

What Has That to Do with Me?

By Yiyun Li

THIS STORY I am going to tell you, it is a true story.

The year was 1968. The girl was nineteen, the secretary of the Communist Youth League for her class in a local high school in Hunan Province, China. You probably don't know much about Hunan, but I am sure you have heard of at least one person from the province – Chairman Mao, our father, leader, saviour, our god and our dictator.

So it was in 1968 that the nineteen-year-old Hunan girl, after seeing many men and women being kicked and beaten to death by her fellow Red Guards, expressed her doubts about Chairman Mao and the Cultural Revolution he had started two years earlier, in a letter to her boyfriend, who was serving in ►

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◀ the military. He turned in the letter to the company officer. The officer reported to his superiors, who in turn telegraphed the Revolutionary Committee of her town. Three days later, she was arrested.

She was jailed for ten years, ten long years during which she kept writing to officials of all levels to appeal her case. The letters accumulated as evidence of her failure to reform, and ten years later, in a retrial, she was sentenced to death. She was executed in the spring of 1978, two years after Chairman Mao's death. Hundreds of people attended the execution in a local stadium. A bullet took her twenty-nine-year-old life, and that was the end of her story.

But the story I am telling you, it is not over yet.

Because I still have to tell you what happened before the final moment. Minutes before the execution, an ambulance rushed into the stadium, and several medical workers jumped out. I call them medical workers because I don't know if they were doctors. Do doctors kill? But these medical workers, they were professional, efficient. Working quickly so as not to delay the execution, they removed the girl's kidneys. No anaesthesia.

The bullet entered her brain after the kidneys were taken out. The brain was the sinning organ. The kidneys were amnestied, airlifted to a hospital in the province capital, and transplanted into an older man's body. The man was the father of a member of the province Revolutionary Committee.

The kidneys outlived her, for how many years I do not know.

The story I am telling you, it does not end when the brain was murdered. Not yet.

Because I still have to tell you what happened to the young woman's body, minus her kidneys. Like the families of many counterrevolutionaries, her family paid for the bullet that took her life. Twenty-four cents it was, the price of a thin slice of pork in 1978. They signed the paper and paid for the bullet, but they did not dare to pick up the body after the execution. So the girl was left outside the town, in a wild land of stray dogs, crows, and other scavengers. One of the others got to the body first, a fifty-seven-year-old janitor. When jars were later discovered at his home, he admitted to having raped the body. Then he amputated

the sex organs and preserved them in formaldehyde for his personal collection.

He was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment.

But the story I am telling you – you may have guessed this by now – the story I am telling you, it is not over yet.

At the time, in the city in Hunan Province, before the final sentence of the young woman, there were people who tried to organize and appeal on her behalf. They did not stop at the woman's execution, fighting now not for her life but her innocence. *Ping-Fan*, depurge, was what it was called, for in our country, as in any other communist nation, innocence was determined not by one's behaviour but by the tolerance of such behaviour at a certain time. I grew up reading stories of depurge in newspapers and magazines, of people who had been labelled as counterrevolutionaries for ten, twenty, or even thirty years, and now were reabsorbed into our communist family. Some were still alive, but most who were depurged had long been dead. Still, a readmission to the society was celebrated by grateful family members in tears. So you see, in our country, one's story does not end at one's death.

Back in the Hunan town, people gathered for the young woman's posthumous reputation. Hundreds of people joined the protest, and every one of them was punished in the end, years in prison for some, dismissal or suspension from work for luckier ones. One of them, a woman thirty-two years old, an organizer of the protest and mother of a two-year-old boy, was sentenced to death. She signed on the sentence paper and was reported to have thrown away the pen and said, 'What makes you all fear death so? Everybody dies.'

I am not sure how to tell the story I want to tell you. Sometimes when I think about the story, it becomes a grotesque kaleidoscope spinning with patterns and colours that startle my eyes. Sometimes I have to shut my eyes in order not to see.

