

WILD ONIONS



SHA WAS ASSIGNED to Red Rock Middle School as a seventh grader and moved into the dormitory in September of 1966. The school was located in a small town called Red Rock, ten kilometres away from her home in Chongqing City.

After Sha and other new students deposited their luggage in their allotted dormitory rooms, a Red Guard, a girl about sixteen, showed them around the campus. Noticing only empty classrooms, Sha could not help but ask, “Where are the students and teachers?”

The Red Guard patted her shoulder and chuckled. “Do you know anything about the Cultural Revolution?”

Sha nodded, remembering that teachers were under heavy criticism, and thus not allowed to teach; and then she shook her head, wondering why students were enrolled if there was no school

The Red Guard pointed at the posters on the wall that were crowded with large-sized Chinese characters handwritten in ink brush: “Look! This is what we students do: We follow Chairman Mao’s instruction and criticize all ideas of feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism that had been taught and spread in school before.”

“How do we do this?” asked another new student.

“Read all the large-character posters; join in the Red Guards’ activities, and bring Maoism to every corner of the world.” The Red Guard moved her hand in the air as if she were literally spreading Maoism into every corner of the dormitory.

“Can we join the Red Guards?”

“No. We don’t accept anybody under fourteen. In addition, only students that are the children of workers, poor peasants, and/or revolutionary carders are qualified to be Red Guards.”

Sha’s heart skipped a beat. Her parents did not belong to any of those groups, and besides, she was not even thirteen years old.

“But,” the Red Guard added, “you can come to help us. Our office is Room 109 in the administration building.”

The following day, Sha made her way to Room 109. Like some of other students, she copied the critical articles written by some of the Red Guards on large-sized paper with an ink brush. The students were told to make a few copies of each article and then post them in different locations, on and off campus. After a few weeks, Sha was pleased to find that her brush writing skills had improved considerably. Also, she dutifully read through the contents of all the large-character posters.

Sha shared a huge room with twelve other girls. Some of her roommates were Red Guards. They asked Sha and the other girls to join them for the Loyalty Dance. To demonstrate their loyalty to Chairman Mao, the girls danced, holding a red, heart-shaped cardboard with the character for “loyalty” brushed on with gold paint. Sha practiced the dance with a group of girls who called themselves the Maoist Propaganda Team. Sometimes, they performed the dance on the village streets.

In the evening Sha did not have any assignments to complete since the students had no classes to attend. Most literary works had been banned, and most movies had been labelled “poisonous weeds.” The cinema was used to criticize or denounce eight kinds of enemies defined by the revolutionary masses as: landowners, the rich, anti-revolutionaries, evils, rightists, traitors, spies, and capitalists.

In Sha’s room, the girls told each other stories to kill time. Whether sacred or ghostly, real or fictive, storytelling became an overwhelming preoccupation.

One evening, the girls climbed into their beds at the usual hour. As soon one of the roommates said, “Turn off the light,” Sha pulled her quilt over her head, to shield herself from the dark. However, her desire to listen to a new story was so strong that she poked her head out from under the quilt, straining to hear a voice. The room was so dim that

for a moment she could not see anything. The door's closed, she told herself. Don't be scared.

"On a starless night, in this hall," the hoarse voice of a storyteller blew like a gust of wind against her face. "A student named Ling dreamt of a long-haired girl in a white robe who patted her shoulders, and said, 'Wake up! Time for reading.' Ling suddenly opened her eyes, but no one was there."

"What happened next?" asked Sha, eyes wide, her quilt wrapped tightly around her.

"Listen," the storyteller said, clapping her hands for silence. "Since Ling had the same dream over and over, she told her dream to others. Finally, the story of the dream reached Nanny Wang in the kitchen. And guess what she said?"

"What did Nanny Wang say?" asked all the girls in the room at the same time as if they were reciting one of Chairman Mao's quotations.

"She said, 'Don't be afraid. The girl in the white robe is the spirit of the merciful old nun. She used to read prayers in that room.'"

