

## Chapter 3

A Bird Who Takes Fright at the Sound of the Bow  
The Liang Family Entertains Ardent Young Guests

One day in June, when Weilin came home from playing with Yuezhu in the hollow, Professor Fan was in the apartment. Weilin had seen Professor Fan before. He was a teacher at the college, an old friend of Father's, of about Father's age. Weilin had the dim impression that Father and Professor Fan were close in some way, perhaps sharing mutual sympathies about something. Mother said that Professor Fan was the best scholar at the college, and had published papers in international journals. However, he had made an error of some kind in one of the movements, and lost his professorship, and never been able to get it back. Now his title was just Lecturer. This put him below Father's rank; but Father always deferred to him, and made a point of addressing him as Professor Fan.

Professor Fan was sitting with Father and Mother at the table in the living-room when Weilin came in. Mother was sitting forward with her elbows on the table, in a rather tense, perhaps angry, posture. Father just looked thoughtful. Professor Fan wore his usual expression—anxious and fretful. There was a newspaper on the table—an odd thing, as newspapers were delivered to work units to be read in libraries or study rooms, not to individuals. There was nothing else to be deduced from Professor Fan's presence, as they had obviously stopped talking when they heard Weilin's feet on the stairs. There was an uncomfortable pause during

which no-one said anything. Then Professor Fan said: “Well, we must follow the General Line and obey the directives of the leaders.”

“Yes,” said Mother. “We must study Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Zedong Thought and strive to fulfill the tasks set for us by the Party.”

Father said nothing. After Professor Fan had gone, taking the newspaper with him, Weilin asked Father what they had been talking about. Father chuckled.

“Old Fan!” he said. “He’s a ‘bird who takes fright at the sound of the bow’.”

Weilin did not know this idiom. He asked Mother to explain it, but she would not. She seemed very troubled—almost (he thought) close to tears. He found the idiom anyway in one of Father’s books.

### **The Bird Who Takes Fright at the Sound of the Bow**

In ancient times, in the Kingdom of Wei, there was a famous archer, whose name was Geng Lei. One day he was out walking with the King of Wei when they saw a gaggle of wild geese passing above them. Geng Lei said: “I can shoot down a bird using my bow alone, with no arrow.” The King demanded a demonstration. Geng Lei raised his empty bow and took aim at the rearmost of the geese. At the twang of the bowstring the goose fell dead from the sky. The King was astonished. Geng Lei explained: “I could tell that this bird had previously been wounded by an arrow. I saw that he was rather slow in flight, and I heard that his cry had a note of fear in it. From this I knew that his wound was not yet healed, that his heart was not yet steady again. When he heard the bowstring he at once took fright and tried to fly up higher to escape; but his strength and spirit failed him, and he died.”

Having read this, Weilin himself felt troubled. Why should Father speak of Professor Fan in that way? What did Professor Fan have to be scared of? Perhaps of being demoted again. But if Professor Fan was the bird who takes fright at the sound of the bow, *who was the archer?* When

this question occurred to him, Weilin at once felt afraid, though he did not know why. Clearly this was some adult thing. Normally Weilin did not concern himself with adult things; but this thing, whatever it was, had upset Mother. He asked her again about it, later that evening, but she said it was nothing, he should not worry, just be a good boy and don't question anything at school.

Weilin was sufficiently disturbed that he could not get to sleep that night. Lying in his bed in the living-room he could hear Mother and Father talking in their own bedroom. From his bed he could not make out the words, so he stealthily crept out and put his ear to the bedroom door. Still he could not make out everything that was said, but got most of it.

"... can't understand why they would do that. We are making so much progress."

"Never mind *why*. *Why* does not concern us. We only have to survive."

"Well, we've always survived before."

"Thanks to me! You, you foolish old Bullfrog, you are the one who wanted to speak out in '57. It was I who persuaded you to keep your mouth shut. And you see, I was right, wasn't I?"

"Of course, of course, I know that. I just can't understand the Librarian's reasoning."

"Nobody can understand. Why bother trying to understand? It's like a force of nature, like an earthquake. You just have to survive."

"We are put on this Earth to understand, my sweet Cicada. If one generation can't improve on the previous generation's understanding, why should we trouble ourselves to put forth new generations?"

"The Librarian has his own motives. They don't concern us. If you could understand them, what would you have understood? The thoughts of a maniac! The babbling of an idiot! It's not worth trying to understand it. Just be quiet and obedient. Just survive."

