

Chapter 4

Down With Bourgeois Things!

Father Becomes a Big Character Poster

For several days Yuezhu did not appear at the pool, and was not waiting for him outside the barracks. Though there was no school now Weilin went into the town every day, to South Lake Park, always hoping she would be there; but day after day, she wasn't. Then he would walk home, along the dusty road leading out of town to the college and the bamboo grove, and dawdle outside the gate of the barracks. Usually there would be some of her little friends playing there. They sniggered and giggled among themselves when they saw him, and the embarrassment soon drove him away. Weilin even went to the bamboo grove, more than once, in the desperate hope she might be there waiting for him, but of course she was not. The grove was quite different without Yuezhu to share it with. It seemed smaller, and hostile in some way he could not understand.

Then he discovered the reason for Yuezhu's absence. She had become a Little Red Guard.

At about the time Professor Fan hanged himself one faction of Red Guards decided that their leaders were not revolutionary enough. They staged a coup and took over the Red Guard movement. These new Red Guards were fiercer than the old ones. They made a lot of noise at their meetings, chanting and shouting. They held many of their meetings in the open air, on the basketball courts behind the teachers' refectory. Then Weilin could hear them from his room, sometimes late into the night. It

was a very scary sound, especially when you couldn't actually hear the words they were saying. The only time Weilin could make out words was when a certain young woman was speaking. This girl had a very shrill, penetrating voice. She especially liked to say *Down with . . . !*, and that was what Weilin heard, lying on his bed at night: *Down with . . . ! Down with . . . ! Down with . . . !* There seemed to be no end to the number of things she wanted to bring down.

One of their innovations was to enroll grade-school kids as Little Red Guards. They didn't accept just anyone, of course. You had to be politically correct, which in practice meant from a worker, peasant or soldier family. The Little Red Guards got Red Guard armbands—red with white or gold lettering—and marched around in groups chanting revolutionary songs. When the older Red Guards decided that something was incorrect, they would often send in the Little Red Guards to rectify it. Flowers were discovered to be incorrect: the Little Red Guards pulled up the flowers in Children's Park and South Lake Park. The traditional afternoon siesta was incorrect: the Little Red Guards were set to making continuous loud noise from noon till two o'clock, banging drums and old cooking pots, singing and shouting outside people's windows. Tea houses were incorrect: the Little Red Guards were sent to close them down—though this campaign met with fierce resistance from the tea-house patrons, some Little Red Ears were boxed, and the Red Guards proper had to go in and do the job.

Weilin, of course, was not allowed to be a Little Red Guard. His parents were intellectuals, so he was not politically correct. In fact, he did his best to avoid the Little Red Guards, of whom he was rather afraid. They had quickly got themselves a reputation for mischief. But one day, walking home from the pool, he met a squad of Little Red Guards going into town. There were about forty of them, marching five abreast, like soldiers, and singing a revolutionary song. Yuezhu was in the front rank. Weilin wanted so much to call out to her, to speak to her, but he dared not. Her face was set in the expression of righteous determination that all the Red Guards cultivated. She certainly saw him; but only clenched her features more firmly and swung her arms more wildly, and marched straight past. Weilin

struggled to hold back tears all the way home. When at last he got home the wish to cry had gone. He only felt a dull, unhappy despair.

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The new Red Guards started a campaign against Bourgeois Things. They went into people's houses and criticized the people for having Bourgeois Things. Then they took the Bourgeois Things away on a handcart. They came to the apartment block where Weilin lived, and took Bourgeois Things from some of the teachers. Professor Jin of the History Department, down on the first floor, had Bourgeois Things. Weilin watched from his window as Professor Jin's Bourgeois Things were loaded on to the handcart in the courtyard below. There was a radio, something in a large glass case, a potted plant, a bird cage, some fine-looking clothes in bright colors that Weilin supposed must belong to Mrs Jin, though he had never seen her wearing them. The Red Guards taking the Bourgeois Things from Professor Jin's apartment were all college students; the Little Red Guards did not seem to be involved in this activity.