"What? The old nun!"

"Yeah. Nanny Wang said the old nun hanged herself in this hall in 1949 after the Communists' takeover."

"Is it possible? There are no such things as ghosts," whispered one girl.

"The soul isn't a ghost. The souls of good people never disappear," replied another girl with certainty.

Until midnight, the girls in Sha's room exchanged opinions about the existence of souls and ghosts.

Sometimes at midnight, a loudspeaker would rouse them from their sleep, and announce Mao's latest political statement broadcast by radio. When this happened, the students would knock on each door in the dormitory, calling out, "Get up! Let's celebrate!" Sha would dress quickly and follow the other students out, each holding onto Mao's red book. The Red Guards would make sure to sport red armbands.

The leading group would play drums, beat bronze gongs and cymbals. Some would hold national flags. Sha would walk among the excited celebrators streaming down the narrow streets of Red Rock with their arms raised, shouting, "Long live Chairman Mao!" and "Follow Chair-

man Mao forever!" Sha would join the others, prancing and singing songs. Often, she would take notice of several of the town's residents standing under streetlights, watching the melee, yawning, or rubbing their eyes with handkerchiefs.

Another morning, Sha followed some of her roommates to the street to watch different groups of Red Guards argue with one another.

Among the crowd gathering in front of a three-storey government building in the town centre, a male student, about fifteen years old, waved his arms in the air, the scarlet band on his arm and its gold characters, "Red Guard," glistening in the sun. He shouted, "We're the best revolutionary team in town. Don't you think so?"

"Yes! We are!" Several students raised their arms.

"No, you're not!" A girl pushed through the crowd toward the boy. "We denounced the school principal at our meeting last Friday. Why didn't your team join us?"

"We went to the municipal meeting to denounce the mayor," yelled another girl, who held up both her arms.

"We've already criticized the principal. Now we're going to knock down a big capitalist lackey. Do you understand?" The boy laughed and shook some sheets of paper in his hand. When he let go of them, the fliers fluttered over the crowd. "Comrades, read our political statement!" His voice echoed in front of the wall of the building covered by large-character-posters.

Sha caught one and read it.

"Look who's here." Someone tugged at her blouse.

Sha spun around and saw her roommate, Lilei, with a girl about eleven years old. It was the sister of Sha's friend. "Fang! Why did you come into town?" asked Sha with surprise.

"Do you know where my sister has gone? Nobody seems to know anything about her," said the girl, with a confused look on her face.

"She's gone to the revolutionary holy place, Yan'an," Sha answered.

"What?" Fang didn't expect this answer. "She went to Yan'an! That's so far away," she said, her eyes wide with fear.

"Don't worry." Sha explained that many students wanted to follow in the steps of Mao who had led the Red Army on a Long March on

foot for two years—from 1934-1936—during the battle with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist Party. “She joined a Long March team and left last week.”

“Do you know when they will get there?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe in a month or two.”

“My parents don’t know she’s gone.” Fang wiped her sweaty face with a handkerchief. “She hasn’t been home for three weeks. That’s why I came to find her.”

“How did you get here?”

“On foot! The bus drivers stopped working because they are on revolutionary duties.”

“Come with me to my dorm.” Sha gripped Fang’s hand and left the crowd. “Your sister asked me to tell your parents about her Long March when I went home. But I was too busy to leave last weekend.”

“You don’t have any classes, my mom said. What are you doing in school?”

“Reading wall posters, shouting ‘Defend Chairman Mao’ and ‘Down with Liu Shaoqi’ at the denunciation meetings. We also join in street demonstrations, like the one you saw just now.” Sha pointed to a building. “Look, this is my dorm.”

“It looks like a temple.”

“It’d been a convent until it became a student dorm seventeen years ago.”

Sha led Fang through the courtyard. They went upstairs and entered Sha’s room.

“Why are many of the beds empty?” asked Fang.

