



The Little Girl Who Thought She Could Shoot Down The Moon





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For Ai Mei, and for the whole world as far as she knew, 1968 was the year that the grown ups learned to fly. School teachers flew most often, but so did their doctor, and the mother of one of her friends, other people's parents, too. One after another, each of them stood with straight legs, bent their heads down almost to their knees, and extended their trembling arms to the smiling girls and boys of the Red Guard who stood at their sides. The children pulled those arms straight so they were stretched out like the wings of an airplane. Then they took turns forcing the old people they now called Demon, or Ghost, or Capitalist to remain with their knees locked and their heads straining towards their feet for hours while they wept and moaned. Sometimes the disgraced adults stood in airplane position until nightfall, and sobs rose into the sky like the croaking of frogs at dusk.

And sometimes the Red Guard tied their wrists and threw the ropes over tree limbs. Then they really did go up into the air like planes, except that they were screaming. If the victims looked out at all – at the boys and girls who tortured them or the other children, the ones who only watched – it was with eyes that had already turned into dark glass beads. Birds' eyes, Ai Mei thought, and she wondered what they were doing in human faces.

Many years later, Ai Mei would come to understand what the Cultural Revolution had done to her and to everybody else too. She would understand what fear is and why the teachers and the doctor who had cried in front of them all would smile so desperately afterwards, with faces that would never look right again. In time, even the way that her mind had distorted the world around her began to make sense. She thought that she'd seen her surroundings the way a little water

bug might see the universe as it wandered across the clouds and sun floating at the top of a deep lake. After all, the very lightness of her steps had depended on not thinking about what might be actually waiting for her below. It was enough to be eleven years old and to know that people were turning into airplanes and birds, that public speakers bloomed like some strange new species of black amaryllis, poisoning the air with “Long life to Mao!” and glorious revolution was what happened when pleading men and women knelt down like characters in a children’s story to be whipped by the teenagers who lived next door. The world did not become real to Ai Mei until the night the Red Guard came to her own home. Even then her parents said that they had all been lucky.

“Nobody was hurt,” her mother said. “We are so fortunate.”

Her sisters, whose lips were still swollen, nodded their agreement.

“You have to know how to handle them,” their father said. “The minute I heard them outside the door, I had a plan. It was my plan that saved us.” He was able to look in his family’s faces when he said that, but his voice got watery and too full one minute and then disappeared into nothing the next. It made her think of a pen that rubbed across the paper but couldn’t leave a mark. “Did you hear them? They called me Old Chou. I knew,” he said, “right from the beginning. I, I knew the way to handle them all.”

Ai Mei hadn’t known anything from the beginning; she had had been sitting on the corner of their bed, studying, once again, her little pile of pamphlets about the ancient women of the Banpo, when she looked up find the Red Guard, shouting and banging a big pot in the middle of her home.

That’s when she saw First Sister and Third Sister standing very close to each other beside the door. She saw their mother sitting in one of the folding metal chairs with her hands clasped together and her eyes cast down to the table in front of her. And their father – he was sitting across from his wife, but he was turned away from them all, and seemed to be considering something very small and very far away while five Red Guard ripped apart his few books and called them all traitors. Later Ai Mei would think about the Guard. She would think that most of those children came from families even poorer than her own, that they had hands

that had never touched a new toy, or a fat red envelope with new year's money, or even running water, some of them, and now they had permission to go into anyone's home and take hold of whatever they wanted. But at the moment when she realized that the revolution had entered their home, Ai Mei looked only at the bland, pale face of their leader, Xiang Zhou.

And it was strange, even stranger than hearing her family called the enemy, to realize that this was a human face, as real as her own. It looked like something that had been painted on a wall and brought to life to devour her.

"The people in this home ate a good dinner," the face announced.

"They ate pork!" one of the girls said. She sniffed loudly, several times, like a child pretending to be a dog, and she couldn't hide the excitement in her face.

"They've just been cooking it. They get fat while the workers starve!"

"Only for the children," her mother told the girl. "Only the children ate."

"Not me! I didn't have any meat even on New Year's," her father cried. His back was still turned. "Everybody else had some, but I control myself. Everything for the family."