Afterwards it occurred to Weilin that his own apartment had things in it similar to those he had seen loaded onto the handcart. This worried him. Would the Red Guards come and take away Father's radio? The gramophone? Mother's pretty coral-pink blouse that she wore at Spring Festival? What exactly was a Bourgeois Thing, anyway? How did you tell? Weilin had never been clear about the meaning of *bourgeois*. He knew it was something bad, but the Chinese characters—"wealth" and "root"—did not really make much sense together. He had a vague idea that *bourgeois* was a synonym for *foreign*. The "root" character also turned up in the word for "Japan", which gave it a slight foreign connotation.

At dinner that evening he tackled Father about this. "Do we have Bourgeois Things?" he asked.

Father nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"Will the Red Guards come and take our things away?"

"Probably. But they are not important things. Not things we really need. It doesn't matter."

“If the Red Guards come here, you must just do what they tell you,” said Mother.

“Why did they go to Professor Jin’s apartment, not to ours?”

Father chuckled. “It’s not so easy to struggle a mathematician. Our subject is too unworldly. Try finding anything counter-revolutionary in Pythagoras’s Theorem!”

“Does that mean you won’t be struggled?”

“Hard to say, Little Pangolin. I can’t understand this movement at all. It’s a new thing, not like the other movements. But you’re not to worry. If they struggle me, I’ll give them satisfaction.”

Weilin didn’t understand what *give them satisfaction* meant; but this seemed to have been intended for Mother. Father smiled at Mother reassuringly, and squeezed her hand. Then, to take Weilin’s mind off unpleasant matters, he showed him how to extract a square root by a process that on the paper looked like long division, but was more subtle. After dinner he played Mr Brahms Number One on the gramophone, listening with his eyes closed. It was a Friday, and Lecturer Wang should have come to play chess with Father; but for some reason he did not come.

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On Sunday the Red Guards came again to the faculty apartment building. They took Bourgeois Things from old Professor Qi on the second floor and loaded them onto the handcart. Weilin watched from the window. Most of Professor Qi’s Bourgeois Things seemed to be books. So many books!—even more than Father. The Red Guards were shouting at Professor Qi in a very fierce way. It made Weilin scared to hear them. He went to sit with Father and Mother at the table. Father and Mother were just sitting there silently, listening to the commotion downstairs. Father had his hand over Mother’s hand, and sometimes he stroked her hand or patted it. When Weilin went to sit with them Mother put her arm around his shoulder.

When the Red Guards did reach the Liangs’ apartment at last, they came right in without knocking. The first one in was Yuezhu’s half brother. Half a dozen others followed him. They looked hot and bothered, presum-

ably from carrying Professor Qi's stuff down the stairs to the handcart in the August heat. They brought in with them a strong smell of sweat. Half Brother seemed to be in charge now. He wore a stern, angry expression, his jaw clamped shut, his eyebrows squinched together. He planted his feet wide apart, fore and aft, and stuck his arm straight out dramatically, pointing at Father.

"Liang Yushu! We are carrying out Chairman Mao's instructions to smash the Four Olds! Do you dare to oppose us?"

"Everybody in this family loves Chairman Mao," said Father calmly. "We are anxious to follow his instructions. Please tell us what we must do."

"Don't pretend to be so meek and mild!" shrieked a girl who had come in behind Half Brother. From her voice, Weilin thought she must be the *Down With!* girl he had been hearing at night. She made the same dramatic pointing gesture as Half Brother, like the hero in a movie poster. "You have bad thinking! Your hearts are not pure! In your hearts you cherish the Four Olds! Down with the Four Olds!"

"Down with the Four Olds!" everybody shouted several times over.

"In your hearts you are against Chairman Mao!" continued Miss Down With. "Look! This apartment is full of Bourgeois Things!" She made a theatrical sweeping motion with her arms, encompassing the character scroll, the gramophone, the radio, the bookshelves—which were still taped up from the previous visitation. "Down with Bourgeois Things!"

"Perhaps we have fallen into luxurious ways," agreed Father. "You young Red Guards must correct our thinking!"

One of the other Red Guards, a thin youth wearing a somewhat unorthodox black pants and jacket, had gone over to the gramophone. He lifted the top and squinted at the turntable. Then he opened the doors at the bottom of the cabinet, and started pulling out the records and looking at them.

"These are foreign things!" the youth in black shouted. "Look! Foreign things!"

