

“A Decade” from *Under the Red Flag*
By Ha Jin

I left the countryside twelve years ago when my father was transferred to an artillery division in Dalian. Ever since then we have lived in the city. If my aunt were not in Dismount Fort, I might have forgotten that small town where I went to elementary school only for two years in the late 1960s. My aunt comes to visit us every fall, helping Mother prepare our winter clothes and pickle vegetables. Once in a while she brings that town back to my memory.

Last summer went to Dismount Fort for the first time after a decade. The town was smaller than I had thought. Every street seemed shorter than it had been. On the first day, I rode my uncle's Peacock bicycle to the marketplace, the Blue Brook, the Eastern Bridge, White Mansion—our classroom building and other places that I still remembered. But the distances between them were so short I visited them all in less than two hours. From the second day on I gave up the bicycle, and instead I walked around. Few people knew me; because my family never lived in the town and I had stayed at my aunt's when going to school there. After strolling through the street, there were fewer children now, I stopped at some houses where my former classmates had lived, but they had all left, working in nearby counties and cities. Most girls had become textile workers in Gold County. Their parents didn't remember me. There was only one boy who had not left and whose mother still knew me, but he was jailed for raping two women.

Life in the countryside was dull. There was nothing going on in the evenings. After supper most people would sit outside, chatting away and fanning themselves until the cool breeze came from the Yellow Sea around midnight. I missed my boyfriend, who was my classmate at the college. He stayed with his parents in Tianjin during the summer. At night I would write to him. If tired of writing, I read Turgenev's *Smoke* and a current issue of *Youth*, a small literary magazine published in Shenyang, which carried a story of mine. Since I had time, I read the whole issue from cover to cover. I didn't like most of the pieces in it, but there was a narrative poem that aroused my interest. The poem tells a story from a former Red Guard's point of view. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution a teenage boy together with his classmates paraded their teacher, an old man, through the streets. The boy kicked the teacher hard and broke his ribs. For the following years he was full of remorse and tried to make up for what he had done. Then the teacher fell ill, and the boy, a young man now, looked after him for five months until the old man died with gratitude. I didn't like the sentiment of the poem, but it reminded me of a young woman teacher, Zhu Wenli, who had taught me at the Central Elementary School in Dismount Fort eleven years before.

I was in the fourth grade when she came to our school. At a glance you could tell she as a recent college graduate. She looked shy and timid. In the beginning, whenever she spoke, not only her cheeks but also her ears turned red. She was a charming woman, tall and slender, her hands very delicate with long, thin fingers. Her dark eyes were as sensitive as though they were always ready to be in tears. At that time, in the middle of the revolution, we had no sense of beauty. As one of the slogans says “sweet flowers are poisonous.” To us, Wenli was someone dangerous rather than pretty. But I remember I liked looking at her in profile in that way she reminded me of the ballerinas in the revolutionary role model play *The Red Women Detachment*. Certainly Wenli never wore a uniform, besides her lips were thicker and the tip of her small nose too round, lacking the stern looks of a woman soldier.

She taught music in her first year. The class mainly consisted of two parts: the songs praising Chairman Mao or composed for the quotations from him; the dances expressing our

loyalty to the Chairman and the Party Though she was knowledgeable about music and was even able to compose a song, Wenli's voice was much too soft and too weak for those revolutionary songs. We believed we sang better than she, because our voices were sincere and passionate. But she was a wonderful dancer. Standing on one toe, she could raise the other leg slowly back and forth with ease as if it had no weight. She could stretch out her arms with a lot of grace and poise. We all enjoyed watching her dance, though she didn't seem to have the strength for a loyalty dance, the vigorous kind we did on the streets. Soon we learned that she came from a capitalist family in Shanghai. No wonder she looked so delicate and fragile.

One day at noon, Niu Fen and I went to see Miao Jian, the teacher in charge of our class, whose office was on the second floor in White Mansion. On the last flight of stairs we heard someone singing. The slow, dangling tune was so different from anything we had heard that both of us stopped to listen. It was Wenli's voice. Gradually we took in the words:

Why are flowers so red?

So red and so beautiful?

O so red, O so beautiful.

Like a fire,

Like a fire

That burns the blood

Of youth and love—

The wind must have blown open the door of her office. She stopped. Niu Fen and I entered the corridor and found Wenli holding the doorknob. She saw us and smiled nervously, her lips twitching slightly and her eyes full of sparkling tears.

"Can I help you, Aina?" she asked me. I shook my head, too confused by her tearful eyes to say anything. One of my bobby pins came loose and I stuck it back in my hair.

"What's that song, Teacher Zhu?" Niu Fen, who was a loud mouth, asked.

"A Uigar folk song," Wenli said. "I, I sang it just for fun."

I don't know whether Niu Fen reported Wenli to the school leaders. After that, I never heard her sing the song again, and she only sang the revolutionary songs she taught us in class. But somehow the tune of that folk song remained in my mind; from time to time it rose in my ears. Later I came upon its music and words at a friend's home in Dalian and learned to sing it myself.

