

Chapter 12

If You Don't Love Opera, You're Not a Human Being
Half Brother Answers Chairman Mao's Call

Somehow—Yuezhu never understood the details—the different factions in the Cultural Revolution fell to fighting. The fighting went on for months. It would quiesce for a while, then flare up again. From the barracks where Yuezhu's family lived they could hear the sounds of the fighting in the town. Mostly it was just the crackle of small-arms fire; but once, for several days, they heard a *whump-whump* sound which Half Brother said was field mortars. Yuezhu was not clear about mortars, so Half Brother had drawn an elaborate diagram for her, explaining the mechanism. Half Brother knew everything.

While all this fighting was going on Father wouldn't allow them to go out. Half Brother wanted to go out anyway, but the barracks' perimeter guards sent him back. The army was supposed to keep out of the fighting. This was on the orders of the very senior leaders in Beijing, including Marshal Lin Biao himself, so nobody dared disobey. Of course Half Brother and Yuezhu, being of an army family even though not actually in the army, came under the prohibition. The schools and colleges were all closed in any event, so there was no reason to go out. Half Brother stayed at home with Yuezhu. He taught her card games like Eight Eyes and Imperial Family, and Chinese chess. He let her sit with him while he listened to the radio, and explained the dramas and news programs to her. Of course Half Brother knew all about history, and could give her the

background to what they were hearing: the cruelty of the Japanese during their colonial rule in China, the arrogance of the American Imperialists trying to stifle the brave people of Vietnam, the treachery and dishonesty of the Russian Hegemonists, who had betrayed all of Lenin's and Stalin's ideals.

"Only we Chinese have the true spirit of revolution now," said Half Brother. "It's our duty, our sacred duty, to carry that spirit forward, to make a new society for the enlightenment of all mankind."

"But wasn't that what we were trying to do when we were Red Guards?" asked Yuezhu. "Yet the Red Guards were disbanded, and now we're not allowed to be Red Guards any more."

Half Brother smiled at her naivety. "It's not a simple thing, to make revolution," he said. "There are many twists and turns on the path. Chairman Mao understands everything, we must listen to him, try to understand his great Thoughts, and follow his instructions."

Yuezhu didn't see how she could carry out Chairman Mao's instructions cooped up in the barracks. Some of Chairman Mao's instructions were, in any case, very hard to figure out. "Examine the essence of a thing and treat its appearance merely as an usher at the door", for example. How exactly were you supposed to do that? When she asked Half Brother these things he just laughed and said: "You can't understand it until you've had some revolutionary experience."

She would have liked to ask Father, who had had even more revolutionary experience than Half Brother, but Father was especially unapproachable at this period. He spent a lot of his time in meetings, from which he always came back frowning and irritable. Yuezhu had the impression, anyway, that Father did not have much taste for political or philosophical matters. There had been some blazing rows in Half Brother's Red Guard days, Father yelling that revolution meant more than just breaking windows and beating people up, Half Brother yelling back that people like Father, raised before Liberation, could never bring themselves to make a full break with the Four Olds.

On the few occasions when Father expressed himself on public matters, it was with a tone of disgust. "Fucking civilians!" he snarled once, when one of the warring factions, needing weapons, broke into an ammo

dump belonging to the army. “Troublemakers!” Another time, while the family was sitting down to dinner, they heard the tramp of many feet and a marching song being sung on the street leading into town, which passed close to the barracks. “I wonder what’s happening,” said Mother. “Oh,” said Father, “one bunch of idiots going to blow up another bunch of idiots, I suppose. In the end they’ll call us in to clean up the mess.”

