

Chapter 8

Clean Up the Class Ranks!

Weilin Joins a Daring Expedition

In September the schools opened again. The Brigade had an elementary school and Mother arranged for Weilin to attend. But the school was a poor place, the teachers hardly better than peasants themselves. The content of the lessons was: elementary arithmetic, with endless exercises of numbing simplicity, and class reading of newspaper editorials, the teacher explaining the characters and words one by one. Since there was no secondary school to advance to, Weilin thought there was little point in attending. After a few days he went back to his wanderings.

The Saturday after National Day, October 1st, Asan reappeared in the railroad station plaza. Weilin had gone into town early that day, and saw him setting up his stall and books, which he brought in in a handcart. Asan was the same as ever: cheerful, confident, obscene. He seemed taller, but Weilin thought probably he was only narrower without the padded winter clothing. It was still warm, and Asan was in his summer jacket with oversleeves and an army-style green cap. He was wearing smart shoes, the kind everyone called Capital shoes, made of black corduroy with white soles. As they loaded the stall he favored Weilin with a long discourse on the relative merits of the girls of Liaoning Province, where he had spent the summer, and those of their own district, with special reference to their body hair and juices.

“Jilin girls are easier,” he concluded, naming the province in which Flat All Around was situated, “but Liaoning’s are prettier.”

“I think our southern girls are prettiest,” said Weilin, wanting to have an opinion. He really did think so. The girls in Flat All Around, with their bad-diet lumpiness and frostbitten complexions, did not seem to him at all like his female classmates in Seven Kill Stele, where fish, fruit and vegetables were plentiful and light summer clothing could be worn all year round.

Asan considered this seriously. “Well,” he said at last, “maybe the chicks are cuter the further south you go. Liaoning’s south of here, isn’t it? That must be it.” He grinned, pleased at having successfully mastered logical induction. “Hey, you’re pretty smart, Little Brother! Let’s you and me go south!”

“Prettier, but more difficult,” pointed out Weilin.

“Oh, yeah. That’s right. Shit, there’s always a downside to everything.”

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In October Love Socialism! Production Brigade was visited by one of the new Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda teams. All the adult employees of the Brigade had to go to an open-air meeting in the main compound one evening. Weilin did not go, but sitting in the room behind the wall of the school buildings he could hear the shrill, urgent tones of the speaker. The sound filled him with dread, bringing irresistibly to mind the struggle meetings as the college in Seven Kill Stele. *Down with! Down with!* These were not Red Guards, though. They had been sent by the Party to restore order and tell people the new line. Still Weilin feared them. Once a movement got started, you never knew what direction it would take.

His forebodings proved well-founded. The Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda team decided that life in Flat All Around had been altogether too orderly. The Dongs had not been Taking Class Struggle As The Key. Counter-revolutionaries had not been properly exposed. Under the leadership of the team, the Party Secretaries of the various units therefore rooted out such counter-revolutionaries as they could identify and exposed them.

Inevitably, Mother's case was reopened. She wept when they told her, and continuously for several days afterward. Weilin could make no contact with her at all; she just shook her head wildly and burst into tears at any approach. She was struggled again: not a violent affair like the one at the college, only a one-hour meeting in the Brigade compound, the Thought Propaganda team leading the Brigade members in criticizing their half-dozen counter-revolutionaries and urging them to reform. A few days later there was a parade, all the town's counter-revolutionaries being marched down Victory Avenue with caps on, the names of their crimes written on the caps in black letters. Again Mother's cap said WIFE OF COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY LIANGYUSHU. This parade was rougher than the meeting, as the townspeople had the opportunity, which some of them took, to spit or throw stones at the participants. After the parade there was a rally at the town sport stadium where the local counter-revolutionaries were yelled at, and in a few cases beaten up, by those they had wronged, or by anyone else who had a grudge against them for any reason. Since nobody knew anything about Mother's case she was spared this. As struggle meetings went it was nothing. There was an air (everybody said) of just going through the motions. No great harm was done and nobody was sent away. Two days after the parade the Thought Propaganda team left, and Flat All Around lapsed back into its customary political torpor. The Dongs had finessed the situation somehow and were still in charge, to everyone's satisfaction.