"Everything for the children," her mother said. "I don't eat either."

At this, the Guard began shouting again. "Everything for the revolution!" They were saying "traitors" and "rats" and "Destroy the four olds!"

"What else do these reactionaries have?" Zhou asked the teenagers who surrounded him, and the same girl answered, her chin stuck out, and her eyes wide with triumph.

"They're rich!" she said. "They steal from the workers. We should search every where, search everything for, for their gold!"

"Oh yes," Zhou answered. "A family like this certainly has gold." Ai Mei's family lived in a two room apartment and shared a bathroom with everyone else on the ground floor of their building. It seemed that Zhou might have smiled then, just slightly, as he leaned against the rusting, iron framed bed with its ancient mattress and gazed over the other children's heads at the lone picture of Mao cut from

a newspaper and glued to the concrete wall. “Great treasure,” he added. “I wonder what they’re hiding in this big cabinet.” And he waved his arm. “Send your wife here, Chou,” he said. “Let her show us.”

“Hurry!” their father said. He reached back behind him and tried to wave his wife away with his upside down hand. “Hurry up!”

Ai Mei saw how her mother’s hands trembled as she reached toward the wood door.

“Everything on the floor!” Zhou shouted, and the woman cleared the shelves with her hands and arms, sweeping her linens and her medicines, the family pictures and the sewing scissors into a pile at Zhou’s feet. On top of everything else was a red silk sheet embroidered in gold – the mother-in-law’s traditional wedding gift.

“What’s this?” Zhou asked. He let the cloth swing from the tips of his fingers in front of the young Guards. They were not slow to do their duty.

“Silk!” the angry girl screamed. “Real silk and, look, there’s gold!” She snatched it away and began hitting it against the woman’s forehead and chest. “Spy!” she said. “Capitalist spy! Taiwanese spy!” The golden flowers and peacocks careened like flashes of light in the half lit room, and that one flapping piece of silk sounded like a storm blowing over open land.

A boy stepped forward. “She should suffer a thousand blows,” he said. He took his leather belt off and stared nervously around the room. Ai Mei’s mother dropped her head even lower as she clutched the hem of her cotton jacket on both sides and waited. Zhou raised one hand.

“Who should suffer the blows?” he asked. And then he said, “Chou, turn around.” Very slowly, the man turned.

Never in her life could Ai Mei have imagined a face like that on her father. Not even the people who were turning into airplanes and birds had looked more frightened. Zhou took the wedding sheet back and dangled it gleefully from his fingertips. “Maybe this is yours, Chou?”

“Belongs to her.” Chou pointed at his wife.

“Hers alone? She doesn’t share it with anyone?” The face twisted itself into a knowing smile. “Not even in bed, Old Chou?”

There were several giggles at that, as the children edged closer.

“Hers alone,” Chou finally said. “She doesn’t share.”

“So only she should be beaten, then? Beaten or killed?”

“Only she! Only that woman does counter-revolutionary things. That woman and the children, they, they do bad things.”

“Only that woman?” Zhou asked. “Only that woman does counter revolutionary things?” Zhou had the gift of imitation. He could make his voice sound like a foolish old man’s. “They, they, they do bad things? They’re the only ones?”

A high pitched noise started out of Ai Mei’s mother. She was sobbing with her mouth clamped shut. Probably it was this – the sound of a woman who couldn’t open her lips even to cry – that made the words come out of Ai Mei.

“Go home and beat your own mother.” The room fell silent then. Ai Mei saw what was happening on the faces around her, and the voice that her mother’s desperation had called into being grew a little louder. “You don’t need to ask my father what to do. You can just ask me; I’ll tell you. Go home, Zhou; go beat your own mother. Go home and kill your. . .”

For an instant, even Zhou looked frightened. But almost immediately, he composed himself and slapped her two sisters, and just as quickly everybody else seemed to remember their own roles as well.

First Sister and Third Sister stood very still, like two little saints ready to bear anything while their faces sprouted twin red flowers right in the middle. “We love the revolution,” First Sister said. Blood dripped on her teeth.

The Red Guard began shouting all at once, all about traitors and death and the wrong outlook, while her father shouted, “Stop making trouble, Ai Mei!”