“Some students like your sister are away on their Long March.” Sha shook her head. “Some may fear the revolution and hide at home.”

“Now I understand why you don’t go home.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sha.

“You want to make revolution.”

“Most of my roommates are eighth graders or older,” Sha explained enthusiastically. “Some of them are Red Guards. They are from Red Rock, but they don’t go home.”

“You must like it here. But I want to stay home.”

“We’re not here for fun. Some girls’ homes are just a five-minute walk

away from here, but they live in the dorm to participate in revolutionary activities. Do you remember the girl who took you to me, Lilei? Her dad is the school principal and a capitalist lackey. This is why she moved into the school—to show her loyalty to the revolution. I like these girls and want to learn from them,” Sha said as she retrieved a box from her drawer and opened it. “Have some cookies. I’ll find water for you.”

She checked a few thermoses in the room for drinking water, but could only find a half glass of boiled water. Sha handed Fang the water and then pointed to her upper bunk bed.

“You can take a nap if you want,” Sha said .

Fang nodded and climbed onto the bed.

“Wake up.” Sha shook Fang’s arm after she had read a few pages of Mao’s red book and made some notes.

“What time is it?”

“Maybe four o’clock. Do you want to go pick wild onions?”

“Why?”

“The meals in the cafeteria are awful. We call them pigfeed.”

“Pigfeed? Why?”

“Sometimes the rice is half cooked and the carrots and Chinese cabbage are mushy.”

“My dad says we should live a simple life to fight against bourgeois ideas. But I don’t think I would like pigfeed.”

“It tastes salty and watery. But I can make a salad with wild onions and chilli peppers.”

“Sounds good. Let’s go.” Fang came down from the top bunk.

Sha and Fang walked into a field near the school. The sunlight beamed through the gaps between the hills and coloured the late autumn. Stones shone among yellow grass, and golden brown leaves hung from the almost bare trees. Faded, white and yellow flowers, and red and black wild-berries dotted the bushes. Weeds waved among a jumble of rocks, and fallen leaves danced with the wind.

Sha enjoyed the quiet wilderness. All those wall posters, red slogans, denunciation meetings, and busy crowds that filled her mind disappeared. Suddenly, she felt lonely and homesick. Dad’s thoughtful eyes

under his glasses, Mom's over-elaborate words, and her younger sister's playhouse made of little stools, came alive in her memory.

Thinking about her family, Sha sighed. Chairman Mao asks us to participate in the revolution. But I don't have the right family background to become a Red Guard. She shivered, and tried to push thoughts of her mother's background out of her mind.

Once she asked her mother, "Do I have grandparents?"

"Yes, but they are dead."

"How?"

"They just died." Her mother was reluctant to talk about them.

Later, Sha discovered, from reading a note in her family's residence booklet, that her mother had been born to a landowner's family. Since she was a little girl, she had been told at school that all landowners had exploited the working class. As a result, they were classified as sinners and enemies of the revolution. She felt guilty about her grandparents, but felt glad that the class enemies on her maternal family's side had vanished from the world.

After spotting a tall wild onion, Sha stepped forward and bent to pull it out. A pungent scent drifted into her nostrils. She pushed away the weeds to get at the large wild onion heads. Unexpectedly, her head bumped into something hard. She looked up and saw a cracked gravestone. A tomb lay alone among the rocks, framed by a mass of tangled weeds. The inscription on the stone was blurry though she could still recognize a few words: "A devoted woman ... under the Nine ... Friends...." The date was not legible. A wooden board had been inserted into the tomb, and a few words scribbled with red paint read: "The nun deserves death!" Her heart sank, and Sha knew some Red Guards had been here to denounce the nun who had died seventeen years before. She stared at the tombstone for a while. Chills ran through her body.

Sha touched Mao's badge on the front of her sweater and desperately wondered: Who will have this badge if I die? What does death mean? If I die, where will I go? Where am I? Why am I here? She felt as if her body had become airy and weightless. Everything that had looked extraordinarily clear was now vague. Her thoughts flew far away into an invisible world, and she felt helpless and terrified. Sitting on the ground, almost bursting into tears, she finally shrieked, "Fang!"