And shut my mind's eye so I can stop imagining: the clean incision when the scalpel cut into the skin, hastily disinfected for the sake of the kidneys; the short moment between the operation and the death; the parents who gave up not only the daughter's life but her body; or the ►

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◀ boy who grew up not knowing his mother and who was taught to thank the government five years later when she was deported.

What makes you all fear death so? I do not have an answer. I run away from the deaths of the two young women because I have only enough courage to tell the stories of those alive – for instance, the audience who filed into the stadium and watched the young woman suffer and die. The execution must have taken place in the morning, as all executions have in my country for hundreds of years. Did people go to the stadium first before they went to work, or did they parade to the stadium from different working units, singing Chinese and Soviet marching songs?

I try to see the world through my eyes of 1978. That spring I was five and a half years old, a problematic kid in day care, disliked by all the aunties, as we called the day care teachers. One, Auntie Wang, especially hated me. I knew she hated me, but I did not know why. I feared her more than any other kid feared her; I feared her more than I feared any other person in my life. I was always the first to stop playing and run to her when she called out any order. I would stand in front of her, looking with expecting eyes, waiting for her to praise my promptness. But she saw through my willingness and brushed my head aside with a heavy hand. ‘Stop looking at me like that. I know you do this just to make us believe you are a good kid. Don’t think you can deceive me.’

I tried not to cry, not knowing that what angered her was my blunt, wide-eyed stare. Auntie Wang turned to another auntie and said, ‘This is a kid who has too much of her own will.’ The other auntie agreed.

I did not know what they meant. I did not have any will except to please Auntie Wang so she would smile at me, or praise me, or at least not yell at me every time I played the guerilla leader. In the day care our favourite game was battle game, boys the male guerilla fighters, girls the female guerilla fighters. Our enemy was Japanese invaders, the reactionary nationalist army, American soldiers in Korea or Vietnam, all in the forms of houses and trees, rails and weeds. I was always the guerilla leader because I was the one who made up the story for our battle games, the one to lead them to charge or retreat.

But before I had won my first battle this morning, Auntie Wang grabbed my collar and brought me to a full stop. ‘What are you making them do?’ she said.

I tried not to look at her, but I did. ‘Play guerillas,’ I said.

‘No guerilla playing today,’ Auntie Wang said and waved to my soldiers standing beside me. ‘Go play other games.’

The boys and girls scattered. I tried to slip away, but Auntie Wang stopped me with a thundering yell. ‘You, did I tell you to leave?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Right. Time-out for you this morning. Now squat here.’

I squatted between her and another auntie, who was busy knitting a sweater for her son. Auntie Wang reserved this special punishment for me. Other kids served five or ten minutes of time-out standing in front of her, but she always had me squat, for half an hour at least.

Many years later I read in an article that having prisoners squat for hours is a common practice in Chinese prisons. Squatting while holding the legs, putting the whole body’s weight on the heels of the feet, back bending and hips drooping – such a primitive position creates pain as well as shame, the article said.

I wonder if Auntie Wang was an inventive person or if she simply knew the practice. Either way, I had to squat in such a position so often that I was no longer bothered by it. Yes, my legs still cramped, but I could still watch my friends with cramping legs. I saw boys chase one another in meaningless circles, girls gather wildflowers and grass leaves. They did not know how to play a guerilla game without me.

I sighed. Auntie Wang caught me immediately. ‘Why did you sigh? Do you think I am wrong to punish you?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘You are lying. Did you not sigh? I heard you. You are dishonest. Do you hate me?’

‘No,’ I said, trying hard to hold back my tears.

‘Liar. I know you hate me. I know you do,’ Auntie Wang said.

Such exchanges happened often when I was on time-out. I did not know what made Auntie Wang so persistent in tormenting me. Did she have much fun having me in the day care? I do not know the answer. Many years later, when I was already in America, my mother met her in a shop. Auntie Wang recognized my mother right away and asked about me. In the next five years, as my mother told me, they met in the street many times, and Auntie Wang asked about me every time. I wonder if she remembers me for the same reason I remember her. Sometimes I wonder about it, knowing I will never get to know the real reason, accepting ►

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◀ her comment that I was a kid with too much of my own will as the only explanation.