"They're from the Soviet Union," said Father, still maintaining the mild, level tone. "It's a socialist country, like ours. They are not imperialists."

“The Russians are revisionists and hegemonists!” shrieked the girl. “You’re in league with them! You’re black elements! Down with the hegemonists and revisionists! Down with the black elements!”

“Down with the black elements!” they all shouted. “Down with! Down with!”

Half Brother had broken the seal on the bookshelves and was pulling out books and examining them. He stood up, holding open a book. It was Abramowitz and Stegun’s *Mathematical Tables*, Weilin could see. Half Brother fanned some pages with his thumb. His jaw stiffened, the eyebrows squinched tighter together.

“What’s this?” He addressed Father.

“You know perfectly well what it is,” said Father, quite calmly. “It’s a book of mathematical tables.”

“In *English*? Why in *English*?”

“It’s an American book. They make the best tables. They have powerful electronic computers . . .”

“Much better than our Chinese computers,” sneered Half Brother. He had come over to the corner where Weilin and Father were standing together. “That’s your character, Comrade Liang, isn’t it? To worship all things foreign.”

“Worshipping foreign things and looking with contempt on the Motherland!” shrilled Miss Down With. “Down with the foreign things!”

“Down with! Down with!” The other Red Guards started shouting and shaking their fists.

Half Brother still had his eyes fixed on Father. When the Red Guards had quieted a little, he waved the book of tables in front of Father’s face.

“Liang Yushu! You don’t fool me! You’re a black element, I can see! We’re going to give your case very serious consideration!”

Half Brother gave the book to one of the Red Guards and went to examine the radio on top of the dresser. The radio was a Chinese model. He turned the tuning dial absent-mindedly. The others seemed to be waiting for him.

“All right,” he said at last. Then, turning to address Father: “We’re going to remove these Bourgeois Things. They’ll be stored in a safe place,

don't worry." He nodded at the radio. One of the Red Guards unplugged it and carried it out, down the stairs.

After that they took all the Bourgeois Thing from the Liangs' apartment.

Practically everything the Liang family owned was bourgeois, it turned out. Mother's "Night in the Pavilion" character scroll was bourgeois; her prettiest clothes, which she kept in the dresser, were bourgeois. Father's books were all bourgeois. The little gadgets in his tin box; his notebooks; their board games; the gramophone records; even the photographs on top of the dresser—everything, all but the barest necessities of life, was bourgeois. Not quite all: In the peculiar calculus of the Red Guards, board games were bourgeois but playing cards were not; Father's fancy ink block was bourgeois, but not his writing brushes.

Weilin sat with Mother and Father at the table while the Red Guards took away all the Bourgeois Things. He wanted to cry, but he dared not. He wanted to say something; but since Mother and Father were silent, he thought he had better be, too. He most wanted to cry when the Red Guards took away the photographs, including the one he liked so much, of himself as a baby. He thought up an argument that might be used in defense of the photographs: since photographs of Chairman Mao could be seen everywhere, how could photographs be bourgeois? But something told him that this logic would cut little ice with the Red Guards.

Most of all Weilin hoped that Mother's two little porcelain lovebirds would not be bourgeois. This hope was partially fulfilled. The lovebirds, and the little flower vase between them, were left; but the Red Guard who swept up the photographs from the dresser knocked them all off, and they fell to the floor and broke.

Last of all the Red Guards took the gramophone. It was a substantial object, standing four feet high, made of good heavy wood. "Come on," Half Brother said at last. "Let's take this down to the cart."

With Half Brother supervising, three of the Red Guards manhandled the gramophone across the room and out onto the landing. They seemed to have a lot of difficulty with it on the stairs. All of them were out there, shouting orders at each other, jostling each other on the stairs. Bump! went the gramophone down the concrete stairs. Bump! Bump! Each bump

seemed to contain a plangent metallic component, the mechanism vibrating from the jolts; and with each bump, Mother winced, the motion transmitting itself down her arm to Weilin's shoulder. Bump-thwang! Bump-thwang! went the gramophone, accompanied by shouts and grunts, fading away round the bend of the stair well, leaving the Liangs in silence.

