

Dreaming of the Garden Village

Jeremiah, or Chen Gao Yi, or the filial son, sat on a dusty rug in an asbestos basement, his head adorned with twelve long pendants of jade, and his body with dragons.

The jade was imperfect: the pipe cleaner did not look the same shade of green as in the pictures. But the dragon, made with sharpie on a white polo shirt and tan, khaki pants, seemed almost living to Jeremiah, flying through his clothes, as if to burst out and smash through the asbestos ceiling. There was another boy who had done that. He had drawn a dragon, and then, once the black eyes were dotted, it came alive and flew into heaven. Mother had told Gao Yi that story, with pictures that showed an inky mass of dragon soaring off, to the amazement of the crowd who had gathered, who doubted that the boy could draw a dragon into life.

Jeremiah admired that boy, for having courage, and being correct in his courage. He would like to sit under the sun as Gao Yi, as his mother called him, and bow to heaven in his funeral costume. But, he lived in America, where everyone knew him as Jeremiah . So, Jeremiah sat in the basement, and was ashamed. But whoever he was, he had an obligation to his mother, so his head knocked to the ground and shook the asbestos ceiling. When Jeremiah was diagnosed with lung cancer some thirty years later, the doctor asked if he had ever smoked. “No,” replied Jeremiah, “But our basement had an asbestos ceiling; a ceiling full of asbestos”.

In that moment in the future, thinking of the ceiling, of the asbestos, of the cancer, of his childhood, Jeremiah fuzzily remembered a story his mother told to young Gao Yi, near the end of her life when she was sad and confused. “Do you want to hear a story Gao Yi? Of when I met the Jade Cat?” she said in Chinese.

“Who is the Jade Cat?”

“When I was very young”.

Then, she stayed silent for a minute, then two, her rattling breath marking the passing seconds. When she began to speak again, it felt unconscious, as if she were just sleep-talking. But, Jeremiah decided, she was not. She was speaking to her son. Her son who in a month would wear a black beanie with jumbo stem pipe cleaners curled into parodic pendants, and in thirty years would be diagnosed with the same thing killing her. She spoke to them, as a mother.

I was in school when I first heard a Red Guard. ““My fellow revolutionaries,” the loudspeaker called out to us, “stop studying! Stop following the intellectual bourgeois! Work for the people! Follow Chairman Mao!” What an exciting announcement! Some people ran, some walked, but we all left the school, excited by the idea of no more school, of serving Chairman Mao. The first to leave were three boys, Jian Guo, Lian Guo, and Ai Guo. They weren’t related, but they always hung around each other, pulling pranks on teachers and peasants. We called them the three Guos. Once, Jian Guo had thrown a cicada shell into my hair, laughing and running away with the other two Guo’s. He was the ringleader, and a braggart. His father was a low-ranking party official, so he always talked about meeting Chairman Mao. He was childish, and wanted to be something more than a child. Maybe, if they did not stand up, none of us would have left, and it would have just been another school day... Nevermind. I know that isn’t true.

I ended up working more at my parents Coop store, a small shack with a variety of small toys and candies, and a large barrel of propane. We used to use propane lanterns. I was always afraid of lighting our lanterns; that they might burn me, set the entire house alight. And I would just stand there, in my imagination, watching the flickering light consume my house. I disliked fire, but otherwise red was my favorite color. I loved watermelon and pomegranates, oftentimes

stealing them from the peasants. My name was Little Red. I wanted to become a Red Guard more than anything.

When I told my mother this, she told me to forget about it. I was too young, most Red Guards were in high school or University. I think she was afraid, but she would never say that. So she said I was too young, and that she was my mother, so I must listen to her. Talking back scared me, so I spent most of every day imagining being a Red Guard instead.

