

Chapter 9

Mother Divulges a Terrible Secret

The Barefoot Doctor Shows His Art

Thinking of what had happened at the bank, Weilin became profoundly scared. He stayed in the room at Love Socialism! for several days. Had any of the others been caught? If caught, had they informed on him? The bank robbery was big news; Mother heard about it at the kindergarten that very next day. The authorities were furious, the police running round town rounding people up. Weilin did not trust himself to speak. Mother had heard him coming home, but did not seem to know how long he had been gone. At any rate, it did not seem to occur to her that he might have had anything to do with the bank business.

Boredom drove him out after a week, but he dared not go into the town. When Mother sent him food shopping, he just went to the Brigade commissary. The commissary had little to offer, but sufficient for their immediate needs. In October there was a distribution of cabbage to everyone, and Weilin occupied himself with storing it in jars of vinegar to keep for the winter, in some underground cellars the brigade had dug out for common use. Still he dared not go into the town.

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That November Mother began to go mad. Or perhaps she had been going mad for some time, and it was only in November that Weilin really noticed it.

He woke one night, in the seamless darkness and silence of the small hours, to the awareness that Mother was not on the *kang* with him. After some fumbling Weilin got the lamp lit. Mother was sitting on the floor in a corner of the room, hunched up as small as she could make herself, clutching her knees to her chest.

“Mother, mother, what’s the matter?”

“They tried to make me go with them, but I wouldn’t go,” said Mother. “Hush! They may still be here.”

“Who? Who tried to make you go with them?”

“The men. They said I had to go with them, but I said no, I won’t, I won’t. They pulled at me, but I wouldn’t go.”

“Well, you don’t have to go with them if you don’t want to,” said Weilin, understanding that she had suffered some kind of nightmare.

“No.” Mother shook her head, her face set in fierce determination. “I won’t, I won’t.”

After much coaxing Weilin got Mother up from the floor and back onto the *kang* with him. There he held her in his arms to comfort her; but there was a stiffness, a withholding to her body that he had never noticed before, until she fell asleep. Next day she was perfectly sober, one might almost have said cheerful; and it became the pattern of these episodes that after each one there was a spell of normality, slipping into silence and distraction as the days went on, mounting at last to another crisis, as if those times when she was lost to the world were the venting of some slow-accumulating pressure.

Some days after this night-time attack one of the kindergarten teachers brought Mother home in mid-morning, while Weilin was still in bed. Mother was staring straight ahead, lips pursed, as she had when they had paraded her in the town.

“She just wouldn’t do anything,” said the teacher. “She stood there in the classroom staring into space, not saying anything. The kids were running wild, she just didn’t do anything. When we spoke to her she didn’t answer, just stood there staring at nothing. She came along with me easy enough, though.”

Weilin put Mother to bed on the *kang*. She made no resistance; but when he brought her food from the kitchen she would not feed herself, and he had to spoon the millet gruel in through her unresisting lips.

It got worse, though never dramatic. Now, even when Mother was not perfectly silent, her speech was sometimes strange and illogical. Word of it spread out to the people in the brigade offices, and even to some of the peasants.

“Your ma’s very strange,” said one of the cooks at the communal kitchen. “She was in the boiler room talking to herself. I asked her if she was all right, and she said yes, her life was good, the Party had sent a young man to take care of her. Said this young fellow lived in her room and took care of her. Well, there’s only you and her living there, right? So I suppose she meant you. She thinks you’ve been sent by the Party to look after her.”

The cook—who was really just a peasant himself—laughed openly in that uncouth, unembarrassed way peasants had towards other people’s misfortunes. “Seems like your ma’s got a screw loose.”

The disturbances, whatever they were, had a good side: they seemed to act beneficially on Mother’s bronchitis, which did not seem so bad this winter. Some of this was sheer willpower. Part of the malady that had seized Mother’s brain was the determination to make as little impression on her surroundings as possible. When in the grip of her disorder she would not speak, for fear of being heard; she would not move, for fear of being noticed. When attacked by a coughing fit she did her best to swallow it, keeping her mouth closed and straining to hold her breath for fear of giving herself away to the demons that, in her imagination, surrounded her. Weilin found her a number of times like this, often in the middle of the night; her chest wheezing and creaking inside, an occasional stifled grunt escaping through her mouth or nose, but no real coughing. He wondered if these prodigies of self-control would cure the illness, and hoped that they would, for he still dared not go into the town and so had no access to Asan and his pharmacopoeia.

