

FIRE FROM THE SUN

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Book 1

JOHN DERBYSHIRE

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FOR ROSIE

Author's Note

Names of the principals:

“Weilin” is pronounced “way-leen”.

“Yuezhu” is “ü-e-jwoo”. The “ü” is done with a pout, as in German *Glück* or French *lune*. The “e” is a short American “e” as in “get”.

Opera singing, like any other line of work, has its own jargon, taken mainly from Italian and German. Though I did not want to cumber my novel with these terms of art, it has proved impossible to avoid them altogether. Because they are not defined well—often not defined at all—in standard dictionaries, I have put them in a glossary at the end of the third volume of this story. Also included in this glossary are the names of all operas, arias and composers mentioned in the text, with brief descriptions (where the text has not already supplied them).

For the convenience of my plot I have taken serious liberties with some of the realities of opera life, training and performance. I ask opera lovers to forgive me these transgressions (and one or two absurdities), and beg them not to write me angry letters pointing out that, for example, the Ravenna festival only began in 1990. Similar remarks apply to the world of high finance as I have portrayed it. I know very well, and do not need to be told, that the Bosco and Mosco are not possible objects (though the latter bears a passing resemblance to the Collateralized Mortgage Obli-

gation, invented in 1983 by Lew Ranieri and Bob Dall). Novelists, like opera composers, are very ruthless people, as our acquaintances will tell you, and the material world is our slave, not our master.

In building my sets for this story I have been helped by friends and relatives who know much more than I do about opera, finance, and life in China during the 1970s and 1980s. I am deeply grateful to: my wife Rosie, Wally Fekula, Bing Ma, Liz Kotlyarevsky, Yanbin Wang, Liz Funghini, Carl Leaman, Paul Micio and Kitty Brush.

Chapter 1

New Costumes at the Swimming Pool
We Have Friends All Over the World!

The first time Weilin ever saw foreigners—real foreigners, not just National Minorities or Chinese people from another province—was at the swimming pool in South Lake Park.

September in Seven Kill Stele was very hot. Weilin and his classmates used to go to the pool after lessons. Most of the classmates just wanted to splash around and cool off, but Weilin really liked to swim, and conscientiously practiced his strokes in the pool, so far as was possible. This was, in fact, not very far. The pool was patronized by all the children on the south side of the town: not only those from Elementary School Number One, which Weilin attended, but also students from Number Three, by the textile factory, and some from a nearby middle school. This made the pool very crowded. If you got there early you could swim the length of the pool without more than two or three collisions, but later it was so full you could only jump up and down in the dark, oily water.

None of the classmates had a swimming outfit. You rented an outfit at the pool, for two *fen* per session. The outfits were poor things, made of rough wool dyed dark blue. The boys' outfits were just briefs, with a draw-string at the waist. The girls' had shoulder-straps. However, the outfits were so old and worn you sometimes got one with a hole in it. This was all right if the hole wasn't in an embarrassing place; but of course, in the case

of the boys it generally was, whichever way round you tried to wear it. Then you had to argue with the crabby old woman in charge of distributing the costumes, to try to get a replacement. The woman belonged to one of the National Minorities. She had a piece of ivory in her ear. There was nothing very quaint or fascinating about this: it was just a curved piece of ivory, murky gray in color, tapering from one end to the other like a tiny replica water-buffalo horn, stuck through a hole in the woman's earlobe. It was just a custom the women of her tribe, whatever it was, practiced. She did not wear any picturesque Minority costume, at any rate not while carrying out her duties at the pool; just plain old-woman clothes, and that piece of ivory in her ear. Arguing with her was very tiresome. She was part deaf, or pretended to be, and her Chinese was not very good. Depending on her mood and your own perseverance you might or might not get a decent exchange, or you might have to forego the evening swim, or take a chance with your classmates' mirth.

Weilin was, in point of fact, rather afraid of the old woman. He had only been able to negotiate an exchange with her once, when she was distracted by several children trying to claim her attention all at once, and at last had handed out costumes at random in exasperation before slamming the window she owned in the wooden shed at the entrance to the pool area. The other times he had tried to argue with her the old woman, with the bully's instinct for spotting the weak and shy, had rebuffed him. Furthermore Weilin was never really sure of his position among his classmates, and did not bear up well under ridicule, so if he got a costume with a hole in it he generally just claimed back his two *fen* and went home alone.