Father’s mood was not improved by the sudden unheralded arrival of Uncle Fish. Uncle Fish was Mother’s older brother. He lived with his wife, mother and twin adolescent girls in Chengdu, the provincial capital, which was also Mother’s home town. In Chengdu, apparently, the fighting was very fierce. Anybody who had a safe place to go to had left. People had gone to relatives in the countryside. Seven Kill Stele was too big to be considered countryside, and the fighting in the town seemed just as bad as it could possibly be in Chengdu; but everyone knew that an army barracks was the safest place to be living at this point in the Cultural Revolution. So Uncle Fish had packed up his family, with their quilts and cooking pots, and taken a train to Seven Kill Stele to throw himself on Father’s mercy.

Father had grumbled a great deal but could not send his in-laws back to Chengdu while the fighting was going on. Two or three other families in the compound were in the same situation. Some sleeping accommodation was found in the soldiers’ and nurses’ huts, extra rations were approved somehow, and Uncle Fish and his family lived with the People’s Liberation Army that winter and spring.

Uncle Fish was actually called Jiang, which was of course Mother’s maiden name. He seemed decent and kind, if somewhat lost in the military environment, and Yuezhu liked him. However, there was no denying he looked like a fish. His head was flattened in the vertical plane, and had no chin, and his eyes were small and round. It had been Half Brother, always looking for something satirical or derogatory to say about Mother’s side of the family, who had christened him “Uncle Fish”. Once Yuezhu had heard the appellation, she could never think of Uncle Fish in any other way.

The Fishes were at even more of a loose end in the barracks than anyone else. The military people at least had some legitimate occupa-

tion: drill, training, political education, maintenance. The Fishes, like Yuezhu and Half Brother, had nothing to do at all. Yuezhu's parents' apartment was too small to accommodate them all at once, and the Fishes were never quite at ease when Father was there, knowing they were imposing on him, so they tended to turn up in ones and twos at odd times when Father was at a meeting, to sit and talk, or, in the case of the women, play cards. Half Brother, following Father's lead, was somewhat standoffish with them and inclined to drop sarcastic remarks about the great good fortune of those whose close relatives have married into the military.

Yuezhu, on the other hand, was always glad to see them. Auntie Fish was an educated woman from a family who had had some position before Liberation. She knew all the old classic novels and stories, which Yuezhu was hardly acquainted with yet, though Half Brother had an abridged, illustrated version of the *Three Kingdoms* he had allowed her to read. Auntie Fish could recite poetry and sing folk songs. She knew dozens of varieties of Cat's Cradle, could play foot-shuttlecock better than anyone Yuezhu had ever seen, and knew every card game under the sun. Mother, who had no education and never acted a day less than her age, clearly felt a little oppressed by her sister-in-law, so Yuezhu, from filial piety, deliberately tried not to be too interested in Auntie Fish; but it wasn't easy.

Uncle Fish was very musical. He could play the flute, so he said, both end-blown and transverse, and the *erhu*, which he was able to prove, having brought one with him. [The *erhu* is a two-string Chinese fiddle.] Sometimes he accompanied Auntie Fish in a folk song. His real passion, though, was opera. The province they lived in, Sichuan, had its own style of opera. The stories were for the most part the same as the ones in Beijing opera, some of which Yuezhu already knew by osmosis; but everything was sung in the local dialect and there were some special instruments and make-up effects not used elsewhere. Uncle Fish knew everything about Sichuan opera. He had even begun to train as an opera singer when he was young, but opposition from his family and the changes in everybody's affairs that had come with Liberation had put an end to it. Until the Cultural Revolution came up there had been opera performances every week in Chengdu, and Uncle Fish had hardly missed one, he said. He could sing entire operas, taking all the parts. He made a creditable job of

acting out some of the roles, too, and even Half Brother could not help laughing at his version of the white-nosed judge in *Fifteen Strings of Cash*.

“If you don’t love opera, you’re not a human being,” said Uncle Fish, quoting an old saw, after accompanying himself on the *erhu* through practically the whole of *The Jade Hairpin*.

“That’s all very well,” said Half Brother. “But these operas you sing are very reactionary. They belong to the old society. We should have some new operas for New China.”

“You are right, of course,” said Uncle Fish, who was a cautious man. “You young people will show us the way.”