One day, Jian Guo came into our store flanked by his friends, his hip aggressively thrust forward, like a needle pointing his way. He wore a saggy, dark-green military outfit, and a red armband, carrying a small and empty plastic jug. He looked ridiculous, and I later learned he borrowed his older brother's Red Guard outfit. However, in the moment, all I felt was jealousy. As his eyes scanned the shop, they fell upon me and he asked "Hey, Xiao Hong, how do I look?".

"Good," I said truthfully.

He eagerly walked over to me, his hips no longer thrust out. He leaned his head in and conspiratorially waved for me to do the same. When I did, he told me that he killed our teacher, Zhang Lao Shi.

"He was a bourgeoisie. So mean, so cold, thought he was better than us. Chairman Mao honored me personally, gave me this band" —pointing to the large red band, threatening to slip off his small arms—"and said there was no one else like me".

I couldn't believe it! Who kills their teacher!? Well, Lao Zhang was alive, just detained by the actual Red Guards. They beat him, then let him return home.

In shock, awe, and jealousy, I just stared at him silently. I didn't think he was worthy of being a Red Guard, especially if I couldn't become one. Maybe, he had something I did not. That willingness to kill someone for the cause. But he was such a brat!

He left me, having bragged enough, and pumped propane into his small jug . He left after filling the jug, giving it to Ai Guo to hold, while he kept his hands in his pockets. Determined to find out his secret, I followed behind the three Guos, as they alternately made fun of the girls in the class and raced each other. They wandered around the village doing this, only pausing whenever they saw a stray cat. "Cat!", one of them would yell, and then all three of them would chase after it, like a pack of dogs. Ai Guo was funny to watch, because instead of chasing the cats, he would put down the jug and then chase after Lian Guo or Jian Guo. He was probably scared of cats. I was too. Once I got scratched by one of them, it was a deep cut. The wound got infected, and I got very sick. I still feel a little sick whenever I am near a cat.

They managed to catch a lean, orange tabby. She was hit by Jian Guo's rock, and then, stunned, was grabbed by Lian Guo. The cat flailed in Lian Guo's arms, scratching and biting him alternately.

Jian Guo shouted, "Hold him Lian Guo! Get it Ai Guo! Ai Guo!"

Ai Guo struggled getting the lid off of the propane, he was sweaty from carrying it all this time. Jian Guo kept on shouting at him, and Ai Guo looked like he was about to cry, all the while trying to get off the cap. The cat was really angry now, and she twisted, and scratched, and bit, and I began to wonder if Lian Guo would be alright. Finally, Ai Guo got off the lid, lurched over to the flailing cat, and began to pour. Shouts and yowling intermingled, I couldn't tell a difference between the two. Just yelling, loud yelling. The cat, now slippery with propane, managed to wriggle out of Lian Guo's grip, a puff of dust marking its landing. I thought it was

going to get away— so focused on the tabby cat, with matted propane fur, that I ignored Jian Guo, and the match that left his hands.

They must have seen me, those boys. I was tall, taller than them, and I did not try to hide. So they must have seen me, just as I saw them, when that tabby cat burst into flames. I used to think I did not stop them because I was scared of the uniform, cowed by the Red Guards. I think I would have stared no matter what though. What can a person do, when a person is mean? I think all of us there, the tabby cat too, were mean. Mean in a hungry sort of way, and hungry in a mean sort of way. Mean.

“What happened to the cat?”, Gao Yi asked. All stories that his Mom told had a happy ending.

Xiao Hong paused, smiled, and said “You know the Jade Rabbit? Up on the moon?”

“Yeah!”

“She’s right up there. She’s the Jade Cat.”

“Do they make mooncakes together?”

“Mmm”

“What else do they do?”

“Dance, Gao Yi. If you look really hard, you can see them dancing.”

...Gao Yi’s nose began to itch after the tenth bow, so he scrunched his face as tight as he could, but to no avail: he sneezed, then sneezed again, sneezed thrice. The dust, like matted leaf piles meeting strong winds, sprang up and exchanged places on the rug. Gao Yi began to cry.

And continued to cry, alone within the asbestos basement, until the sun rose and his day began in earnest.