Weilin's birthday—his eighth birthday—fell in October. One day in late September, a few days before the birthday, he went to the swimming pool after classes to find it all changed. The old woman's wooden shed had been whitewashed. The old woman herself was nowhere to be seen. Instead, there was an army man at the window. The army man looked very smart. He wore full uniform and a peaked cap. It must have been even hotter in the booth than outside, to judge by the rivulets of sweat running down the army man's face from under his cap. He made no move to wipe away the sweat, though. He must (Weilin thought) be a model soldier.

Fear neither hardship nor death! was the army motto, and so for one of these fellows an overheated shed in a muggy southwestern summer was beneath consideration.

The most wonderful change of all was that the tattered old blue woolen bathing outfits had been replaced. The new outfits were all different colors: black, maroon and ultramarine for the boys, a brilliant flower-garden of yellows, greens, crimsons, pinks and purples for the girls. There was a little knot of girls at one side of the window, still wearing school clothes, comparing the outfits they'd drawn, arguing about whose was prettier, in that noisy way girls have.

When Weilin got to the window the army man scanned him quickly, then turned and produced an outfit from one of the wooden pegs on the wall inside. It was brand-new, maroon with a white drawstring. Weilin took it cautiously. He thought it the most beautiful item of clothing he'd ever been given.

"No charge today," said the army man when Weilin offered up his two *fen*. "Mind you behave yourselves in there. Next!"

Of course, all the children were delighted with their new outfits. Especially the girls, their skinny bodies, when they emerged from behind the changing screens, sheathed in dazzling displays of color and pattern. They were jiggling up and down in delight, shrieking, covering their mouths with one hand and pointing with the other.

The pool area itself had been spruced up. The water of the pool had been cleaned to some degree. The surface, normally scummy with algae, bits of grass and dead dragonflies, now glittered and flickered with pure light. At the shallow end you could see right down to the bottom of the pool. The concrete surround had been scrubbed, and bushes and shrubs in bright-painted tubs had been set along the outer perimeter. Everywhere was a strong smell of disinfectant.

The water, when Weilin let himself down into it, was colder than usual. Perhaps it had been refreshed from the town supply. Weilin didn't mind this at all, because the air was so insufferably hot. However, the girls made a fuss about it—shrieking, clutching their arms about themselves and each other, pretending to shudder. Weilin thought the generality of girls very babyish, incapable of any kind of serious talk or play. He

himself was an only child; but there were girls in his class, of course, and most of the boys he knew had three or four brothers and sisters apiece, so Weilin was pretty well acquainted with girls. Now, irritated by all the shrieking and shuddering, he decided to assert his superiority by splashing the nearest group of girls. He accordingly set off to swim past them, using an exaggerated overarm motion to make a lot of splash.

This went wrong. The girls were standing round in a little ring, and as he was about to pass the nearest one she stepped back right into him. His flailing arm caught her quite a sharp knock on the shoulder.

“Ow! Why don’t you watch where you’re going?”

By the time he got upright the girl was clutching her shoulder, face scrunched up in pain.

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.” Weilin thought the girl was going to cry. She was a little thing, younger than him, he thought, with one of the more spectacular of the new outfits on: big yellow, red and blue flowers on a white background. Her hair was tied up in short pigtails, sticking out at each side. Her face was round, a tooth missing at top front, and her eyes were very large and mobile, like those of an alert small animal. However, the eyes did not cry.

“You really hurt me. I’m sure I shall have a bruise.”

“Why are you boys always so rough?” chipped in one of her companions, a chubby girl with no visible eye matter at all, only puffy horizontal slits, like a Tibetan. “Go away!” This was echoed by the others, a little chorus of minuscule outrage. The chubby girl splashed at him, hitting the water with her palms.

“It’s all right,” said the girl he had hit. “He didn’t mean it. It was an accident.”

Weilin had had his fill of girls for the evening. He swam off as best he could among the jostling children, into the deeper part of the pool. Here he felt very brave, knowing he could not touch the bottom. Weilin considered himself a good swimmer, probably the best in his class, though nobody had ever bothered to organize any competitions.

There were only real swimmers at this end of the pool. Older boys, mostly. Normally they were horsing around, showing off to each other. Today, however, they were standing and sitting quietly on the surround,

or making clumsy solo dives into the water. Holding on to the rim of the pool, Weilin saw the reason. As well as the normal lifeguard—one of the physical education teachers from the middle school, a rather unfit-looking fellow with a paunch hanging over his blue shorts—there were two more army men: sleek well-muscled fellows in army-color shorts and brown plastic sandals. They were not doing much, just standing together at one side watching the children in the pool, but their presence was enough to intimidate the older boys from their usual rough play.