After that Uncle Fish told his opera stories with many asides about the darkness and oppression of the feudal society in which they were set, to show that he had a correct attitude. It was clear to Yuezhu, though, even at the age of ten, that these asides were “feet drawn on a snake”, and she discarded them automatically when listening. It was from Uncle Fish that Yuezhu learned all the stories of the old operas, and in later life she often wondered whether her fate had been determined in part, in spite of all her own inclinations, by some gene passed down through her mother’s family, a gene she shared with Uncle Fish.

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Father’s prediction about the course of events proved correct. Shortly before the Spring Festival the following year—1968, the Year of the Monkey—the loudspeakers around the barracks compound, which for weeks had played only martial music, began broadcasting exhortations to Clean Up the Class Ranks. Squads of soldiers, five abreast, marched out of the gates early one morning, with jeeps towing artillery pieces. Father disappeared for several days, leaving very strict instructions to Half Brother and Yuezhu not to leave the barracks. The instructions were superfluous. The perimeter guards allowed no-one in or out, and the sounds of fighting in the town were sufficiently discouraging in any case, with fearsome roaring and crashing noises added to the rattle of machine guns and the thump of mortars. The noise did not scare Yuezhu. It was too remote, too

abstract, and in any case there were still plenty of soldiers in the barracks to defend them. She only felt scared once, when she was going to the boiler-house to fetch hot water, and happened to see the front gate opened. It was opened for two soldiers pulling a handcart. The soldiers were red-faced, dusty and sweating, trying to run while pulling the heavy handcart, whose heaviness was caused by the presence on it of four or five other soldiers lying fore-and-aft, all covered in blood. The soldiers pulling the handcart were shouting in desperate, exhausted, angry voices, and one of those on the cart was emitting a terrible continuous thin wailing noise, like a ghost. They made off in the direction of the infirmary, and Yuezhu ran back to the apartment, forgetting her hot water altogether.

Father came home at last. His manner was much better, the irritation and disgust apparently dispelled. Everything everywhere was better. The noises of fighting from the town had stopped, and the prohibition on leaving the barracks was lifted. Fighting had stopped in Chengdu, too, according to Father's information, and the Fishes packed up their quilts and pots and *erhu* and went home, with many smiling declarations of gratitude to Father and Mother. Yuezhu, though not Half Brother, went to the railroad station with Mother and Father to see them off. Yuezhu had not often been into the town, and did not know it well, but it seemed to her that some of the buildings had recently fallen down. Around the railroad station there were several ruins, jagged shapeless walls and heaps of rubble. The facade of the station itself was pockmarked all over, and a big round hole high on one side was being roughly filled with bricks and plaster by a team of workers up on bamboo scaffolding. The ticket hall inside was a mess. Big-character posters had been stuck all over the walls and were now being scraped off. Their scrapings mingled on the floor with broken glass from the windows, splintered wood from a hole in the ceiling, fragments of plaster and concrete.

Oddly, Father seemed pleased to see the mess. "They ran like chickens when they saw the People's Liberation Army," he said to Uncle Fish, and chuckled. Uncle Fish chuckled too, though without Father's true enthusiasm.

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Very soon after this, matters at home became tense again. Father was clearly worried about something. He had a long private talk with Half Brother, and the result was that Half Brother became thoughtful and quiet. Mother, too, seemed to be infected by Father's worry, whatever it was—rather severely, for Yuezhu heard her weeping one night. It seemed odd that Mother and Father should be so worried, and Half Brother so quiet, as everyone else in the barracks was in high spirits, and all the noises of fighting in the town had stopped. It was a week before Yuezhu could get up the nerve to ask Half Brother what they were all so anxious about.

“Anxious?” Half Brother laughed. “*I'm* not anxious. I'm certainly ready to answer Chairman Mao's call.”

“What is he calling for?” asked Yuezhu.

“Why, he wants us educated youth to go into the countryside and learn from the poor and lower-middle peasants.”

