

On a spring afternoon in 1968, a group of Red Guards broke into my grandparents' home and arrested my grandfather. A few days later, they stormed back, dragged my grandmother out by her arm and escorted her to a "denunciation rally" at the high school where she taught art. She was in her early forties with five children. My then eleven-year-old mother was the middle child. When her mother was taken, the oldest sibling stayed home to take care of the youngest, and the middle three followed the Red Guards, far enough back to avoid being noticed and sent home.

Hundreds had gathered around a podium in the school playground's front end. They pressed Chairman Mao's Little Red Books into their chests and shouted.

"Purge the remnants of capitalism!"

"Overthrow the Five Black Categories!"

"Defeat the People's enemies!"

My mother, her older sister who was thirteen, and younger brother who was nine, slipped behind a boiler room, which stood between the podium and the school building, and peeked around the corner.

The Red Guards—who used to be my grandmother's students—pushed her onto the podium and kicked her to her knees. They reported the outcome of their investigation on my grandfather, who had shown up in the city sixteen years earlier with no identification.

Far from the son of a dead farmer he claimed to be, he was actually the descendant of a wealthy family in Jiangxi Province, southern China. He and his family had been part of the Landlord Class, one of the Five Black Categories. Sixteen years earlier, during the Land Reform Movement in his hometown, the authorities had executed his father in public, confiscated their property, and forced his mother to live in a pigsty. My grandfather had escaped to Changchun, two thousand miles away, became a middle school history teacher, married my grandmother, and started a new family.

Then, the Red Guards delivered the real punch: in his past life, my grandfather had been married to another woman. And he still was. Their