Weilin did not attend either the struggle meeting or the parade. He cowered at home through both, remembering Father, and the milky white substance that had come out of his ear, and wondering how he would live if Mother were struggled to death. When she came home at last from the sport stadium, carrying her cap in one hand (it would have been counter-revolutionary to discard it on the road), he ran to her and threw his arms round her. They held on to each other for some time, mother very quiet and still, Weilin sobbing loudly.

"Do you think this will ever end?" he asked Mother.

"No," said Mother. "It will never end."

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It was after being paraded that Mother definitely changed for the worse. The spells of silent introspection, when she could hardly be persuaded to speak at all, expanded to occupy whole days, sometimes two or three days at a stretch. Her hair turned white; at least, that was Weilin's impression. Mother had had some white hair before, he was sure, but now the white outnumbered the gray—or perhaps it was only now that the change in Mother's manner caused him to think so. Weilin had always thought of Mother as young and beautiful, though in fact she had been almost forty when he was born. Now quite suddenly, through whatever blend of the subjective and objective he could not unravel, she was old.

Mother's bronchitis returned with the cold weather. This year it was worse than ever. She would wake in the middle of the night coughing, waking Weilin on the *kang* beside her. At first Weilin tried to console her by holding her in his arms, but Mother could get relief only by sitting up, so of course he had to sit up with her, and instead of sleeping they sat up for an hour or more every night, in the cold and the dark—their only light being from an oil lamp, and oil too precious to waste.

The room was never warm, but by midwinter this year Weilin had mastered the *kang*, so that it was never really cold. He had also developed a technique for plugging the cracks around the door at night with strips of crushed straw, so that the icy draughts were eliminated, at least once they were shut in for the night. As Mother's condition got worse he tried to keep her confined to the room when she was not at her duties in the kindergarten. He would not let her go out, and went himself to fetch food and hot water for her from the communal kitchen. Still Mother coughed and coughed.

Weilin told Asan about Mother's bronchitis.

"Is she coughing blood?" asked Asan, who liked to pose as an authority on everything.

"No. I don't think so. I've never seen any."

"That's good. That means it's not TB. Does she take any medicine?"

"No. We haven't got any money for medicine."

"Shit, I can get you some. Leave it to me."

The result was a brown paper package filled with traditional remedies: herbs, bulbous seed-pods, fragrant bark and the pale white skins of cicadas. Following Asan's instructions, Weilin steeped it all for a long time in boiling water, then gave it to Mother to drink. In the following days her condition really did improve; but this was spring time now, each day warmer than the last, so whether her revival was caused by the herbs or by the weather, Weilin could not know.

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It was late that summer, the summer of '69, that they tried to rob the bank.

Robbing the bank was Red Wang's idea. Weilin first heard of it from Asan, of course. Asan had stayed in town this summer. His other businesses were languishing, so he kept the penny library in the station plaza two or three days a week. When Weilin did not feel like swimming he would go into the town, and it was on one of these days that Asan told him about robbing the bank.

Weilin had been reading a Chinese translation of R.M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, which he thought a wonderful tale. On the day he was hoping to finish it he went to the plaza. Asan had told him he would be there this day, and there he was, sitting on the kerb in his usual spot—but there were no books.

"We'll go for a walk," said Asan. "Then we'll have some lunch."

Weilin tagged along with him, suspecting nothing. They went along Renxing Street (named for Ma Renxing, a hero of the Liberation War) and down Victory Avenue. Here was the newer part of town, most of it built after Liberation. The town bank was on a corner, where Victory Avenue crossed Revolution Street. It was a single-story building in red brick, with a grassy area all round it. Clothes-lines were strung between poles on the grassy area, with clothes drying on them. Some of the bank staff lived in the bank, explained Asan. The clothes belonged to them.

"Have you ever been in the bank?" he asked Weilin.

"No, of course not."

"Me neither. But Donkey has. His ma's elder sister works in the bank."

"Really? What exactly do they do in the bank? I'm not clear."

“Why, they hand out money. All the units in the town, the railroad and the paint factory, the shoe factory, all the production brigades in the countryside around, they all need money. The bank hands it out.”

“Where does the bank get the money from?”

“From the Party of course. Now, look there. Don’t stop and don’t make a big show of looking, just glance. The little window, in the corner of the wall there.”

“Yes. I see it.”

“Think you can get through there?”