This did not seem so very bad to Yuezhu. The peasants were very wise, as everybody knew, and it was quite proper that people should go to learn from them. It was only after several days, from fragments of her parents' conversation she overheard, and from various clues in the speeches on the loudspeakers, that Yuezhu got an idea what was happening. The Red Guards were all washed up and all the factions had been suppressed. The army was in charge of everything. The Red Guards had gone too far, and those young people who had been the most prominent Red Guards were to be sent to the countryside to correct their thinking by learning from the peasants. Half Brother was one of these young people, of course. Yuezhu was not; nobody had really paid any attention to the Little Red Guards. She felt oddly confused about this. On the one hand she felt annoyed that her Little Red Guard activities, which she had taken very seriously at the time, should count for so little. On the other she felt secretly, guiltily glad that she would not have to leave Mother and Father and the apartment to go and live with strange peasants in a strange place.

It seemed that Half Brother himself did not mind being sent down to the countryside; but that, Yuezhu thought, was his nature—to follow

Chairman Mao's call selflessly, enthusiastically. Half Brother was a true revolutionary! But she was sad to think she would not be able to see him every day, as she had been used to. She knew, of course, that she would not be allowed to go to the countryside with him, though part of her wanted to go, in spite of the separation from Mother and Father. She made the suggestion anyway, but Father just laughed at her.

"You? Eleven years old?" (She was not quite ten at that point, in fact, but Father counted age in the old style: a year old at birth, a year older every Spring Festival.) "What could you learn from the peasants? You'd just be in their way!"

But although she knew that Half Brother was glad to answer Chairman Mao's call, she perceived that Father and Mother were unhappy about this policy. Mother was unhappy because (she told Yuezhu frankly when asked) she thought the assignment would be permanent, and Half Brother would have to spend all his life as a peasant. Father was unhappy because some of his colleagues had avoided similar situations by getting their sons and daughters into the army by the back door, but Father felt this was against his principles. Father hated these back doors, and even hated to hear anyone speak of them.

"I was too revolutionary," explained Half Brother over dinner one evening. "If you've been too revolutionary, you can't go into the army."

Why should Half Brother's having been revolutionary prevent him joining the army? Yuezhu wanted to know. Wasn't the People's Liberation Army the beating heart of the revolution? (Repeating a phrase she had heard at school once.) "The more revolutionary the better, I should have thought."

Father frowned at her over his uplifted rice bowl—they were all there at the dinner table. "It's not so simple," said Mother on his behalf. "There are different kinds of 'revolutionary'."

Father, when he had finished shoveling rice into his mouth, waved his chopsticks angrily. "You women," he said, "keep your noses out of what you can't understand! He's going to the countryside, that's all, to learn from hard experience. It won't hurt him. Do him good, probably."

"I don't mind," affirmed Half Brother. "Chairman Mao told us we must learn from the poor and lower-middle peasants. Well, I'm ready to learn."

So Half Brother went to the countryside early that summer. Yuezhu helped Mother pack up some food for the journey, along with his toothbrush, spare socks and underwear, and one or two books. He was getting a ride in an army truck to a village with the peculiar, yet reassuring, name “White Rice”, where the road ended. After that he would have to walk. Three other ex-Red Guards from the town were also going on assignments to that district, so they came to the barracks to ride in the truck with Half Brother. Yuezhu felt sad to see them ride off in the truck. She would have cried, but Half Brother and his comrades were so cheerful, waving to those behind, singing a revolutionary song:

Chairman Mao’s book is the thing I most love to read!
 A thousand, ah, ten thousand times
 I must apply myself
 To understand his Thoughts!

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In the fall Half Brother fell ill with a gastric infection. Some kind of worm (said Mother to a neighbor), which to Yuezhu sounded dreadful. A worm! Inside Half Brother’s belly! It sounded terrifying and disgusting all at once, and she desperately wanted to go with Mother, but Father wouldn’t allow it. He wasn’t even keen on Mother’s going.