One night in January, in the very bitterest depth of the northeastern winter, three days before the Spring Festival—which in these latitudes marked only the beginning of the hope of Spring—Weilin woke in the

pitch blackness feeling cold air on his face. Even before he struck the match to light the oil-lamp he knew the door was open. Mother was not in the room.

Weilin ran to the door and shouted for her: “Mother! Mother! Come back!”

The moon would have been far gone toward new even if it had been up; but it was not up. The only light came from the stars, which were countless, but whose rays revealed only the dimmest apprehensible outline of the brigade’s administration building a hundred yards away. The terrible remoteness and ineffectuality of the stars seemed only to add five more degrees of frigidity to the winter air, which had been at fifteen below the previous afternoon, when Weilin passed the thermometer fixed to the outside of the window frame of Secretary Duo’s office. Weilin slept in his cotton-padded winter clothing, but without his hat, and now the cold air burned his exposed ears. He went back into the room, grabbed and donned his hat, then ran out into the icy darkness calling to Mother.

Past the school and kindergarten buildings the path from their room forked into two at right angles to each other. One went off to a village, the nearest of those that made up the brigade; the other to the administrative building, then out through the brick gateway on a broad track to the paved road leading into Flat All Around. Guessing that Mother would take the route more familiar to her—she had never had any reason to go to the village—Weilin headed for the administrative building. It was dark, the doors bolted from inside; but by this time Weilin’s eyes had accustomed themselves to the very little light there was, and he was aware of something moving up ahead on the broad track.

He caught up with Mother fifty yards along the track. She was walking at a brisk, deliberate pace, and did not stop when he grabbed at her arm. Like Weilin himself, Mother slept in her padded winter clothes, and had her jacket on now; but Weilin was horrified to find that the jacket was wide open, unbuttoned at front, and that Mother had no hat or gloves.

“Mother! Mother! It’s me, Weilin!” Weilin put himself in front of her, holding out his hands to grab her arms and stop her. He could make out her face as a pale oval in the starlight, though not well enough to discern

its expression. With surprising strength Mother pushed him aside, hardly breaking her stride. Weilin turned and walked alongside her.

“Mother, at least let me fasten your jacket. Don’t you feel the cold? It’s twenty below, at least.”

“I have to find Comrade Shu, before it’s too late,” said Mother.

“Comrade Shu? Who is Comrade Shu? Mother, Mother, please let me fasten your jacket! Please!”

“Comrade Shu will know what to do. Comrade Shu will fix everything. I’ll find him all right—don’t think you can stop me!”

Weilin had never heard of this Comrade Shu. In desperation he was contemplating hurling himself on Mother to bring her to the ground, as apparently being the only way to stop her; but in the darkness Mother stumbled in one of the frozen ruts of the track, and fell to hands and knees. Weilin went down beside her, got his arms round her torso, and began fastening her jacket as best he could from behind. Mother made no resistance to this, only kneeling there murmuring about the necessity of finding Comrade Shu. Weilin got the buttons all fastened, then took off his hat and put it on Mother’s head, fastening the two ear flaps under the chin. By the time he got this done Mother had fallen silent. He helped her to her feet.

“Put your hands in your sleeves, Mother. That will keep them warm.”

“My feet,” said Mother. “My feet are cold.”

Her feet were, in fact, perfectly naked. They were as cold as the icy air itself. Weilin made her sit on the track while he put his own shoes on her. She was silent the whole time. The coldness of the air was terrible on Weilin’s feet, and he wondered how Mother had endured it so long. Neither of them possessed any socks.

Mother was quiet while he was putting his shoes on her. When he tried to get her standing up, however, she grabbed his wrists with that same extraordinary strength and prevented him from rising.

“Mother, come on, let’s go. Now I have no shoes or hat. My feet are freezing.”

“It’s you, Weilin, isn’t it? Weilin, my son. Our Little Pangolin.”

The sheer conversational normality of Mother’s voice cut him deeper than the steely Siberian air.

“Yes, Mother. It’s me. Weilin. Of course it is.”

“Something’s happening to me, isn’t it? I’m losing my mind, aren’t I?”

“No, Mother, no, of course not. But we must go now. Quickly. We must get out of the cold.”

Mother paid no attention. She was still holding him down by the wrists.

“Weilin, listen carefully. I am losing my mind, I know. A few minutes ago I didn’t know who you were. I thought they’d sent someone to follow me. I can clearly remember thinking that, like when you wake from a dream. You were talking to me, but I didn’t know your voice.”

“Mother, it doesn’t matter. You’ll be all right. But we must get back. My feet . . .”

“All right, Weilin, all right. But listen. While we’re here, with no-one around, there is something I must tell you.”