So on this unlucky day, I was bracing myself for a long squatting period when the police patrol drove into an open field by our play yard. There were two tall metal poles at the centre of the field. On evenings when movies were shown in the open field, a piece of white cloth would be stretched between the two poles, with people sitting on both sides of the screen watching the same war movie and speaking the lines in a collective voice along with the heroic actors. During daytime the field was left for weeds and insects, and I was surprised to see the police car drive in there, calling through a loudspeaker for the residents to gather in ten minutes. Retired men and women walked out of the apartment buildings carrying folding chairs and stools. Some even carried umbrellas to shield them from the morning sun. The electric bell clanked in the nearby elementary school. A minute later students of all grades rushed out of the school building, pushing and shouting and ignoring the teachers' orders.

I was so excited by what was going on that I forgot to squat. I stood up and looked for my sister among the schoolchildren. Immediately Auntie Wang came and snatched me off the ground. I was scared, but she did not have time to scold me. She placed me at the end of the long rope that we all held onto when we went out of the day care. I held the rope and started to stomp my feet as other kids did, waiting impatiently to be taken outside our play yard.

As we walked onto the open field, the old men and women patted and squeezed our cheeks. Other, younger adults had also arrived from different working units. We sat down in the grass at the very front. Workers were building a temporary stage with bamboo sticks and wooden planks. The students from the elementary school sat behind us. I looked back and found my sister in the second grade line, and I grinned at her, glad that she was not as close to the stage as I was.

As we waited, the aunties chattered among themselves and passed around a bag of dried tofu snacks. I caught a black ant and put it in my palm, let it walk over my fingers, something my parents told me not to do because, as they said, my hand was too hot for an ant and it would have a fever walking on my fingers. I watched the ant looking in a feverish way for an exit to leave my hand. When I was tired of the ant, I flipped it with a finger and saw it land on the neck of Auntie Wang, sitting not far from

me. I held my breath, but she did not turn around. I hesitated and cried out a warning. 'Auntie, auntie,' I said.

'What?' she turned around and said. 'Now it's you again. Get up and squat. Keep quiet.'

I got up on my feet, trying to keep my head and my back as close to my legs as I could, so my sister could not tell that I was being punished again.

The truck drove into the open field as I was struggling to keep a decent squatting position. Policemen, dressed up in snow white uniforms, jumped down from the covered truck. Then four men, all heavily bound with ropes, were pushed out of the truck and led onto the stage. Two policemen stood behind each man, pushing his head down. A police officer with a loudspeaker came onto the stage, announcing that the four counterrevolutionary hooligans had been sentenced to death and the sentence would be carried out after they were paraded through all the neighbourhoods of the district. Then he raised a fist and shouted, 'Death to the counterrevolutionary hooligans!'

The aunties signalled us, and I raised my fist, still in the squatting position. We shouted the slogan along with the elementary school students, the uncles and aunts from all the working units, and the retirees, who had already started to leave the meeting with their chairs. The hooligans were escorted back to the truck, and a minute later the police car and the truck pulled out of the open field and drove away to the next meeting place. I felt disappointed at the shortness of the meeting. Auntie Wang walked up to me and put her hand to my head, in the shape of a handgun. 'You see that? If you have too much of your own will, you will become a criminal one day. Bang,' she said, pulling her finger as if to trigger the gun, 'and you are done.'

So I could have been there in the Hunan stadium, five years old or seventy-five years old, a child trapped in her small unhappiness or an old man already getting tired of the long morning. Did I see the violent struggle of the young woman as the medical workers tried to pin her limbs down? Did I hear the muffled cries that came from her gagged mouth?

No, I did not see, and I did not hear. I was dozing off, out of boredom. I woke up in time to see another man, a young villager, in a provincial court in central China, stand up and say into the microphone, 'I was ►

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◀ an orphan. I was illiterate. I did not know how to be a good man. I promise I will learn to be a good man. I ask the people to listen to me.'