Weilin made his way back to the shallow end, swimming haltingly among the milling youngsters, now so colorful. Standing there in the eighty centimeters of water he looked back down to the army men. They had gone to the other side now to talk to the regular lifeguard. The regular lifeguard had a little hut of his own, up against the screen of the changing areas. This hut, like the one where the outfits were kept, had been whitewashed. Weilin wondered about all the cleaning and painting, and about the new costumes. He thought perhaps it might be a movement. He was not very clear in his mind what a movement was, but he knew that they happened from time to time, and that when they happened people ran around rearranging familiar things. Landmarks disappeared, people's parents were moved away to new assignments, slogans were painted on walls. Weilin had a vague idea, the very vaguest of ideas, from hearing his parents talk, that movements were a big nuisance.

“I really think I shall have a bruise.”

It was the girl, the one he had bumped into. She was standing alone just in front of him. When she saw she had got his attention she angled her head over in a way that looked quite painful by itself, to inspect her shoulder.

“I'm really sorry. But as you said yourself, it was an accident.”

“It's all right.” She turned back to regard him, cocking her head now just a little over on one side. With her pigtails sticking out like that she looked rather comical. Weilin smiled. She smiled back, showing the gap in her top front teeth.

“My name's Han Yuezhu. *Yue* like in 'moon', *zhu* for 'pearl'. My father's an army man. He's a company commander.”

What a show-off! thought Weilin. But the girl had disarmed him, cocking her head like that, and he felt a little guilty about the accident still.

“I’m Liang Weilin. My dad teaches in the college.” Weilin didn’t feel he wanted to describe the characters of his given name. He did not like it very much, thinking it old-fashioned and pedantic. He had not yet been able to develop a satisfactory running-hand signature with the fussy, complicated characters.

“Really? What does he teach?”

“He teaches mathematics.”

The girl made a face. “I hate math. Two threes are six, three threes are nine, four threes are what? I can never remember. I think it’s stupid.”

“What do you like, then?”

“I like dancing. When I grow up I shall be a dancer.”

The girl raised her thin arms above her head, fingertips touching, and swayed a little. It was so affected Weilin could not help but laugh. His laughing discomfited her. She dropped her arms, looking a little crestfallen, and Weilin felt guilty again.

“Your outfit is really lovely,” he said, for something nice to say.

The girl brightened at once. “Yes, it’s the prettiest one. Much prettier than Fujun’s.”

“I think it’s great that they’ve got new outfits. The old ones were so awful.”

“Oh, I know why! I know why! Do you know why?”

“Why what? Why they got new outfits?”

“Yes. I know why, and I’m sure you don’t.”

“Well, it’s true, I don’t. Will you tell me?”

She frowned, feeling the weight of responsibility. “I don’t know if I should. Perhaps you’re a bad person. A county-revolutionary.”

“It’s counter-revolutionary. How could you spot one? You don’t even know how to say it.”

“Well, then, I won’t tell you.”

“Please yourself. I don’t care.”

“It’s a secret. Because my father’s in the army, he knows. He told me. He’s a company commander.”

“It can’t be a very important secret, or I’m sure he wouldn’t have told you.”

The girl ignored this. “I guess it’s all right,” she said. “Everybody will know soon, anyway.”

“So you’re going to tell me?”

“Yes. Listen.” She came close to him, paddling her hands through the water, which came up to her chest.

“All right,” said Weilin. “I’m ready”.

The girl was at his side. Quite unselfconsciously she grabbed his arm with her hands and pulled him down so that she could whisper in his ear. Weilin experienced an odd thrill, feeling her hands on his arm. It was a new thing, something he had not felt before.

“There are foreigners,” she hissed.

“What? Foreigners? Where?”

“In the town. At the guest house.”

“All right. What’s that got to do with the new outfits?”

“They’ll come to South Lake Park. To the pool. So we have to look our best. That’s why we got new outfits. To make a good appearance in front of the foreigners.”

“Oh, I see.”