“Mother, please . . .”

“It will be quick. Then we’ll go back. Here, put your feet under my jacket while I talk. Here, yes.”

She let go his wrists and pulled his feet back under her padded jacket. They were still sitting on the frozen hard earth of the track, and Weilin’s ears were burning from the freezing air, but he humored her, holding on to her jacket with his hands to keep from falling over backwards.

“All right, Mother, but quickly. What is it you want to tell me?”

“You have an uncle. Fourth Outside Uncle.” She pulled him closer so she could whisper the story into his ear.

“My mother’s fourth younger sister’s husband,” she said. “She died very young, and he remarried. He lives in Hong Kong.”

“But I never heard you talk about him.”

“Listen! He was an officer in Chiang Kaishek’s army. An intelligence officer. This is a secret thing! If people know you have such a relative, it will make trouble for you. Don’t say anything about it!”

“Of course. I understand, Mother.”

“He lives in Hong Kong. When I went to see Auntie An that time, you remember? At Dewy Spring, when we first came back here. She told me, this Fourth Outside Uncle is still alive. He’s a rich man in Hong Kong. You must go to him. He will help you.”

“No, Mother, no. I will stay here with you.”

“I am going to lose my mind, Weilin, I know it. I’ve heard the comrades talking about the things I do, the things I say. I know what is happening, don’t think I don’t know. When I’ve lost my mind the brigade will stop feeding me. They don’t want useless mouths. I’ll be left to wander around naked, like the woman you told me about in the town.”

“I’ll look after you, Mother. Please don’t say these things. I’ll always look after you.”

“No! Listen to me! Don’t waste your life looking after an old mad woman. Go to Fourth Outside Uncle in Hong Kong. His address. I remembered it. In Hong Kong, of course. It’s Wodalao Road, number 433. You must remember that. Don’t write it down! You see, I remembered it! I didn’t write it down. Too dangerous. I followed your father’s example. Anything with numbers, he would remember it. Such a brilliant man. My Bullfrog, my dear old Bullfrog.”

Mother was silent for a while. The terrible steely cold of the earth was seeping up through the road, through Weilin’s bottom and haunches, penetrating the cotton padding of his pants.

“Bullfrog,” whispered Mother. “Oh, Bullfrog!”

“I can remember it, Mother. Wodalao Road, Number 433. But what is Fourth Outside Uncle’s name?”

“Name Xu, Xu Yiming. Listen, and I’ll tell you the characters.” She described the written characters. “A rich man, a rich man in Hong Kong. He will help you. Things in Hong Kong are different. They have no movements there. The living standard is higher.”

“All right, Mother. I’ll remember. But we must go back now. We’ll freeze to death here outside. Come on, let’s go back. *Please.*”

“Tell me his name, Fourth Outside Uncle. Tell me his name and the characters. And the address. Tell me!”

Weilin told her, describing all the characters until she was satisfied. At last she got to her feet. They set off down the track in silence. Weilin’s feet quickly went numb, but he could still walk. Mother seemed to have exhausted her capacity for speech. The only words that passed between them were when, near the gate of the brigade, Weilin asked: “Who is Comrade Shu?”

Mother stopped at once and looked at him. “Comrade Shu?” Incredibly, she chuckled. “Did I talk about Comrade Shu?” When she walked on, Mother was chuckling again, quietly, making the bronchitis rasp and gurgle in her chest, sending her into a spasm of coughing at last.

“Comrade Shu!” she murmured, before the coughing took over. “How absurd it all is! What a comedy!” But Weilin was never able to find out anything about Comrade Shu.

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Mother caught a cold from this night-time expedition. She lay on the kang coughing all through the Spring Festival. She coughed now even when lost in one of her attacks, as if concealment from the demons no longer mattered to her.

At Spring Festival the refectory had a distribution of fresh fish, meat dumplings and sugar candies, all of which Weilin dutifully fed to her; but she took no pleasure from them. On the third day of the Lunar New Year she developed a fever. Weilin became aware of it in the night. He woke to her coughing. Sitting up and taking her in his arms, he felt the heat of her skin against his face. It seemed almost too hot to touch.

He lit the lamp, which was just a string wick poking up through a hole in the lid of a little can holding oil. There was enough light to see how flushed Mother was, and he got up and woke the barefoot doctor.

The barefoot doctor was not actually barefoot. Nor was he, in point of actual fact, a doctor. “Barefoot doctor” was just a term people used for the paramedics with minimal training who served in places like Love Socialism! brigade, that could not afford the services of a fully-trained doctor. When people on the brigade needed a real doctor they walked into the town. If too ill to walk, they used one of the brigade’s donkey carts; or, if it was an emergency and none of the carts was to hand, two of the strongest peasants would carry the patient into town on a makeshift stretcher; or piggy-back, taking turns.