"Yes, yes. I know well enough how to do that. But we should worry about the Little Pangolin. He is at a dangerous age. As Mr Rousseau observed, he has the words but not yet the meanings. We must be sure he does not use the words carelessly."

“You must explain to him, Bullfrog. He is old enough to understand, surely. He will listen to you. You must tell him how to survive. How the nail that sticks up is hammered down; how the tree that stands tallest is felled by the storm.”

“Such things to teach a child! To always march in step, to hold the same opinions as everyone else, to be a ‘rustless cog in a great machine’. Is this all we can offer him?”

“It’s only for a while. The Librarian is, what? more than seventy now. There are other voices in the Party.”

“Yes. There was Peng Dehuai. Look what happened to him!”

“It won’t go on for ever, silly old Bullfrog. We must be patient. Think of our Little Pangolin. He can be a fine scholar, I know. You have said so yourself. If the worst comes to the worst, perhaps he will be able to go abroad.”

Father sighed. “Ai! Ai! We are oxen and donkeys for our children!” He sighed again. “Well, thank Heaven I am a mathematician, at any rate. They can’t find anything counter-revolutionary in *that!*”

Other than perceiving a vague sense of menace, Weilin could make little of this. As it happened, he knew the college librarian—a tiny mild-mannered fellow named Zhao, best known in the college community for his fanatical dedication to fishing, though no-one had ever known him catch anything bigger than his thumb. Was he really more than seventy? Weilin would not have said so; but like most children he had only the sketchiest notion of numerical age beyond about thirty, so he thought it not impossible. But why was he suddenly so important? *Like a force of nature*. What, Old Zhao? Weilin doubted Old Zhao could muster enough force to push a wheelbarrow. Baffled, he retired to bed. In a dream, a terrifying archer with the varicolored face of a temple god shot invisible arrows into the air, one after another, howling with laughter all the while, and each arrow brought down a weeping bird. If dreams were logical the birds would have had the face of Professor Fan; in fact, they were a selection of Weilin’s classmates, all weeping.

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It was soon after this that the school closed. One morning the teachers were all summoned to a meeting. The younger students were left in the charge of older ones. This was never a success, as the older students were themselves only eleven or twelve and had no authority, so everyone just did as he pleased. Later in the morning they were all called into the school yard, and the Physical Education teacher made them do calisthenics for half an hour to music from the loudspeakers. Then, quite abruptly, he sent them all home.

Weilin and some classmates went to the pool in South Lake Park; but it was the dead period in midday, when people ate their lunch and had a nap, so the pool was closed. The classmates started up a game called Storming the Mountain, using a little hillock among the trees of the park, but Weilin slipped away and started to walk home. He dawdled by the barracks; but Yuezhu must have been still in school, or having her afternoon nap, and did not show. There was no-one at home. Weilin took his own nap on his bed in the living-room.

Usually Mother, whose teaching duties were not very arduous, came home in mid-afternoon, Father somewhat later. On this day, however, they came home together. Weilin heard them speaking in low voices as they ascended the stairs, but they stopped before he could make out words. When they came in he told them about the school. Mother seemed not interested at all. She just went to the kitchen to start preparing food. Father, however, was very attentive.

“Did the teachers say anything to you?”

“No. Only to go home and there was no school today.”

“Were there any posters stuck up?”

“No. Only the usual things.”

“What about the loudspeakers?”

“Mmm, there was a speech. But I didn’t listen to it. Then some music. When the music started, Teacher Liu came out and made us do calisthenics. Then he sent us home.”

Father fell into deep thought, and did not speak all through dinner. That evening he seemed to have a passion for Mr Mozart, and in particular for Number Thirty-Eight. He played it three times right through, sitting in his chair with his head back, his hands clasped in front of him,

moving only to change the records. Mother sat with a book, though she seemed not to be turning many pages. After the third time through Number Thirty-Eight Father sat in silence for some time. Then, abruptly, addressing the room at large, he said: "Five hundred years from now we shall be dust, and Hibiscus Slope Teachers' College will be utterly forgotten. But people will still listen to Mr Mozart."

Weilin could think of no response. He wondered why adults said things like that, such obvious things, unconnected with anything else.

Mother put down her book. "You should talk to our son, Bullfrog."

"Yes." Father sat up and leaned forward, elbows on knees, looking across at Weilin. Weilin was sitting at the table, practicing calligraphy. He wanted to be able to make beautiful characters, like Mother, but just could not get the proportions right.

