

Buried

I could hear shouts coming from the next street. The sound of breaking glass and slamming doors echoed throughout the neighborhood. The Red Guards had been roaming this area for several months now, going from door to door in the name of Mao, seeking out those rebels who still opposed him and his ideas.

It was late morning when the sounds of drums and gongs drew near. We could hear their distant shouts as they searched the nearby houses. I was in my room when I heard the furious pounding on the door. Trembling, I peered around the door frame and watched as my father moved toward the door. “We’re here to search your house. Open up!”

My father’s hand reached out for the knob, but before he could turn it, the door opened, kicked down by the brutes on the other side.

A teenage boy, not much older than me, strutted through the door. The rest of the guards followed the boy into the house and stood at attention in a line behind him. They wore tightly-belted army uniforms with bright red armbands.

“Didn’t your family own land and have workers?” said the boy.

“Yes, but not anymore. It was sold before I was born.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re here to search your house for any Four Old relics. Leniency for confession, severity for resistance!”

My father started to speak, but the boy cut him off and turned to the other guards. “Search!”

The guards split into four groups. The first two groups headed straight for our drawers, cabinets, and chests. Within minutes, our possessions were strewn across the floor. They brought dishes from the kitchen, pots and pans, forks, knives, and even the small teacups my mother drank from every day. I watched as one of the guards went into my room and little by little brought my things out. Books, clothes, and toys were dumped in a pile in the middle of the room, and other guards did the same to my brothers’ and sisters’ rooms. As a female guard walked out carrying a wooden carving, my brother leapt up from the floor.

“What are you doing? That’s not even a Four Old! Why are you taking it away?”

“It’s nice. I think I’ll take it with me. You better sit back down before you get hurt.” She pushed him down, turned to her partner, and both began to laugh.

The third group forced all seven of us out into the main room to watch as they made our parents open anything that was locked.

“Faster,” one guard shouted, giving my father a solid blow to his side.

After the contents of our home had been gathered in the living room, the fourth group of guards arrived carrying stones, which they dumped into the corner.

“Kneel,” they told our parents.

My father lowered my mother onto the sharp rocks. One of the guards then forced him down also, with a firm hand on his shoulder. He didn’t cry out, but I could see the blood from his

wounded knees staining the dusty rocks a muddy brown. My mother saw it too, and grasped his hand tightly.

“What is this?” one of the guards called, coming out of my parents’ room.

The boy in charge examined the objects the guard had brought out. “I don’t know. It’s a woman, wearing funny clothes and holding a baby, and a book full of foreign words. Put them on the pile.”

I recognized the statue of Mary, Mother of Jesus, and the Bible. They were two of my mother’s most prized possessions, given to her when she was a little girl. Her mother had been one of the first in this region to convert to Catholicism, and my mother had been baptized as a baby. I looked at her, trying to catch her eye. Her gaze was locked on the Bible. Tears were forming in her eyes, and her lip trembled as the guard tossed the book onto the pile, between the broken toys and shattered dishes. She started to open her mouth and protest, but a nearby guard saw her. He scooped up my little brother and cuffed him on the head, then tossed him back to the ground.

“That’s what will happen if you speak.”

She closed her mouth and buried her head in my father’s shoulder, sobbing.

The guards began to transfer everything of questionable origin into a large pile outside, next to the stream flowing by our house. Century-old paintings were torn off the wall and thrown unceremoniously on top, along with silver utensils, tiger furs, gold coins, books, and furniture. Even the household’s most sacred object, the family’s genealogy book, was taken. My father and mother watched, horrified, as the pages were ripped out and tossed onto the heap of items as tinder.

“So much of our family history is written inside that book. How can we pay homage to our ancestors if we do not know their names?”

“This book represents the old ideas and customs that your ancestors stood for. Everything that has happened up to this point shall be forgotten, and Old China shall be remembered only by its ashes.”

As the guards ferried objects back and forth from the house to the pile outside, they allowed my parents to stand up and watch as their belongings were burned. On the way, my mother stumbled and fell to the ground. When she straightened up, I noticed her fingers tightly closed over the wooden sculpture of Mary and the Bible.

With her back towards me, she pressed the two objects into my hand and whispered, “Take these when no one is looking, and hide them where no one will find them.” I tucked them into my waistband behind my back.

One of the guards turned around. “Hey, what are you whispering about?” He advanced towards my mother.

My father tried to step in, “She wasn’t talking about anything,” he said.

“Shut up!” the guard said, and punched him in the stomach.

My father doubled over, gasping for air. “Do not speak unless spoken to!” the guard said, and began to kick him in the side.

Screaming, my mother rushed to try to stop him, but another guard grabbed and restrained her. “Take them outside and make sure they don’t speak disrespectfully to us again,” the boy in charge said. He turned to us. “Get the kids into the bathroom and out of our way.”

Inside, all we could hear were the angry shouts of the guards and the cries of our mother. Then everything fell silent. After a few minutes a guard opened the door, and we ran outside to see what had happened. My father and mother lay unconscious on the ground. They were covered in cuts, and their faces were beginning to bruise. The boy in charge told the others, “Hurry up and finish burning everything so we can move on.”

Smoke filled the air as our belongings burned. The guards left.

As soon as they were out of sight, I wrapped up the sculpture and Bible, ran to the edge of the yard, and dug a small hole between two trees. As I sat there, still weeping, I made a promise to myself, that I would return to this place one day and find the Bible and statue, and bring them back to my mother.

It would be the end of the revolution, five years later, before I could return to dig them up. I walked out into the woods once more, recalling my footsteps from five years ago. I followed them to those two trees, and dug up the Bible. The words were gone, and the pages were more rot than paper, but it was enough. •