The barefoot doctor had a little clinic in the main administrative building, and lived in his clinic. Weilin had to shout and bang on the window shutters for fifteen or twenty minutes before the doctor unbolted

his door. He was a young fellow, big and strapping, and Weilin had often wondered why he had been chosen to be a barefoot doctor, when he would probably have done better for himself earning work points out in the fields. He supposed it was just sloth. Father had once remarked that peasants would do anything to avoid field work.

On this particular night the barefoot doctor was drunk, being of the opinion—a majority opinion among the male population of Love Socialism! brigade—that Spring Festival was a splendid opportunity to test the limits of one's capacity for the brigade's home-distilled white liquor. He was willing to do his duty, but not very able, and fell flat on his face twice in the pitch darkness going back to the room behind the school buildings. When they finally got back to Mother he could think of nothing to do but put a hand on her forehead and look at her tongue.

“S a fever,” he mumbled. Getting up from the *kang* he lost his balance and would have fallen again if Weilin had not held him.

“Shouldn't you take her pulses?” asked Weilin, drawing on his scanty knowledge of medical procedures. [In traditional Chinese medicine the doctor feels for several pulses.]

“Noss ness, noss sess, not necessary,” averred the barefoot doctor, lips pursed authoritatively. “Bring down fever, 'ass all. Wessa ma bag?”

Turning to look for the shoulder bag of supplies he had brought, he fell down, this time too quickly for Weilin to grab him. He landed on his bottom and sat contentedly there on the floor by the *kang*, having apparently forgotten about his bag. Mother was coughing again: a thin, dry, exhausted cough. She was clearly awake, and had begun plucking fretfully, abstractedly at the quilt. Behind the cough was the other sound, a scraping, creaking sound from inside her chest.

“Perhaps you should listen to her chest,” Weilin said to the barefoot doctor, handing him the bag. The barefoot doctor was singing, or mumbling, a peasant ditty:

“Big Wang's donkey
Pissed in my bowl.
Millet on the stalk;
A prick in a hole.”

Weilin unbuckled the bag and looked inside. There were a lot of bandages and dressings, scissors, a glass jar of some kind of salve, presumably for burns, and half a dozen small circular pill boxes made of cardboard. Each pill box had one character written on the lid—crude, simple characters, mnemonics for the barefoot doctor, who probably could not read much, to remember which pill was in which box.

“Which one?” insisted Weilin, to the barefoot doctor mumbling his song. “Which one to lower the fever?”

“Aspirin. ’S the one with ‘wood’.”

Weilin found the box with a rough “wood” character on its lid. There were a hundred or so small white pills inside.

“How many?”

The barefoot doctor’s professional pride stirred in his sodden brain. Holding on to the *kang*, he got to his feet.

“Gimme.”

He snatched the box of aspirin pills from Weilin, and promptly dropped it.

Weilin brought the lamp down onto the floor, and the two of them set to picking up all the pills. The barefoot doctor was giggling to himself. In the middle of their work he paused, straightened up, adopted a look of great concentration, and farted loudly. Then, giggling even more relentlessly, he went back to picking up pills. Weilin, who had quite got the measure of the barefoot doctor by this time—the measure both of his general abilities and of his current condition—took the opportunity to hide twenty or thirty of the pills in his jacket as he picked them up.

They gave Mother three of the pills, and some warm water from the flask, and the barefoot doctor left, the heavy marinated-vegetable stink of his fart lingering behind. Weilin left the lamp on all night. Mother was silent when not coughing, plucking and plucking at the quilt.

The aspirin did nothing to lower Mother’s temperature. Weilin gave her a dozen more the next morning, but still without result. When he tried to give her some food at noon, she was unconscious and could not take it. He could hear her breathing from outside the door of their room as he approached with the mess tins of food. Her fever was still high, her skin hot and flushed. Weilin went to see Secretary Duo, and brought him over

to see Mother. Secretary Duo was rough and uneducated, but he was not a fool and had seen people die.

“Pneumonia,” he said. “She needs penicillin.”

He had a cart brought up from one of the villages, and roused the barefoot doctor from his hangover, and they bundled Mother up on the cart in a mass of quilts, and the barefoot doctor and the peasant who had brought the cart set out for the town at a run, taking turns to push, Weilin trotting along behind. When they reached Flat All Around Number One Hospital, Mother was dead.