered flight from which I didn't want to return.

Once upon a time . . .

I heard another voice joining me in this flight: the voice of my father. During the limited time he stayed at home, one of my father's favorite things to do was to tell us stories. Every afternoon, around seven or seven thirty, after we finished our supper, my father would pull from his bedroom—which was also his study—his dark brown rattan armchair and place it in the middle of the living room. My siblings and I would go grab our small wooden stools and put them in two rows around the armchair—my brother and I in front and my two older sisters behind—and wait for the story to begin.

Most of the furniture in our household was loaned to us by my father's work unit, Anhui Provincial Association of Arts and Literature, and thus all stamped with its red seals. But the armchair belonged to my father and didn't have such a seal. Whenever he was home, he would sit in the chair at his big writing desk either reading or writing. The original brown of the armchair had faded into a shadowy yellow, but its surface was smoother and shinier than when new. "It was the finest and strongest rattan," my father told us. "It would only grow more solid through wearing." In this old but sturdy armchair my father leaned back, his long legs crossed, his left arm resting casually on the armrest, and his right forefinger and middle finger holding a burning cigarette. Our eyes followed its light blue twirl of smoke as it curled up in the air before drifting out of the windows. When he stubbed out the cigarette and slowly put it down in a dark blue marble ashtray on the coffee table nearby, that was his signal. He would clear his throat, take a deep sip from his big brown ceramic tea mug, glance around at each of his four little children sitting with their chins propped on their hands, and ask, "Now, are you ready?"

We always were, eagerly yet patiently waiting for him to draw up the magical curtain. Once he started telling, he wouldn't allow anyone to distract or interrupt him. Everyone had to be very quiet, as he put it, to be in the *milieu* of the story itself. Whenever he saw fit to stop, without warning, he concluded the way a traditional storyteller always did: "Well, everyone, we stop right here. If you want to know what happens next, wait until next time."

With that, he slowly rose from his armchair, his eyes sweeping over each of us with an intriguing smile. Then he strolled back into his study and disappeared into his own world of stories. Long after he left and after all my siblings had gone to play, I would still be sitting on my stool, immersed in those characters and what had happened and wondering what would happen to them next time we met. Most of the stories my father told us, I learned later on when I started reading on my own, were works by authors of Asia, Europe, and North America. Without knowing it, I had been acquainted

with characters and stories created by such authors as Tagore, Dickens, Hardy, the Brontë sisters, Balzac, Molière, Maupassant, Flaubert, Zola, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Melville, Hawthorne, Mark Twain, and Hemingway.

These and other books were shelved in the pine bookcase standing in the innermost corner of my parents' bedroom. About two meters high and one meter wide, the bookcase had double doors, the lower half of which were solid pine wood and the upper half clear glass, through which rows and rows of hard cover and paperback books could be seen. The bookcase was built by my grandfather as a wedding present to his beloved son-in-law. My mother often said that the most expensive property they had was all in that bookcase: the major portion of my father's salary and royalties, which amounted to a few thousand yuan a month, was spent on books. Like my father's old rattan armchair, the bookcase was free of the red seal. It was another piece of furniture my parents could claim as their own. It was their priceless treasure which, my father often said, would eventually be passed on to all of us.

By the time I learned to read, however, I would be warned to stay away from the bookcase and its treasure. In the summer of 1966, with his own first big-character poster, Chairman Mao lunched an unprecedented wide-scale political movement with the intention of purging the Party of any possible opponents and enemies, using middle school and college students as its driving force. The movement would later be known as the Great Proletarian Revolution. Mao became the Commander in Chief who conducted numerous reviews of the students, now organized as Red Guards. There were around two million at each review. Those students, who streamed into the capital from all over the country, assembled in the middle of the night, filed in at both sides of the Tiananmen Square for ten kilometers from east to west along Changan Avenue, waiting to be reviewed and to catch a glimpse of Chairman Mao the following day or the day after. Their Commander in Chief, accompanied by Deputy Commander in Chief Lin Biao holding his little red

book of Mao's sayings, would drive in an open jeep past tens of thousands of students who waved the little red books, screaming themselves hoarse, wildly shouting "long live Chairman Mao." Then they all went home to "make revolution"—to smash up everything that was old; they ravaged homes, wrecked schools, destroyed temples, and attacked any enemies or potential enemies of the Party and its leader.

The revolutionary whirlwind, raging in every corner of the land, dazzled and terrified everyone. Big posters and slogans covered walls and filled the streets, written on the lampposts and even on the roadways. Pamphlets and leaflets fluttered in the air, as cars with big loudspeakers shuttled back and forth broadcasting Mao's sayings. Party leaders of various ranks were escorted by the rebelling masses onto open trucks and paraded in public. They all wore dunce caps with humiliating slogans on their heads and placards on their chests with their names in black characters with big red *X*s through them. They would be forced to kneel, and were beaten and kicked while their arms were twisted backward by students. Other Red Rebels wielded leather army belts to whip these men and women mostly in their forties or fifties. The brass belt buckle struck their backs and heads with heavy thuds. Some of them would fall down, their hands clutching their heads while blood oozed between their fingers.

"Next, it will be our turn," I heard my father whispering to my mother one night after we all went to bed. They and my grandma were talking in lowered voices in the next room, but I could hear them. The images of those Red Guards and the bleeding faces of those in the parading trucks reeled through my mind and kept me wide awake and deeply worried. Some big-character posters were already put on the wall outside our complex, citing my father as one of the biggest "ox ghosts and snake demons" who were accused of using their novels and movies to engage in anti-Party and antirevolutionary activities. I knew it was only a matter of time until he would be hauled out for the mass denunciation meetings and street parades.