“I don’t know. It’s very small.”

“You can, I bet. Skinny kid like you. You climb in there, go through to the front and open the door. Me and Red Wang will come in, help ourselves to a bit of money, slip out again. Easy. That window, they always keep it open.”

Weilin stopped dead. “You’re going to do this *now*?”

“Course not. And keep walking. Cross over here and we’ll walk back. Try to get a good look at the place going back, careful like.”

Weilin felt scared. His knees were shaking. These boys were bandits! They were going to rob the bank! He had fallen in with bandits, like poor Oliver Twist!

“We’re going to do it one night, one Wednesday night. Maybe this coming Wednesday.”

“But don’t they lock up the money at night?”

“Mostly, yes. But Thursdays they do big payouts to the work units all over the town. They have to get a start on counting up the bills before, on Wednesday. When they’ve counted them, they lock them in the cashiers’ drawers. They’re just drawers made of wood. You can open them with ordinary tools. Donkey knows, heard his ma’s elder sister talk about it.”

“If Donkey’s ma’s elder sister works in the bank, why doesn’t he let you in?”

“Cause she doesn’t live there. Only the ‘collars and sleeves’ live there. But they all live round the back, they won’t hear us if we’re quiet.”

Asan, for all his street smarts, had a peculiarly old-fashioned way of referring to authority. People in a senior position were always “collars and sleeves”, the old metonymy used in Imperial times; Party HQ was

“the *yamen*”; the instructions of the national leadership, on the very rare occasions he referred to them, were “edicts”. Admiring Weilin’s good educated Chinese speech on one of their first encounters, he called it *guanhua*, “the Mandarin tongue” instead of saying *putonghua*, “the common tongue” as everyone was supposed to nowadays. Weilin did not think Asan was consciously counter-revolutionary, he was just ignorant. His people were peasants, Weilin knew. Once Asan’s mother had come to the railroad station plaza and stopped to pass the time of day with her son. She had one of those shiny faces that have never been washed, and was smoking a pipe.

“I don’t think it’s a very good idea, to rob the bank,” said Weilin cautiously. “Suppose you get caught?”

“Who’s going to catch us? The sticks had a sweep last month, they won’t stir for a while. The army’s helping with the harvest. We have a flashlight—Red Wang got one from his dad, they use it to check under the trains. Everything else will be dark. Piece of cake.”

“I don’t know. I really . . . It seems so dangerous.”

They were back on Victory Avenue now, fifty yards from the bank. Asan stopped and looked down at Weilin.

“Younger Brother, don’t you want to help your mother?”

“My mother? Of course. How will it help her if I rob the bank?”

“Why, she needs treatment for her bronchitis. It will come back this winter for sure. You need a decent doctor. You know the saying: ‘Money can move the gods’.”

This put things in a new light. Weilin considered. “If we suddenly start spending money, people will wonder where we got it.”

“Nah. You’re strangers here. Tell ’em it’s a secret stash you brought with you from the south. Your people had a decent position in the south, didn’t they?”

“Yes. I . . . I suppose we could do that”

Probably Weilin would still have resisted if it had been anyone other than Asan grinning down on him. But he could not resist Asan.

The following Wednesday was unpropitious for some reason, so it was ten days later that they robbed the bank. Asan had them all meet at midnight—“zero o’clock” as he put it, sounding very military—in the

old brickyard on Victory Avenue, at the edge of the town. It was a moonless night and the town had no street lights, so the darkness was total. Weilin stumbled along the familiar streets for what seemed like hours, feeling for the kerb where there was one, making his turns by dead reckoning. He passed the bank on the way out of town, but could only sense the shape of the building, set back from the street corner. How would he find the window? What if it were closed?

The other boys were all at the brickyard. They met in one of the kilns, gathered round the feeble glow of Red Wang's flashlight. Donkey was there, of course, and another boy called Pimple who dropped by at the book stall from time to time.

"Any trouble, we all run off in different directions," said Asan. "That's important. I'll head down Victory; Red Wang go up Victory, out of town . . ."