Our class teacher Miao Jian was a young man. Some people called him "Little Albanian," because of his big round eyes, aquiline nose, and small stature. In no way did he look Chinese. His face was very lean and he had to shave every day to keep his whiskers down. It was said he had mixed blood. People thought him handsome, perhaps because he looked exotic. I had no idea when he and Wenli started their love affair. In any case, we soon noticed they were often together. Later Wenli had appendicitis and was operated upon. During her recovery Miao visited her every day.

One afternoon in the fall Niu Fen, Zhang Wei, and I went to Miao's office to get some

pamphlets for the class. On his door hung a sign, "No Admittance," which had never been there before. We were uncertain if he was in, but we heard a noise inside. The three of us pressed our eyes on the cracks of the door to see what was going on. Both Miao and Wenli were standing by the window, but Wenli, her hips leaning against a desk, was unbuckling her belt.

"Just let me have a peek," Miao said softly.

Outside we three looked at each other and stuck our tongues out. Then we heard Wenli say, "Just a peek, promise?"

"I promise."

She pulled down her pants a little and revealed her white belly. "Lower, lower," Miao urged.

The pants went down further, and a scar like a caterpillar, about three inches long, appeared close to her right groin. Miao touched the dark skin with his index finger, then bent down and kissed the scar. "Naughty, you're a naughty boy," Wenli said happily and pulled up her pants.

Bewildered by what we witnessed, the three of us turned around simultaneously and dashed to the head of the stairs as though escaping provoked hornets. Our footsteps must have startled them, for I heard Miao cry, "Oh Heaven!"

Either Niu Fen or Zhang Wei told on them. Next morning we were summoned to the office of the school's Revolutionary Committee. The leaders asked us to describe what we had seen and heard; without hesitation we told them all the details. We thought our teachers had done something bad and shameful, but we had no idea how serious it was. Director Liu said the two teachers were corrupt to the bones by bourgeois lifestyle.

In three days our school was covered with big-character posters exposing and condemning Miao Jian and Zhu Wenli. Many articles appeared on the walls and billboards, such as "Root Out the Bourgeois Lifestyle," "It's Shameless to Open Your Pants in the Office," "Why Do You Still Behave like a Hoodlum?" "Zhu Wenli: the Stinking Bourgeois Miss," "New China Does Not Tolerate the Incurable Progeny of Capitalists." In the music class two days later, Wenli looked very pale, her eyes swollen and her voice a little hoarse. She tried to leach a song that expressed the Tibetans' love for Chairman Mao, but we weren't very interested. Quite a few students made faces at each other. Two boys even buckled and unbuckled their belts with meaningful noise.

Then Miao was sent to the country to be reformed through labor in the fields. Wenli was assigned to take over our class. She didn't teach music anymore, because one of the school leaders had complained that she sounded as though wailing when singing a song which should be full of gusto, in accordance with the courageous spirit of the proletariat. Most students in our class were children of poor peasants, workers, and cadres, so it was not easy for Wenli to teach us. But unlike the boys, who often made insinuating remarks about her family background or imitated her voice, a number of girls were good to her, because they liked the way she danced and wanted her to teach them how to dance. Since I was clumsy, not cut out for dancing, I was never close to her. I noticed she seldom spoke to anyone outside class. A few wrinkles, very thin, appeared at the ends of her eyes. Her hair was no longer as tidy as before.

After the Spring Festival we began to study a new lesson in our Chinese class. The text was a letter Chairman Mao had written to the Albanian Communist Party. As usual, Wenli led us to read it out three times, and then she started to explain the new words and expressions. In the letter, there was a sentence that went like this: "You (the Albanian Communist Party) are a grand eagle soaring bravely; in comparison, the Russian Revisionists and the American Imperialists are

merely a pile of yellowish dirt."

Wenli said to the class, "Chairman Mao here uses a metaphor. Who knows what a metaphor is?"

We had never heard of that word, so nobody responded. Wenli wrote out the word on the blackboard and went on, "A metaphor is to compare one thing to something else. For example . . ." she coughed into her fist, "the Russian Revisionists and the American Imperialists are not dirt, but Chairman Mao describes them as dirt. That's a metaphor."

"I have a question, teacher," Gao Jiang said and stood up. He was the tallest boy in the class.

"What's your question?" Wenli asked with a start.

"You say the Russian Revisionists and the American Imperialists are not dirt, but Chairman Mao says clearly they are dirt. Why?"

Wenli's lips were quivering, but she managed to say "They aren't dirt. They are also people like us. We call them dirt merely to show our contempt for them."

"You mean they are also humans?" Niu Fen challenged.

"Ye-yes," Wenli said.

The class was in a tumult now. Many of us were convinced that Wenli was wrong, not only wrong but reactionary. How dare she change Chairman Mao's meaning! How could we trust such a teacher? Like her capitalist father, she must have hated our socialist country and our great Party all the time.