“Yeah? I’m here!” Fang ran up to her. “An old tomb! Maybe it’s empty. Do you think ghosts exist?”

Staring at Fang, Sha shook her head.

Fang pulled Sha to her feet. “Let’s go home. I’m starving.”

“Okay. We have enough onions for supper.”

The two teens walked away from the wilderness, their shadows lengthening behind them as the sun went down.

A month later, Sha joined a group of teenaged students who had decided to follow Mao’s instruction that educated youth must receive re-education from the working class. Most of these students came from the families of doctors, teachers, lawyers, scientists, and researchers—all intellectuals were labelled “Stinking Number Nines” because they were ranked after the other eight identified types of “evil people.” Laden with their luggage, the group trudged along to a factory, fifteen kilometres away from the school. In the factory, the students were directed to help cooks in the kitchen.

“You girls, wash these vegetables.” A cook cut off the roots of napa, Chinese cabbages, and soaked them in a huge sink.

Sha and two other girls donned aprons and bent over to rinse the huge pile of napa. Her fingers moved along the leaves in the water. She felt a little disappointed since she did not get the chance to learn how to operate a machine or how to produce goods in the factory. She had not expected to end up working in the kitchen. One of the boys beside her asked the cook, “We have strength. Can we knead the dough?” The boys rolled up their sleeves.

“Sure. Watch me first.” Another cook turned over a large basin and dumped a lump of dough onto the board. He took a kitchen knife and cut the dough into a couple of pieces. “Take one. Roll it out with your hands like this.” The cook demonstrated. “Got it?”

Sha became accustomed to her chores in the kitchen, and time dragged on. She wondered how long this type of revolutionary life would last.

Two weeks passed. One evening, a fellow student who left in the early morning to find out what was going on in school, returned with

shocking news. “The Defending East Long March Team has returned. They carried back a student with a leg fracture after he fell from a truck. The June 11th Fighting Team got marked as an anti-Mao organization, and –” he hesitated for an instant then said, “I’ve heard that Principal Yu committed suicide by ingesting poison as he couldn’t bear the denunciation.”

Sha turned around to search for Lilei and found her squatting with both hands on her face.

“This is your mail,” the same student called to Sha.

She did not have time to comfort Lilei. She took the crumpled letter. The envelope had her father’s handwriting on it. With shaking hands, she opened the letter. It read:

Nov. 14, 1966

Dear Sha,

Your mother is very ill. She was hospitalized yesterday. The doctor said she needs surgery. Hope you can return home as soon as possible.

Your father

The letter had been mailed two weeks earlier.

Lilei grieved over her father’s death while Sha was saddened by her mother’s hospitalization. Together they dragged themselves back to the school the same evening.

Again, there were no buses. The following morning, Sha walked home. It took her over two hours to get there.

She pushed the door open and saw the nanny sitting with her sister. “Nanny Li, is my dad home?”

“Oh, dear. You’re back.” The elderly woman wiped her eyes.

“How’s my mom?”

“She ... she couldn’t wait. She is gone.”

“No, no, she is not!” Sha’s mouth twitched. She could not swallow this hard pill. She grasped the woman’s hand as she sobbed. “Where is my dad?”

“He’ll be back soon. Sit down, poor thing.” Nanny Li patted Sha on the back and sighed. “Good people live short lives. You don’t know

how much your mother worried about you. You shouldn't have lived at school."

"I needed to join in the Cultural Revolution," Sha explained in tears.

"I don't know why we need a revolution." Shaking her head, Nanny Li wheezed. "Poor girl, you're more confused than me."

Sha sat on a chair, weeping. Her six-year-old sister did not understand what had happened, but she walked over to Sha and cried along with her. Sha clasped the little girl in her arms. The solitary tomb in the field reappeared in front of her. The missing words inscribed on the cracked gravestone became clear: "A devoted religious woman of the world, whose soul now rests beneath the Nine Springs; a place for the dead."