It was the winter of 1991, and I was one of the freshmen of Peking University in the middle of a one-year brainwashing in a military camp in central China. The Harvard of China, as the university advertised itself, Peking University had been the hotbed of every student movement in Chinese history, including the one in 1989 in Tiananmen Square that ended in bloodshed. For the next four years, to immunize the incoming students to the disease that was called freedom, all freshmen were sent to the military for a year of brainwashing, or political re-education, as it was called.

Being in the military made me think of myself as a victim of the regime. Having to use toilet stalls that had no doors angered me. Having to listen to the officers call us *disgusting wild cats in the mating season* after being caught singing a love song in the break or *Americans' walking dogs* after being caught reading English in political education class, their spittle on our faces, angered me. Anger sustained us as hope would sustain one in such a situation. Anger fed us instead of the radish stew that never filled our stomachs. Anger made us defy the officers' orders in public and in secrecy. Anger helped us to endure the punishment with dignity.

Anger made our lives meaningful, filling us with selves bigger than our true selves. What could be more satisfactory for boys and girls of eighteen and nineteen than to feel that pumped self growing inside as leavened dough?

So that winter day I was sitting among my fellow victims, a swollen self inside my dark green uniform, in a crowded theatre that served as a makeshift court for three young men. We were sent to listen to the trial to learn how to be law-abiding citizens. On the stage were a judge, a public prosecutor, a one-man jury, and two assistants who recorded the trial. The three men on trial were held in separate pens. From where I sat, I could not see any of their faces, and I did not care to see.

I closed my eyes once we were ordered to sit down. I dozed off during the public prosecutor's opening statement, spoken in a local dialect that I could not understand well, and was lost in my own dreamland until the officer on duty walking from aisle to aisle tapped my shoulder heavily with her belt. I pulled myself straight and looked at the stage. The judge

was asking questions, and the prosecutor was answering, waving a knife in front of him for emphasis. 'What did the men do?' I asked the girl next to me in a whisper.

'A train robbery,' the girl answered. 'I don't know for sure.'

I closed my eyes, not curious whom they had robbed, what they had done to the train. I did not see anything in the three men that was worthy of my attention. Again I was awakened by the officer.

For a while I sat there not thinking anything, looking at the back of the head in front of me and the head in front of that head. Then I traced my eyes along the head to the shoulder and to the wooden chair, where a line of characters was scrawled on its back in faint ink. I leaned forward and tried to read it. 'Wang San eat dog shit!' I laughed to myself at the huge exclamation mark and pointed to the girl next to me, and she nodded with a smile.

Then the youngest of the three criminals stood in his pen and spoke into the microphone in front of him in heavily accented mandarin Chinese. 'I was an orphan. I was illiterate. I did not know how to be a good man. I promise I will learn to be a good man. I ask the people to listen to me,' he said and bowed to us.

I laughed and whispered to the girl next to me, 'What is he doing?'

'I think the judge just asked him if he had anything to say to defend himself.'

'And that's his defence?'

'Probably.'

'And what's that to do with us?' I said, and we both laughed lightly, dismissing the image of the young man along with the graffiti on the back of the chair.

That was the end of the trial. We did not catch how many years the young men were sentenced to, and we did not care to know. We left the theatre feeling angered that one more afternoon of our lives had been wasted, not knowing we had missed one important moment, not knowing that we forgot to answer that crucial question: *What has that to do with us?*

Did anyone in the Hunan stadium ask the same question? Did anyone try to answer it? I want to know what the audience was thinking as it watched the young woman's death. Was there an Auntie Wang in the crowd? ►

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◀ I want to know, too, who those medical workers were, rushing in and out of the stadium in the ambulance. Was the surgeon the same one who, when I was ten years old, operated on my mother to take her gall-bladder out? I saw him shortly after the operation, and he even joked with me, telling me that my mom would no longer be a quick-tempered person because she no longer had an organ to store her bile.

I want to know the man with the transplanted kidneys. After the operation did he walk with a cane to the neighbourhood centre to attend the retirees' biweekly meetings, where my eighty-one-year-old grandpa was made to stand for hours, listening to the old men and women criticize him because he once fought in the army against Communism?