"There's going to be a movement," said Father. "Do you know what that means?"

"Is Chiang Kaishek trying to come back again?" asked Weilin.

His only real experience of politics had been a campaign—apparently it didn't count as a movement—a year or so before. The point of the campaign had been that Chiang Kaishek was trying to overthrow the People's Republic and reinstate the landlords and bring back the old society, so everyone had had to do military training. Weilin had only been seven at the time, but he and his classmates had had to participate in the campaign, throwing wooden hand grenades and drilling with wooden rifles. Everybody thought it great fun.

Father smiled. "No, Little Pangolin. Not Chiang Kaishek. But there are other enemies, you know. The Party will try to find them and punish them."

"Do you think there are enemies here in Seven Kill Stele?"

"Oh, I'm sure the Party will find some." Father glanced across at Mother.

"Yes," said Mother. "You can be sure they will find some."

"Will I have to look for enemies, too?" asked Weilin.

"Probably not. You are too young. At any rate, we don't want you involved if we can help it. The main thing is, you are to keep very quiet and be a very good boy. That's all."

Weilin was somewhat disappointed. He thought it might be fun to go looking for enemies. Imagine if you were lucky enough to find one!

“Why do I have to be good, particularly?”

“Because,” said Mother quietly, “when the Party looks for enemies, sometimes they are too keen. They take somebody to be an enemy, who really isn’t.”

“And if you’re not good, or if you bring attention to yourself in any way, they might mistakenly think you’re an enemy.” This was Father.

Weilin felt baffled. “You mean they don’t really know who’s an enemy and who isn’t?”

“Oh, it’s not so easy, spotting enemies,” said Father.

“What Father means is, the enemies are very sly,” said Mother. “They go in disguise. It’s difficult to spot them.”

“Then how do you find out? I mean, if someone’s an enemy or not?”

Father looked at Mother, then dropped his eyes. He seemed to have no wish to continue. Mother came to the table and sat opposite Weilin.

“You must trust the Party,” she said. “The Party knows. Chairman Mao knows. You trust Chairman Mao, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes! Of course!”

“Well, there you are, then. As Father said, you must just be very quiet and very good. Don’t let anybody think you are an enemy. Don’t let anybody think *we* are enemies.”

“Oh, no!”

“That’s right. We’ve brought you up to love Chairman Mao and love the Party, haven’t we?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Yes. That’s what it means to be good. Then no-one can say you are an enemy.”

The next day school was back to normal. Everything was normal; and because it was a Friday, Lecturer Wang Baojiang came to play chess with Father in the evening. The following day, Saturday, was a half day at school. This was normal, too. Everything was normal. Father and Mother said nothing, and Weilin thought perhaps there would not be a movement after all. He was disappointed, as it seemed a movement was an exciting thing.

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On Saturday afternoon Yuezhu was waiting for him outside the barracks. They walked together up to the college. On the wall of the college, on both sides of the gate, large white sheets of paper had been pasted. On the paper were big black characters in a rough hand.

## ARDENTLY CRITICIZE PRINCIPAL CHEN

said one of these posters. Another asserted that

CHEN AND THE TWO MENG  
HAVE ABUSED THEIR POWER

Professor Chen was the Principal of the college, Weilin knew. He was not sure who the Mengs were, though the Party Secretary for the whole college was called Meng. Perhaps he was one of the Mengs. Though it did not seem likely that anyone would be rude about Party Secretary Meng on a wall poster.

“It’s a movement,” said Weilin. “I know all about it. The Party is going to find some enemies. It’s not Chiang Kaishek, it’s some other enemies. But they’re very sly and it will be difficult to find them.”

Weilin felt pleased to have this information. Yuezhu always liked to be first with gossip, and pretended she always knew what was going on. Now, for once, he had the advantage of her, he thought. But Yuezhu was not to be upstaged.

“You don’t know *anything*,” she said with utmost scorn. “Listen. I know all about it. Half Brother told me. Some black elements have got into the leadership of the Party, the very high leadership in Beijing. They’re trying to push out our Chairman Mao. They have allies everywhere, all over the country. Chairman Mao has asked all the people to support him. The people have to find all those black elements and criticize them. To save Chairman Mao! *That’s* what’s happening.”

“Wa! In Beijing! Such big enemies! Perhaps Chiang Kaishek is really trying to come back, after all.”