The girl had let go of him now. Weilin regretted this, still in the afterglow of that peculiar thrill. The girl was pretty, he decided, in spite of her missing tooth and those babyish pigtails. Her skin was pale, paler than most of the girls’, and looked smooth and creamy. He guessed she was a little younger than himself. You wouldn’t have called her either skinny or plump—though her chest and shoulders were somewhat broader than usual, perhaps. He wondered if there were some polite way to touch her. Start a splashing game, perhaps. But at this point the foreigners showed up.

It was a big party, foreigners and Chinese together. The Chinese were officials and party secretaries from the town government. Weilin thought he recognized one or two of them from various rallies and functions he had been taken to, though he could not have placed them by name or title. But of course it was the foreigners who captured everyone’s attention.

The most prominent of the foreigners was a most extraordinary looking creature. He was very tall and very hairy. You could see he was hairy because he was wearing shorts, and there were thick curly gray hairs all up his legs. On his feet he wore sandals: not the plastic sandals the army men had, but complicated things made of leather, with numerous straps and buckles. The man's hair was gray and very long, swept back in a mane, reaching almost to his shoulders. He had a beard, likewise gray, a narrow goatee several inches long. He wore an open-necked shirt in egg-shell blue, hanging loose outside his shorts.

The other foreigners were slightly less alarming. The gray-haired man had a woman at his side, much younger, with astonishing yellow hair gathered in a limp pony tail, and a light cotton dress over her rather plump figure. Behind them were two other men, one in a short-sleeved shirt and tie, but with sandals like the old man, the other wearing a jacket. It was a light linen jacket in off-white, but the man still looked very hot and uncomfortable. He had an odd face, the features all hanging down, as if his flesh were especially susceptible to gravity.

The army men were coming up from the other end of the pool carrying deck chairs. The deck chairs had been secreted away in the lifeguard's hut, apparently. The party seated themselves, the officials making a great fuss about the foreigners sitting first. Weilin could hear the old man talking. He had a loud voice, but apparently did not speak Chinese. One of the officials was an interpreter. He kept leaning over to catch what the foreigners said, then relayed it to the other officials, who listened with exaggerated attention, then nodded or laughed or clapped their hands in simulated delight.

"Don't stand there staring! Foreigners don't like to be stared at. Swim, or play, or something."

This was one of the army men, heading back for more deck chairs. The children had been frozen dead still in the water and on the surround, staring at the foreigners. The army men walked back, each working one side of the pool, telling the children: "Swim! Play! Be natural!"

Even with this encouragement Yuezhu could not move. She stood staring at the foreigners, her mouth hanging open.

“Come on,” said Weilin. “We’re supposed to act naturally. The army man said.”

Yuezhu jerked back to life. She reached out for Weilin’s arm and held it with her small, pale hands.

“What a monster! Ai ai ai, I’d be scared to death to get close to *him!*”

“Which one?”

“The one with the beard, of course. Ai, so hairy!”

Feeling her hold on to him, the thrill came back, triple intensity. It seemed to Weilin the most delicious thing he had ever experienced, though he could not understand why. With his free hand he disengaged one of hers, and held it, his fingers twined through hers. She seemed not to mind this. Her neck was rather longer than normal, or seemed so with her hair in pigtails. Her pale skin and long neck made him think of the expression *swan-neck*, which he had read somewhere. He thought it was apt, though on purely instinctual grounds, as he had in point of fact never seen a swan. Beneath her neck, passing under the straps of her outfit, were her clavicles, which Weilin would have liked to touch, but of course dared not. The clavicles, and indeed as much of the rest of the girl as could be seen, gave a combined impression of grace and sturdiness, like one of the lesser ruminants—a deer, perhaps, or an antelope, some species of which Weilin *had* seen, at the zoo in Chengdu. Small and neat, but not frail. Robust, but not muscular.

“They’re only foreigners,” he said, determined to show himself unimpressed. “It’s really nothing out of the ordinary. At home we have several foreign books, all in foreign languages.”

“I wonder if they’re Impersonalists.”

“*Imperialists*. Of course not. Imperialists wouldn’t be allowed to come here. These are foreign friends. Chairman Mao says We Have Friends All Over The World. They’re just foreign friends, that’s all. Come on, we’re supposed to be acting naturally. Do you know how to swim? I’ll show you if you like.”

He tugged at her hand. Reluctantly she turned away from contemplating the foreigners.

“So hairy!” she murmured.

The pretty new costumes were strictly for show to the foreigners. Next day when Weilin went to the pool the old Minority woman with the ear ornament was back at her station, handing out the ragged woolen outfits as before. The water of the pool stayed clean for several days, though.