I want to know the boyfriend who turned in the letter to his officer. Was he promoted for his action and admitted to the Communist Party? Did he become the officer who had us march in snow for hours when we were in the military, trying to kick our shaking legs with his leather boots?

I want to know, too, the janitor. How did he get caught? What made him seek out a criminal's body? Was he like the janitor in my father's working unit, who always patted my head and gave me candies to eat? He once gave me a bag of mulberry leaves, kept moist by a wet handkerchief, for my silkworms. Did he intentionally or accidentally forget that the leaves were sprayed with pesticide, so that my silkworms all died overnight, so that I flunked my second grade nature class?

And above all the questions is the one question I have been trying to answer all along. *What has that to do with me?* Why do I feel compelled to tell the two women's stories? Who were they?

The first young woman was once the secretary of the Communist Youth League. She must have been a devoted daughter of the revolution to get the position. What led her astray from her faith? What made her stare back with blunt, questioning eyes? And those letters she wrote over the next ten years, page after page, what was she trying to say? What is in the letter that betrayed her, ending the ten years of imprisonment with a death sentence instead of freedom?

And the second woman, the mother of a young boy, what made her so undaunted in the face of death? Did she like to read the stories of women heroes as I once did, my favourite heroine a nineteen-year-old Soviet girl

named Zoya, who was caught burning down a German stable and was hanged to death? Did she admire Autumn-Jade, the woman hero I secretly hoped was one of my ancestors?

Autumn-Jade was a student of my great-granduncle, the one we called Big Man in our family. Big Man was a revolutionary at the end of the last dynasty, fighting along with his comrades to establish a republic. He was known in history for two things – the female students he trained to be assassins and his peculiar death after a failed mission. Autumn-Jade was twenty-four, the most beautiful student of Big Man. She was sent to bomb the emperor's personal representative; the bomb did not go off, and she was arrested, beheaded in the town centre of our hometown. On the day of her execution, hundreds of people watched her paraded in the street, her body badly tortured. Many brought stacks of silver coins to bribe the executioner so they could get a bun immersed in her blood, something that was said to cure tuberculosis. How many bloody buns were consumed that day, how many men were cured? Soon after Autumn-Jade's death, Big Man went alone on another assassination mission. He succeeded but got caught by the guards. His heart and liver were taken out and fried into a dish for the guards to eat.

I can never tell the story of Big Man and Autumn-Jade right. I cannot resist the temptation to make Autumn-Jade one of my family. I want Big Man in love with Autumn-Jade, the beautiful young woman who learned fencing, shooting, horse riding, and the chemistry of explosives from him. I want Big Man to go into the suicide mission as a tribute to Autumn-Jade, his comrade and his lover. I want the granduncle whom Big Man's wife raised alone to be a son of Big Man and Autumn-Jade.

I want to interfere with history, making things up at will, adding layers to legend. I want Autumn-Jade's fearless blood running in the two young women's bodies. Sometimes I imagine the second woman looking calmly into her executioners' eyes when she was forced to kneel down to receive the bullet, as many years ago Autumn-Jade stood quietly in front of the axe and chanted her last poem. The scenes always move me, as they are the central scenes for a hero's story. I want the story to be about bravery. But always I am stopped.

It is a fact that heroes are created by anger and romance, but anger and romance do not carry us long. It is a fact that the first woman, after the death sentence, cried and begged for her life to anyone walking ►

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◀ past her cell. It is a fact that she was crushed by the thought of dying at twenty-nine, a fact that she was no longer a sane person on the way to the stadium, weeping and singing and laughing and murmuring stories to herself.

As if this were an imaginary world, like the world of made-up battle games in the day care, with history carried on my young shoulders. But sooner or later Auntie Wang will shout in her loud voice, and I will run to her again, wishing that this time she will be pleased by me, knowing she is not when I see her pursed lips. Again I am squatting in time-out, watching the white clouds above me, and the black ants busying themselves in the grass. Our game was interrupted, but our lives continue. ■

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