“If Chiang Kaishek comes back I’ll fight him myself!” declared Yuezhu. She put on a stern face, like one of the revolutionary heroes in the storybooks—Iron Man Wang or Good Soldier Lei Feng—and clenched her fists, and flexed her tiny muscles in a way that made Weilin laugh.

“It’s not funny! Isn’t Chairman Mao dearer to you than your own mother and father?”

“Of course,” replied Weilin reflexively. All the children were supposed to love Chairman Mao more than their mothers and fathers. Weilin had tried his best with this, but did not think he had managed to attain the proper level of devotion. It had been a nagging concern for him for some time, and he could never think of Chairman Mao without experiencing a tremor of guilt.

“Aren’t you willing to defend our Chairman Mao with your own flesh and blood?” Yuezhu was frowning at him, trying to look fierce.

“Of course I am. It’s just that he’s in Beijing, and I don’t see what I can do here in Seven Kill Stele to defend him.”

When Weilin went home he saw that there were wall posters all over the college buildings. Most of them were calling for someone or other to be criticized or exposed. One, however, demanded better food at the college refectory; and another politely asked the authorities to reconsider the decision not to allow a student dance following the graduation ceremony. At home, Father looked grave.

“Why are there so many wall posters?” asked Weilin at dinner.

“It’s the movement,” said Father. “That’s what happens in a movement. People put up wall posters to criticize each other. Big character posters, they’re called. That’s all.” He stopped abruptly, as if he felt he had said too much.

“Who? Who puts up the posters?”

“The work team,” said Mother. This was not helpful, as Weilin had no idea who the work team were. But it was clear the adults didn’t want to talk about it to him. It was always like that with public things. Adults never wanted you to know anything.

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Then everything seemed to happen quickly. The next day, Sunday, there was a lot of shouting in the college, and the students had some kind of demonstration. Father and Mother had to go in to a meeting, and came back looking upset. Still they would not say anything. On Monday Weilin's school was closed again. The teachers were nowhere to be seen, but one of the custodians came out and said they were having thought reform and the school would be closed indefinitely. When he got back to the college the loudspeakers were all blaring, someone making a speech about politics. Now there were even more wall posters stuck up everywhere. They seemed to be getting more forceful.

DOWN WITH THE COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY  
MENG CLIQUE!

PRINCIPAL CHEN, THE PEOPLE DEMAND YOU  
CONFESS YOUR ERRORS!

In the paths and open spaces of the campus, however, there was no sign of activity at all. One of the old women sweepers told him the students were all in the auditorium having a meeting to criticize the teachers.

"What, all the teachers?" asked Weilin incredulously.

"How should I know? They're all in there, anyway."

"Why should they criticize all the teachers? They can't *all* be enemies."

Weilin felt afraid for Father and Mother. Now he remembered Mother's words about being identified as an enemy by mistake. What if Father or Mother were thought to be enemies?

The old sweeper chuckled, and expelled an ellipsoid of turquoise phlegm to the side of the path. "It's a movement," she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "A movement."

When Father and Mother came home they looked tired but not especially upset. Weilin begged Father to tell him what was happening.

"Oh, some of the faculty are being criticized," said Father. "The students have put together a committee. They're making a lot of noise. But I think it'll all blow over."

“Are you and Mother being criticized?”

Father smiled wearily. “No, Little Pangolin. We have done nothing to be criticized for. Don’t worry. However, it looks as if Old Fan’s case will be opened again.”

Weilin didn’t care anything about Professor Fan. He just wanted to be sure Father and Mother wouldn’t be called enemies by mistake.

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Now the Red Guards appeared. It was very sudden. One day there was no such thing as a Red Guard; the next day they were everywhere. The college seemed to be a center for them. Coming home from the pool Weilin often encountered them marching into town in columns, singing Red Guard songs. Once he saw Yuezhu’s half brother in one of these columns. There seemed to be nothing particularly scary or intimidating about them, though. They were just high-spirited students out on a lark. They had a campaign to change the names of the streets in the town. The street behind Weilin’s school had been called Fish Sellers’ Lane: it became Uphold the People’s Democratic Dictatorship! Lane, complete with exclamation mark. The Martyrs’ Monument was still the Martyrs’ Monument, but the stretch of road between it and South Lake Park changed from Cheng’an Temple Street to Carry Out Revolution to the End! Street. The Red Guards seemed to be especially fond of exclamation marks.