“So much fuss over a bellyache!” said Father. “In my day we just slogged on regardless, and sooner or later you forgot about aches and pains. You kids nowadays are pampered.”

Mother went anyway, walking for days over the rough mountain tracks to the remote unit Half Brother had been assigned to, to take him medicine. But still Yuezhu was not allowed to go, because of school. She fretted and pined on Half Brother’s behalf until Mother came back. Half Brother alone in that remote place, with a black worm inside him! (She had not actually heard that the worm was black; but in her imagination it seemed that it must be so—an evil, black, glistening worm.) What if Half Brother were to die! She hurried the thought away, trying desperately not to think it, because if you could think it, then it could happen, and that

would be unbearable. In fact when Mother came back, tired and thin, with blisters all over her feet, she said that Half Brother was much better and the worm had been got rid of somehow. At once Yuezhu found herself thinking—shamefully, guiltily—that she didn't want Half Brother to be *completely* better, for if he needed to convalesce he would probably come home to do so, and she would be near him again.

The reason she had not been allowed to go to the mountains with Mother was that school had restarted in September, and Father insisted she attend to her lessons. Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams had gone round the province restoring order, telling the students that since all the bad elements among the teachers had been purged, they should now return to their books and not disrupt the lessons or put up big-character posters. Some of the students had still wanted to make revolution, but the Teams had criticized them severely, telling them that they, the Teams, had been sent out by Chairman Mao himself. In Yuezhu's class, after some of the boys had shouted revolutionary slogans at the history teacher, the Team had made everybody spend a whole day studying an article in the *People's Daily* written by Marshal Lin Biao, who (as everyone knew) was Chairman Mao's closest comrade-in-arms and most trusted confidante. Marshal Lin had stressed the need for order and discipline, and asked the young people of the country to emulate the men and women of the People's Liberation Army, who kept their discipline even under the stress of battle.

"They thought they could run the show without us," Yuezhu overheard Father say to Mother one evening while she was preparing for bed. "They thought they could run it without us, but they never could."

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In April the next year, the Year of the Chicken, when Yuezhu reached her eleventh birthday according to the modern reckoning, Half Brother came home.

He was coming home for good, or at any rate was never going back to the countryside; and the reason for this was that he was to go into the

army after all. There had been some shift of policy, and he was no longer considered too revolutionary to be a soldier. The birthday party was really more of a coming-home party, or perhaps enlistment party, for Half Brother. Father did not altogether approve of birthday parties. He said they were a relic of bourgeois society and the landlord style of living. He would not let anybody celebrate his own birthday; he would not even tell anybody when it was, though Mother said she had heard from his own mother that Father had been born on some date in November, and that his sign was the Dog, the same as Yuezhu and Half Brother; and Yuezhu, working it out by herself from an almanac, had figured Father's birth year to be 1922. Still, Mother had always managed to make something nice for Yuezhu's birthdays, and Father had never seemed to mind, so long as there was no great fuss about it.

So now the big circular table was full of dishes, a real banquet. There was chicken, of course, since Half Brother had not been able to share the Spring Festival dinner with them, when they had welcomed in the Year of the Chicken. Fish and round dumplings for the same reason, these being traditional Spring Festival food. Lotus root, because of the saying "Though the Lotus Root is Broken, the Threads Still Connect" (referring to the tiny silken ligaments that run through a lotus root, and to the bonds that keep human beings connected even when physically far apart). Dog meat, because Father, Half Brother and Yuezhu were all Dogs. Sweet round *tangyuan* ravioli, so that everything should be smooth and round for Half Brother's career in the army, and for Yuezhu's twelfth year in the world. There were green vegetables, water chestnuts and sweet potatoes, and a soup made from fragrant leaves. Mother—normally an unadventurous cook—had even attempted some of those small "lip-tingling mouth-burning" delicacies that are the delight of the Sichuan people: spicy granny bean curd, stick chicken, "husband-and-wife" lung slices, wonton in red oil. It was the most elaborate meal Yuezhu could remember. So elaborate she was a little anxious (and suspected Mother was, too) that Father, who detested all kinds of luxury and ostentation, would frown at it.