It was some time afterward that Sha discovered a worn envelope in a suitcase left by her mother. Inside was a faded photograph of her mother when she was about fifteen years old. On the back it read, "Shuzhen Feng from Yude Girls' School, Chongqing, July 1945." She also found a small metal cross with a figure of Jesus on it as well. Her first interpretation was: Mom was superstitious. She did not ask her father about the photograph and cross because she knew no answers would be forthcoming. Her parents had never mentioned her mother's past since her mother's family had been labelled "evil." Sha carefully hid the photo in a safe place. The next evening, she dug a hole under a tree outside the apartment building. Looking around and seeing nobody, she laid the cross into the hole and covered it with dirt. The snow fell and whitened the spot immediately.

Years later, Sha became a Ph.D. student at the University of Toronto, Canada. In the summer of 1986, she spent hours in the university archives daily, doing research for her dissertation on the women missionaries from the United Church, who had worked in Sichuan Province, China. Sha flipped through piles of The Annual Reports of the Women's Missionary Society of the Methodist/United Church of Canada month by month. Suddenly, a photo with the heading, "1945 Graduation Class

of Yude Girls' School" caught her eye. With eagerness, she read the accompanying article.

The author, Margaret Bliss, detailed her missionary experience with Yude Girls' School in the 1940s. According to Margaret's tale, Honglin Feng, the richest landowner in the Nanshan area was converted to Christianity. Then he became the first parent to send his daughter, Shuzhen, to the girls' school. Following his example, five other families allowed their daughters to attend the same school.

A class photo that accompanied the essay rang a bell. Is this photo the one I saw twenty years ago? She wondered as she examined the young faces and recognized her mother among them. Margaret Bliss's story helped uncover the mystery of her mother's family. Sha finally understood why her mother had that graduation photo and metal cross as keepsakes. She felt proud of her mother and sorrow for her confused youth during the Cultural Revolution.

Returning the copy of the missionary monthly to the service desk, she asked for Margaret Bliss's address.

The archivist located the information and said, "Margaret Bliss never married and doesn't have any immediate family members. In 1983 she moved into a nursing home in Montreal."

Sha thanked the archivist and copied down the address hoping that Margaret would remember her mother and could tell Sha more about her mother's past.

Back in her apartment, she wrote to Margaret Bliss asking to meet with her and mailed the letter.

She checked her mailbox everyday after that. Nine days later, her letter returned with a notice attached to the envelope: "Deceased."

One day, at the end of August, Sha rode a train to Montreal. From the train station she got on a bus that took her out to a cemetery in the suburbs. The gate had a board on which the words, "The United Church," were carved. Sha wanted to pay respect to the woman who had taught and influenced her mother.

The lawn was bright green and birds twittered in the trees. Colourful flowers or wreaths were placed in front of the many crosses and

headstones in the cemetery. Sha examined the words on each headstone as she strolled. The breeze blew the scent of freshly cut grass. With a deep breath, she seemed back in the open field where she had come across that ancient tomb. Sha envisioned her own little figure in the wild twenty years earlier.

At last, she located Margaret Bliss's grave. She laid by Margaret's headstone a bunch of red roses. Her words on a white ribbon read: "To Margaret Bliss, teacher of Shuzhen Feng. From Feng's daughter, Sha." She read the inscription on the stone again:

Margaret Bliss

Born on May 2, 1904

Back in the Lord's Hands on June 23, 1986

In Chongqing City of China, 1930-1952, for the Lord

She stood motionless. The broken tombstone in the field near Red Rock Middle School reappeared in front of her. She wondered if the nun's damaged tombstone had been repaired after the Cultural Revolution ended. The tiny cross buried in the memory of her childhood glittered in the sunlight. Suddenly, the aroma of wild onions wafted into her nostrils.