Wenli was so frightened she called off the class ten minutes before recess. Then some of us went straight to the Workers' Propaganda Team, which consisted of five illiterate men from the Food Company, to report her. After hearing us, the vice-director, Li Long, slapped his copy of Chairman Mao's quotations on the desk and said, "Damn her grandmother, that bitch will never change. Now she's done enough."

The next day we had a new teacher. In a week Wenli was sent to the countryside. I don't know to what village. At that time I didn't care where she went; wherever she was sent, it seemed to me that she deserved it. Besides, there were so many people being reformed through labor that Wenli's leaving was almost a natural thing.

The image of Wenli came to mind time and again, so I decided to visit her before I left, if she was still in Dismount Fort. Not because I wanted to apologize; I hadn't done anything on purpose to hurt her. Though I didn't know what to say to her exactly my visit would at least assure her that a student of hers had not forgotten her after a decade.

One evening I asked Aunt and Uncle about her "Wenli, you mean?" Aunt said with a big smile, her face full of creases and puckers. "She's different now. She's a strong woman in town. Everybody knows her."

"Is she still a teacher in the elementary school?"

"No, she doesn't teach anymore. You know, after the government canceled all the class-status stuff, she was back from the country and became a free person like us. Now she's the vice-president of the elementary school."

"Is she married?"

"Of course. She has two kids, a boy and a girl, nice kids."

"Who's her husband? Miao Jian?"

"I don't know. He's also a cadre or something. My old man," Aunt touched Uncle with her palm leaf fan, "Do you know who is Wenli's husband? His name?"

"You bet I know. He's Wang Dadong, the director of the People's Bank in town."

Uncle told me Miao Jian had left the country for Hong Kong seven years before. It was said that his granduncle was a rich, childless merchant, so Miao went there to inherit the wealth. Anyway, it seemed nothing had happened between him and Wenli. Aunt said Wenli's family now lived in the granite house at the corner of East and Safe streets. I remembered that house well, where my classmate Dongdong had once lived.

The conversation with Aunt and Uncle made me more determined to see Wenli. The next afternoon I asked Aunt what gift I should take to Wenli if I paid her a visit.

"That's easy, go buy two packets of walnut cookies," she said.

I felt uneasy about that. Wenli used to be my teacher, a graceful delicate woman; cookies would show I had no taste. Unlike the country people who were obsessed with good food, Wenli had never seemed to be interested in eating. I had a new pink skirt with me, but I didn't know her size now; she must have been much taller than I. Having thought it over, I decided to take the issue of *Youth* as a gift, since it contained a story of mine, which would probably convince her that I, as a student of hers once, had been trying to live up to some of the expectations that she might have cherished for herself in the past. I would tell her that I wanted to be a writer—a novelist and playwright—even though I couldn't dance well.

After dinner I set out for East Street, which was just about three hundred paces away. In the dusk a half-moon was wavering beyond the water tower and the buildings within the army compound. Here and there chimneys were puffing out bands of smoke, which were dangling in the indigo sky. The street was much quieter than ten years before. I remembered playing soldier here with boys and girls at dusk, shouting and throwing cabbage roots and rotten turnips at each other.

The moment I entered East Street a small crowd appeared ahead on the left side. I heard people quarreling and calling each other names. Their sharp voices, male and female, fluctuated through the air like sounds sent over by a tweeter from a long distance. I walked closer and saw men and women arguing and gesticulating under a road lamp.

"No, that's not true! Your chicken never came into our yard to lay an egg," a stalwart woman in white pajamas said loudly, waving a rolling pin.

"I saw it enter your yard this afternoon, and I heard it clucking afterwards," a small woman said, holding a white hen in her arms.

"Liar! Why didn't you come and pick it up then?"

Two men, who were apparently the husbands, tried to stop the women, saying it was merely an egg, not worth it.

"No," the small woman said to her husband, "it's not just an egg. Look at that shrew; she can kill me if I come near her." Then she turned to the tall woman. "Zhu Wenli, you're a cadre and have drunk a lot of ink. I'm just a housewife and don't read books. I don't care if we scratch each other's faces."

"If you dare touch me, I'll break your skull with this," the stalwart woman said, sucking her teeth, and raising the rolling pin. She spat to the ground.

I looked closely. She was indeed my teacher Zhu Wenli, but her thick body and fleshy face belied the young person I had known. A pale scar under her nostrils tightened the upper lip and made her mouth protrude a little. All the tenderness and innocence which had marked that face was now replaced by a numb, stony look. Even her voice had changed too, full of scratchy metal. If the small woman hadn't mentioned her name, I would never have been able to recognize her. Indeed she looked very strong, as Aunt had told me, but she was no longer the person I wanted to meet. Somehow I was overwhelmed by a kind of hatred rising in me.

Her husband, a short balding man, held her arm, turned her around, and pulled her away. Together they were returning to the granite house. A feeling of misery filled my chest, similar to how I had felt when my first boyfriend left me for another girl. Things turned misty before my eyes, and I found myself in tears.

From "Under the Red Flag," stories by Ha Jin. Originally published by the University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA. Copyright © 1997 by Ha Jin.