Looking out from the window at last, Weilin could see his family's Bourgeois Things on the handcart in the courtyard. He could see the pile of gramophone records in their brown paper sleeves: Mr Chopin, Mr Beethoven, Mr Mozart.

"Shall we not be able to hear Mr Mozart now?" he asked Father.

Father was still sitting at the table with Mother. Mother's face was nestled against him, his arm was round her shoulders. She was sobbing quietly.

"We can hear them inside our heads," said Father.

Weilin thought this didn't make sense. How could you hear something inside your head? But he could see Mother was upset, and this was no time to pursue things.

"That one at the front, he was a lousy student," said Father. "I failed him on the midterm. He just hates me for that."

Mother didn't say anything, only sobbed. Seeing Mother crying, Weilin began crying too, and Father had to comfort both of them.

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Father was struggled the next day. He and Mother had been going in to work diligently, in spite of all the confusion on campus, to prepare for the new academic year. But this evening they didn't come home. Weilin heard a struggle meeting going on over at the basketball courts, but he dared not go to investigate.

It was after midnight when Father and Mother came home at last. When Weilin saw them he screamed. They had both turned black. Their eyes were awful white circles in black faces, like demons. Weilin screamed and screamed, until Father picked him up and shook him.

"Little Pangolin! It's all right! Don't be afraid! It's just a game the Red Guards played with us."

“A game?” whispered Weilin, when he could bear to look at Father. Now, close up, he could see that Father was not completely black, only streaked with black. One ear was still its normal color. Mother had gone into the bedroom and shut the door.

Father laughed merrily. He swung Weilin round, then set him on his feet and knelt down in front of him. “Look! It’s only ink!” With slow, over-pronounced movements, like a character in traditional opera, he licked a finger and drew it down his face. Sure enough, the finger came away black.

“They poured black ink over us, to try to show that we are black elements.” Father laughed again. “But of course we’re not.”

“I don’t like the Red Guards,” Weilin blurted out.

“Oh, you mustn’t say that. They’re just carrying out Chairman Mao’s instructions.”

“But Chairman Mao is very kind. Why did he let them break all our things? Even Mother’s little love birds. They broke them both. I tried to fix them, but I couldn’t.”

Weilin had spent part of the evening trying to re-attach the love-birds’ heads and wings with some stationery mucilage that had been left in the dresser, but with no success. He had found all the pieces and knew where they belonged in relation to each other; but the mucilage seemed to have no power over porcelain.

“Chairman Mao wants to teach us not to cherish physical things too much. To concentrate on spiritual things. How can that be bad? If people only care about physical things, how will they have any feelings left for each other? Do you want to live in a world where people have no feelings for each other?”

Weilin could think of no answer for this, though he felt that his feelings for Father and Mother, and also for Yuezhu, had been quite satisfactory when the little porcelain love-birds were intact. Now Mother came out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. She began running water from the faucet in the bathroom. Father went into the bathroom with her and shut the door.

Weilin could not sleep that night. He was consumed by the apprehension that Father and Mother would be taken away from him.

Three, four times he got up and crept across the apartment to their door to make sure they were still there. Each time he could hear Father saying some soothing words, Mother weeping.

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The second time Father was struggled, he went alone. Whether this was on the instructions of the Red Guards, or whether Mother just refused to go, Weilin did not know. He stayed with Mother the whole evening. It was a Thursday evening, when normally there was a storyteller on the radio at seven thirty. But the Red Guards had taken the radio; so Mother played the card game Twenty-Four with him until nine, when she said it was time for bed. To help him get to sleep Mother put him into the bedroom, as she sometimes did. For a long time Weilin could not sleep. He could hear the Red Guards over at the basketball courts: *Down With! Down With!* Then he drifted off, to be woken suddenly by a loud cry from Mother. He jumped out of bed and ran into the living room—then stopped in his tracks when he saw Father.

Father was naked, though it took a moment or two to see that. His whole body was covered with paper, twenty or more big sheets of paper. The paper was white, with Red Guard slogans written on it in angry black characters. Apparently the paper had been pasted to Father.

“See!” said Father, turning to Weilin. He was trying to make a joke of it for his son’s benefit, but something in the eyes betrayed him. Something Weilin had never seen before: the dawning of some awful realization. “See! They have made me into a living big-character poster!”