To the contrary, Father was in the best of good humors. He took down a bottle of Five Grain Liquor which had been on the shelf in their living-

room for as long as Yuezhu could remember, and dusted it off and opened it, and poured tiny cups for himself and Half Brother. Half Brother seemed thinner than Yuezhu remembered him, but he had a good tan, and his complexion had cleared up. He seemed happy and excited about going into the army.

“Does it mean you’ll stay here with us for ever?” asked Yuezhu.

They all laughed at her. “Half Brother will have to go wherever the authorities assign him,” said Mother, smiling at her. “It’s not likely they’ll let him stay here. See, your Father joined the army in Shanxi Province, way up in the North; but he’s been assigned all over the country.”

“I’m ready to go wherever they send me,” said Half Brother proudly, reaching over the table for a piece of lotus. “The Party’s will is my will.”

He was so noble! Yuezhu was torn between pride at Half Brother’s courage and revolutionary ardor, and apprehension at his being taken away from them again to be posted to some distant army unit. So noble!—going willingly to the countryside in answer to Chairman Mao’s call, to learn wisdom from the peasants (Yuezhu of course did not know that he had spent practically all his time there prostrate with dysentery), and now ready to don a soldier’s uniform and go to the ends of the earth to defend Chairman Mao and the revolution.

Father made a toast, pouring out the Five Grain Liquor into three tiny cups—Mother, somewhat against her will (she said liquor made her feel ill) joining them in the toast. Yuezhu made the toast, too. She was not allowed to drink liquor, of course. Mother had got a bottle of sweetened pineapple juice from somewhere, and Yuezhu had been drinking that from a beaker. When Father called out “Raise Cups!” she lifted her beaker and the others their cups, and Father made a toast to the Ninth Party Congress, which was just then assembling in Beijing.

“To the leaders of our country and our party,” said Father, “and to the people’s representatives. Success to the Ninth Party Congress!”

“Success to the Ninth Party Congress!” they all repeated.

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Yuezhu and her classmates heard a great deal about the Ninth Party Congress over the next few weeks. They had to read all the resolutions in class, over and over again, with little in the way of explanation from the teachers. With the best will in the world, Yuezhu found it dull stuff. The only things she could extract from it all, all the resolutions and editorials, were that the army was to cultivate Mao Zedong thought, and that Marshal Lin Biao was more important than ever. Now, when there was a slogan to remember, or a Thought For The Day, it seemed to come from Marshal Lin as often as from Chairman Mao.

In the middle of all this, Half Brother went off to his training unit, in the north of the province. It would probably be next Spring Festival before he could get any leave, he said, and even then leave was not always given. Someone had to defend the country even at Spring Festival, after all.

Mother and Yuezhu went with him to the railroad station. Father did not go, saying it was wrong to make a fuss about these things. The mess in the town had been cleaned up now. The ruined buildings still looked very stark, but were beginning to be softened by grass and weeds coming up around and inside them. The ticket hall of the railroad station was as good as new: broken windows replaced, walls repainted, a huge chandelier installed, and a big framed reproduction of one of Chairman Mao's Thoughts, in his own script, put high up on the wall: TAKE CLASS STRUGGLE AS THE KEY!

The train did not stop long enough in Seven Kill Stele to allow them to get on with Half Brother. They said their good-byes through the opened window.

"Remember to eat rice every chance you get," said Mother. "If they send you north it will be hard to get rice. Nothing but noodles up there!"

"Write me a letter as soon as you're allowed to," said Yuezhu, on the edge of tears.

"Make revolution to the end!" yelled back Half Brother from the departing train, grinning at Yuezhu—a Red Guard again, for one last time.