At the college itself things were very chaotic. Classes had ceased altogether, it seemed, and the students just had meetings all day long. The wall posters were more and more vituperative.

EXPOSE THE COW GHOSTS AND SNAKE DEMONS!

SMASH DOG’S HEAD CHEN TO PIECES!

Individual teachers were being denounced by name. There was a rash of posters criticizing Professor Fan, and once Weilin glimpsed him scurrying from the teachers’ refectory to his apartment building, looking terrified. Still Father and Mother said little; and Weilin did not know that

Father was being criticized until Yuezhu told him. This was in the pool one afternoon.

“Half Brother says your father is a black element.”

“*What?* How could that be? My Father loves Chairman Mao.”

“Half Brother says he’s a counter-revolutionary.” Yuezhu was starting to get the hang of these terms now.

“Oh, Yuezhu! Don’t let him think that. Tell him it’s not true! *You* don’t believe it, do you?”

Yuezhu was looking down, splashing randomly with her hands on the surface of the water.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Oh, no! You mustn’t say that! It’s not true! *It’s not true!* You must tell him, you must make it clear to him, it’s not true.”

“No use for me to tell him. The Red Guards decided.”

Weilin pressed her nonetheless, and went on nagging at her all the way back to the barracks, until at last she said yes, she would tell Half Brother that Assistant Professor Liang was not a black element. But Yuezhu only yielded very reluctantly, and seemed disconcerted by the whole thing, and would not go with him to the hollow behind the bamboo thicket.

Whatever she said to Half Brother, it did no good. That very evening the Red Guards came to Weilin’s apartment. They knocked on the door politely, but when Mother opened the door they came spilling in, a dozen or more of them crowding into the Liangs’ living-room. There were even more Red Guards than would fit in, with others out on the landing and stairs. Among these latter, craning to look in through the door, was Half Brother. All the students wore red armbands with gold lettering—the sign of the Red Guards.

The Red Guards were quite polite. The leader, a thin bookish type with glasses, wearing a pair of army-style sneakers and baggy blue peasant trousers with a rather ostentatious patch over one knee, addressed Father as Assistant Professor Liang. He even apologized to Father, but said they had to carry out an investigation, on behalf of the people. Father was quite cool. He said he would be glad to help with the investigation in any way he could, and was eagerly awaiting their instructions, which he knew

were inspired by a love of Chairman Mao and the revolution. The leader, and a female student who chimed in with him from time to time, seemed to think they had to speak in a sort of shrill bark; but otherwise the invasion was perfectly genteel. They did not call Father a black element. They did, however, mention Professor Fan, and said that Father had encouraged Professor Fan's counter-revolutionary crime. Father said nothing to this, only hung his head in silence.

After criticizing Father, the Red Guards went all round the apartment, examining everything. Two of them sat down by Father's bookcase and began pulling out the books to examine them. This led to a lot of discussion. The leader came over and looked at the books. The foreign-language ones seemed especially interesting to him. Through all this Weilin was sitting at the table with Mother, Mother holding his hand on the table.

The end of it was, that the Red Guards decided to seal up Father's books. They pasted white strips of paper cross-wise across the bookcase, with **AWAITING FURTHER INVESTIGATION** written across them in black characters. Now it was impossible to take a book from the shelves without breaking the paper. Weilin felt glad that the book he was reading—a Chinese translation of *Oliver Twist*—was in his school bag, which the Red Guards had not investigated.

After the Red Guards had gone—singing one of their vigorous songs as they clattered off down the stairs—Mother started to weep. Father sat next to her at the table, his arm round her shoulder. Weilin could not see that there was anything much to weep about. It was a shame about the books, of course, but presumably that would be resolved sooner or later. That apart, the Red Guards had been something of a let-down; a group of self-important students playing policeman. He thought this movement was turning out to be rather boring after all.

Mother stopped weeping at last and went to the kitchen. She returned with glasses of tea. The three of them sat there at the table, sipping the hot tea. The silence was uncomfortable.

“Is Professor Fan an enemy?” Weilin asked, to end the silence.

“Not any more,” said Father, looking into his tea.

“But the Red Guards said he'd committed a counter-revolutionary crime.”

“Yes,” said Father. “Yes, he did. Last night.”

“But what? What did he do?”

Father did not answer. He looked up at Mother. Mother turned away, and looked as if she might start crying again. Still turned away, she said: “Tell him.”

Father shrugged. “Old Fan hanged himself,” he said.