

For the Love of the Sun

Leo Wilson

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We will set fire to our yesterdays to light up our tomorrows. The concept of selfishness is examined right here, as we donate our belongings to the commune. Every citizen must contribute and do their part for the Great Leap Forward. If every person does their part, we will be besting Britain's iron production in a heartbeat.

“Mama, the Party Secretary is coming. You need to get your pottery out now!”

“But I don't want to.”

The pottery is beautiful, I must admit. A nimble dragon is unleashed into a land of flower blossoms and magnificent trees that spiral out of control. A peach meets the dragon's eyeline and its greedy tongue slowly engulfs it in a curtain of blue. All this is encapsulated on a piece of round, silvery pottery, a beacon of pure magic.

“Remember the Chairman's words, Mama, ‘At no time and in no circumstance should a Communist place their personal interests first.’ You seem to be forgetting our values.”

“Wang Ge-Ming. Do you really think I'd forget our values? I'll put it in the pile.”

“Good.”

Our house is dark. A shaft of light illuminates the low stools, beaten earth, and a portrait of the Chairman.

Guohua collects me and makes me of use in the town yard. I am glad to be of service. Without a second glance I quickly obliterate the ceramics of old and sentimental into smithereens. I smile the smile of every child singed with godly powers, the power of destroying worlds. The phoenixes do not rise from the ashes, the kings lay slain, and the dragons are dismembered beyond recognition. All these fantasy lands are for children. Now is simply not the time nor place for child's play. We have a revolution on our hands.

“Guohua, hurry up or we will be late for school!”

“Sorry, I was late for the queue at the soup kitchen.”

“Well, a bit of queueing doesn’t hurt, with the amount of food we are getting.”

“Damned right! I haven’t been this well fed since... well... as far as I can remember.”

The regime is working, and the fact I have supported it since it began, puts a proud set of white teeth in my mouth. This bright new commune, with all united for the common good, is a thing to behold. But an old man ruins the moment by choosing to speak.

“Young boys, I saw you using your chopsticks wrongly. Don’t use them like a spoon. It is impractical and there is no elegance in that.”

“Excuse me, Comrade! Please don’t talk to us like that, like we are somehow inferior to you. Times are changing, Comrade. We are all equal now. Capitalists boss people around, Communists don’t.”

“In my day children respected the advice of elders. These shenanigans have made you barbarous.”

Guohua and I gasp. We have weeded out a counter-revolutionary and his reign of terror will be short-lived. The old man tried making his views our own and disguised it as ‘advice’. I am disgusted by him. People like him are the catalyst of catastrophe and we will end him.

The crowd has gathered in wait for its prey. The old man is dragged towards the centre with a sign revealing his true character:

“Capitalist!”

The old man looks terrified. His eyes claim many lives with their seething resentment. His bony fingers are held back and, with him in this most vulnerable state, they beat him and beat him. I flinch at first, but I become accustomed to it, and I know he deserves it.

“Guohua, we did the right thing didn’t we?”

“Yes. Without us, his ideas might have spread. We managed to contain it, and I’m glad we did.”

Guohua and I are newfound heroes, and we are ready to let the capitalists burn.

“Why are you home so late? I had to fetch the food myself.” Mama puts down a plate of dumplings.

“After school, we watched a counter-revolutionary get beaten. Oh, you should have seen his face! That was a very guilty man.”

“Well... Friday is the only time the whole family can all be together without interference. So, I don’t like the fact you ditched us to watch an old man get caned on the bottom!”

“What I do is not under your authority...”

“I am your Mama! It’s my duty to look after you.”

“You repressive old people and your traditional old ways make me sick. This is not the past, this is now. This is the time of freedom and fairness. The world has moved on from your ideas.”

“I’m sorry if I am a bit bossy, son, but I just wanted all of us to be together, for just an afternoon at least. We hardly see each other.”

I go to bed.

Morning comes. The public speaker system crackles into life. ‘Stand up those who would not be slaves!’ - the familiar music. The piercing sun stabs deep inside me. The prolonged exposure gradually makes my skin tougher. I need tough skin.

“Mama, where’s my tunic?”

We all wear the same dusty blue outfits. Unable to find mine, I search my mother's stack. A hard object reveals itself to me. I'm worried about what it might be. The object is the same shape as...

My heart sinks.

A traitor in my own kin!

A mother tainted by incorrect ideas, selfishness, and deceit.

I don't know what to do...

Liwei waits for me for on the walk back from school. The sun is bright. The streets are musty.

"Was that just the most boring lesson ever? I thought I was going to fall asleep."

"What?" I'm preoccupied.

"Are you going to ping pong tonight?"

"No, not tonight."

"Ge-Ming! Why are you so low-spirited? Like you just witnessed Mao die or something."

"Liwei, I'm just tired that is all."

"Is it because Yulan rejected you?"

"No... And she's a capitalist anyway."

"Heavens, Ge-Ming, why are you so serious now? We used to have fun. We all know these things are happening, but you can just let them happen, why do you always want to be in the forefront?"

"This is the revolution."

"I've seen the way you look at her in political science class, that's not very revolutionary, I'd say."

“Do you really want to go back to the old ways? We all saw what the rich got up to. They never cared anything for us.”

“I don’t think you care for anyone anymore.”

“Oh, shut up you cap-...”

“Capitalist? Were you seriously going to call me a capitalist? What are you going to do, report me? Report me like you did to your own mother? This is madness. Everybody accusing everybody. Where does it end?”

I run.

I run along Zhongshan Road, past the Mao statue, the communal kitchen, take the corner by Old Doctor Wu’s, the house now deserted. I hear chanting. It’s getting louder and louder on my approach. The familiar group of phrases:

“Down with the landlords,

Down with the capitalists,

Down with the counter-revolutionaries!”

When I arrive, the crowd parts and in the centre there she is, my mother, on her knees and slumped, as if she has discarded her own body like a rag doll. Her hair is straggled in blood. A placard around her neck says ‘counter-revolutionary’. Stunned, I drop my homework book. As I kneel to pick it up, she sees me and her body stiffens and becomes her own again, filled with purpose.

“Son.”

“Mama.”

She stretches out her arm, and her trembling hand reaches up. I think she is about to touch my face. But at the same moment, I feel many hands prodding me forwards.

“He’s one of them!” someone shouts.

“He should join her!” shouts another.

I force them back as I stand up. I reach out a hand to my mother. Open palmed to start with, it closes leaving one accusing finger.

“She’s a capitalist!” I shout.

The crowd cheers and surges around me. My mother’s grief-stricken face disappears behind a veil of blue uniforms.

“Down with the landlords,

Down with the capitalists,

Down with the counter-revolutionaries!”

I feel a sharp pang in my eyes and put my head down briefly to catch my breath.

When I stand straight again, all I can see is a field of raised arms and a single rock lifted high above the crowd like an offering. The rhythmic chanting continues and the rock falls with a dull thud like a dropped pumpkin.

I push through the crowd again and I see her body splayed out, pulled by two men, intensifying her pain, as they drag her away. Her bare feet rake the gravel and paint it in red. Her head is slumped and broken; her eyes tightly shut. They drag her to the public rice warehouse. They say she spent several hours there alone, wailing and mumbling indecipherably until she died.

That was all some time ago now. The revolution has moved on. One bad harvest is not going to stop us. I sometimes still think about my mother, but I cannot cry for her. I will not cry for her. Revolutionaries cannot be dragged back by the sentimentalities of yesterday. We have a destiny to fulfil, as we work, we strive, and we march to a better tomorrow.