“She’s always the one making trouble,” her mother said. Zhou had flung the red sheet over her head so that she looked like a child caught playing with the grown ups’ things. Tears dripping from her chin, the woman turned towards him almost beseechingly. “I’ve told her so many times not to have the wrong outlook. I always tell her that, but she never listens to her mother.”

“Never listens,” the father said. “Never listens with her. . .” He seemed to be struggling to remember the phrase. “Her wrong outlook. Wrong outlook! Always totally wrong!”

“Ai Mei,” Zhou said. “Do you see how much trouble you cause?” Picking up a wet cloth from the sink in the hall, he wiped the blood from her sisters’ faces.

“Always causes trouble,” her mother said.

“Your parents agree with me, Ai Mei,” Zhou said. The face that he turned on her was more like a painting than ever, round and serene. Like a little god’s, Ai Mei thought, with a string of pearls around his neck. Like somebody who wanted everyone to see that he didn’t care how other people felt, or how much they hated him, or how badly he hurt them.

The face that her parents pretended to love better than her own.

Ai Mei watched him. She listened to her mother repeating, “This is the girl who causes all the trouble,” and she watched the triumph that stole across Zhou’s smug face.

“You don’t punish her enough,” Zhou said, and he gestured to the Guard.

The gesture was enough. Ai Mei’s pant legs were rolled up, and a girl not much older than she was allowed to whip her for a long time with a belt. And when she finally began to cry, Zhou told the whole room not to be weak like Ai Mei, not to be a baby and cry like Ai Mei.

Afterwards, when the Red Guard had left and her parents were saying how fortunate it was that no one was hurt, Ai Mei escaped to the smaller second room where she slept with her sisters. She wrapped her blanket around herself in the

comfortable middle of the bed, the spot between the place where First Sister and Third Sister slept, and she looked out into the little bit of darkness that was her own. She was waiting for her mother to come in. Her mother had seen what happened to her legs, and she would have to put medicine where the skin was broken. Even if the medicine stung, Ai Mei wouldn't complain. She would say she was sorry anyway for causing so much trouble, and her mother would put her arms around her, and maybe she would call her Little Good Good as if she were still a baby.

Little Good Good, Ai Mei thought, and her chest began to hurt as if she could hardly stand the thought of anyone saying such a ridiculous thing to her. Tears leaked out the corners of her eyes as she imagined her mother leaning over the bed to wash her cuts.

“Little Good Good,” her mother would say, or even, “Precious Treasure.”

And she didn't need that, Ai Mei thought. It seemed like a terrible thing to think that she would need her mother to come in that room and take care of her. Yet when the door opened at last, and she saw her mother come in with the light, the pain beneath Ai Mei's ribs disappeared.

That was before her mother spoke in the strange voice. It was a very high and superior voice that Ai Mei had never heard before, “At least I have two good daughters. Two good daughters who love the revolution.” She paused. “They will sleep with the rest of the family tonight.”

Ai Mei didn't answer her mother.

“Only two good daughters,” the high voice said. And once again, her mother paused, waiting, and once again Ai Mei said nothing to her. When the door closed, Ai Mei began to wring her hands, using very tight, small gestures, and she told herself, rapidly, that she didn't care. Only her legs were hurt, and she didn't care, because other things were more important. She would never care how much anyone hurt her, and she especially didn't care what her parents said because she was too old for that. It was a relief not to need them at all. Then, very slowly, her hands came to rest, and a stronger voice, like the one that had come from her mouth in front Zhou, joined in with the first.

She told herself she didn't care if she was different either. She was different, and she always had been different, and that was because it was better to be different. It made her less of an idiot. It made her like she was before the Revolution when people didn't call her a traitor; they called her smart. Smarter than Zhou, she told herself, but as she thought this, the image of his face, like the moon, round and pale, and impossibly beyond the reach of someone like her appeared in the darkness.

Ai Mei fell asleep picturing that face, and she woke and slept and woke again all night, one minute dreaming that she was so powerful she could shoot down the moon. The next minute she had no power at all. She was an insect that had slipped below the surface of a very dark lake and knew that it was drowning before the cold, cold eyes of the waiting fish.