He had planned it carefully, but everything depended on Weilin being able to get in through the window, he being the only one small enough to accomplish this. When at last they found the window, after groping along the wall in pitch darkness for twenty minutes, it was higher than it had looked from the street, and Weilin had to stand on Asan's shoulders. It was open; but going in head first, he could find nothing inside to hold on to. At last they fed him through feet first and face down. When he was standing inside they passed in the flashlight. As Asan had instructed, he held the flashlight against the floor to switch it on, then raised it an eighth of an inch to let some light leak out, and wait for his eyes to adjust. He was in a store room, shelves all the way up to the ceiling, with stacks of printed paper forms on the shelves. The place smelt of dust and damp. Perhaps they kept the window open to ease the damp. The only door seemed to be locked on the outside. Weilin felt relieved. It was clear there was no way to open it from this side. He stood on tiptoe at the window to report these facts.

"Shine the flashlight on the door," said Red Wang, who was peering through the bottom part of the window. "Yeah, see the hinges? Knock out the pins. Quietly."

He passed a heavy wood-handled screwdriver in over the window. After some experimentation, Weilin found he could tap out the pins from the door

hinges using the screwdriver and the heel of his hand. When they were free he pulled back the door as quietly as he could; but still it made a grating, scraping sound and he froze in fear, clutching the heavy door, waiting for some sound of activity from inside. No sound came, and he got the door standing stably, supported by its lock.

Beyond the door was a corridor which led to an open area behind some counters, presumably where the tellers worked. On the other side of the counters was the main hall of the bank, with a big sign on the wall in Chairman Mao's calligraphy: FOLLOW THE GENERAL LINE! Weilin thought of their quiet little room at the production brigade, and wished devoutly he were there. But winter would soon be on them, and if Mother's bronchitis returned it would be worse than before, and need some treatment. Asan had said they wouldn't take much money, so as not to anger the authorities unduly; just a few hundred. Enough, anyway, to get Mother some decent treatment from a doctor.

The main door of the bank had no locks at all, only two heavy metal bars set across in brackets. The bars were too heavy for Weilin to lift; but by sliding and jiggling he got them out of one set of brackets, and the right-hand door opened far enough for Asan to squeeze in.

"Well done, Little Brother!" he whispered as Red Wang and Pimple wriggled in behind him, Donkey performing lookout duty outside. "Where's the screwdriver?"

"I left it back in the room, after I took off the door . . ."

"Don't leave *anything!*" hissed Asan. "The sticks can figure out who it belongs to. Go get it. Take the flashlight."

When Weilin came back the other three had made their way over to the counters with the aid of some matches Asan had. Now they started opening the drawers. There were several that were not even locked; but none held any money.

"Here," whispered Red Wang. "Give me the screwdriver."

He had found a locked drawer and began working on it with the screwdriver, trying to lever it open, to break the lock. It broke at last, with a sound that seemed unbearably loud. The drawer shot forward, coming right out, but Red Wang caught it. Inside the drawer were bundles of bills.

"Wa!" Said Red Wang. "It's true!"

Pimple and Asan grabbed at the bundles in the drawer. They were too forceful, and knocked the drawer out of Red Wang's hands. It hit the floor with a crash.

They all froze. By the flashlight Weilin could see their faces, mouths part-open, eyes wide and scared. Far off down the corridor light showed suddenly from an open door, and there was a voice: "*Zenme hui shi? Zenme hui shi?*" [What's going on?]

"Run like fuck!" said Asan—redundantly, as Red Wang and Pimple were already half-way to the door. He himself went down on hands and knees, for the bundle of bills he had dropped. When Weilin got to the door, Pimple was just wriggling through. The lights went on inside the bank as he slipped through the opening, and there were voices shouting. Asan's head came through, and Weilin pulled at him.

"Run for it!" yelled Asan.

Weilin ran. With the lights on in the bank he could make out the roads, but had forgotten which one he was supposed to take. He ran at random. Looking back, he saw that Asan was through the door and away. There was a lot of shouting. Then a gun went off: once, twice. Weilin ran through the darkness for what seemed like miles, though he was still in the town. Once a jeep with headlights on came racing towards him, and he had to duck into a doorway to avoid being seen. When at last he could run no further he groped around in the darkness for a long time to find a street name. He found one, discovered that he was in the old part of town, not a hundred meters from Uncle Zhou's house. It was dark, and cold, and he was exhausted, and contemplated for a moment going to sleep on Uncle Zhou's floor; but thought better of it and began the long trek out of town.