Chapter 13

A Startling Demonstration of the Power of Poetry
Peach Blossom Lets Down the School

After Half Brother had gone life seemed very flat and empty again. Yuezhu thought Mother missed him, too, in spite of all the trouble Half Brother had had accepting her. With Half Brother around it had seemed there was always something interesting happening, or about to happen—always some new aspect of the world to be revealed. Now there was only school, the activities associated with school—Youth League, for example—and the apartment in the barracks, seeming so quiet and dull now.

Even school was not as interesting as before. Many of the teachers had been struggled in the Red Guard period and the experience had made them cautious and reluctant to impose discipline. Most of the students were glad to be back at school—there was little else for them to do in Seven Kill Stele—but of course there was a bad element who misbehaved. The Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Team was still in the town, and sometimes they came to the school to give a talk or lead the students in some voluntary activity. The leader of the team was a fierce square woman called Cui, with a voice like metal scraping metal. Everyone was scared of her, and when she was in the school even the worst students bent their heads over their desks in silence. At other times, though, it was difficult to work for the talking and laughing in class.

The work itself was much less interesting than Yuezhu remembered. Cowed and miserable, the teachers played safe, saying little, leading the

class through rote drills or editorials from *People's Daily*. There was no attempt to interpret or explain the material; they just read it, each student taking a turn at three or four sentences, the bolder teachers correcting pronunciation.

There was one teacher, Teacher Bai, who seemed especially to like having Yuezhu read. He called on her in turn, but always let her read longer than the others, and if the whole class had read and there was still time in the lesson he would go back to her. Yuezhu thought it was because her Mandarin was so much better than the others'; but he soon made it plain that it was the voice itself he liked, the actual sound of her voice.

"Such a fine voice!" he exclaimed once to the whole class. "Like a bell! You students should all emulate Han Yuezhu. Learn to speak up bold and clear like her! We want the whole world to know about our achievements under socialism, and about the teachings of our Great Helmsman Mao Zedong! Let's all sing out loud and clear like Han Yuezhu!"

Yuezhu liked this, of course. It was good to be a model student. The others—except the bad elements, of course—would look up to you, and you would be asked to address the school on public occasions. She wished it had not been Teacher Bai who singled her out, though. The students all thought he was a little eccentric. He had been badly struggled by the Red Guards, sent to the countryside for a spell, and his wife had left him, taking herself and their baby—Teacher Bai was no more than thirty—back to her home village. Now Teacher Bai was a "bird who takes fright at the sound of the bow". He never spoke a sentence without including some revolutionary phrases. Somehow, though, he always seemed slightly off-key with his modes of expression, coming out with things that had been current in '66 or '67 but had since fallen by the wayside. "Chairman Mao is the Red Red Sun Shining in our Hearts," he said once; and one or two of the students snickered. There was nothing definitely wrong with the expression, of course; it had been a favorite of the Red Guards in '66, and of course they all loved Chairman Mao; it was just that nobody said this any more. All Teacher Bai's revolutionary rhetoric was like that—like a radio slightly off-station.

History, Literature and Russian seemed to have disappeared from the curriculum. Yuezhu had disliked History and been too young for Rus-

sian, which had only been taught to the senior year, but she missed Literature. Before the Cultural Revolution her class had been reading *Red Cliff*, a novel from the early sixties about the Liberation struggles in the southwest. Yuezhu had thought it exciting, and wanted to finish it; but everyone seemed to have forgotten about it, and she had had no copy of her own. Seven Kill Stele's only bookstore had been looted, then closed, by the Red Guards, and when it reopened sold only party tracts and technical manuals for the peasants, all about fish-stocking and the diseases of pigs.

* * *

With Half Brother gone, the spring and summer of that first year back at school were tedious, a gray blur in her later recollection. At the end of the year, however, the students put on a show for the graduating class in the school auditorium. A choir was selected from each class, and they sang revolutionary songs: "Socialism is Good For Us", "Upholding the Red Flag", and the "Internationale". A team from the senior class, directed by their teacher, declaimed some of Chairman Mao's poems. And Yuezhu, together with three other girls who had been Little Red Guards, danced the "Loyalty to Chairman Mao Dance". It was the most exciting thing Yuezhu had done since dancing the same Loyalty Dance at the Martyrs' Monument when she was a Little Red Guard—right up there on the stage, in front of the whole school, with all the teachers and the leaders of the Revolutionary Committee (every work unit now had a Revolutionary Committee to manage its affairs). The dance was well received, the audience clapping their hands for a long time, the Revolutionary Committee all smiling with pleasure.

Presumably as a result of this pleasure the Revolutionary Committee started a dance group at the school. Beginning the following semester the dance group practiced after lessons every Tuesday and Thursday. Yuezhu wished it could have been every day of the week, but the schedule was set by the teachers, who had little enough time to themselves, what with administrative duties, Political Study meetings, and the endless tiresome

trudging of streets and standing on line for food, for clothing, for medicine, for repairs, for permits.

Yuezhu's best friend in the dance group was Taohua. The name meant "Peach Blossom", but it was not in fact the girl's real name. She belonged to one of the National Minorities, her people part of the racial salad of the southwestern highlands, and they had their own language and she had a name in that language. She told Yuezhu the name once as they walked together to the refectory for lunch, but it was so strange Yuezhu could not hold it in her mind.

Taohua could speak the local dialect of Chinese—though with an odd, sing-song accent—but Mandarin not at all. She had been brought up in one of the minority villages in the mountains to the west, beyond Mount Tan, but during the Cleaning Up the Class Ranks period her father, who was headman of the village and a Party member, had been assigned to the Minorities Bureau office in the town, the previous staff of the office having been scattered during the factional fighting. Taohua and her mother still went back to the village in vacations, though. She was the youngest of an immense number—eleven or twelve, she was not sure—of sisters, the eldest of whom were married to village men. She often told Yuezhu about life in the village. It sounded very primitive, living among the animals, no electricity or heating, no toilet paper (they used a handful of grass, she told Yuezhu, giggling), strange rituals and ceremonies no-one could remember the meaning of, ghosts lurking in the darkness beyond the cleared area at night.

You couldn't call Taohua pretty. She had dark skin, thick lips and a flat nose. However, she was a natural-born dancer. She was much better than Yuezhu. Yuezhu knew this in her inmost heart, though she would never have said it out loud. Sometimes, as they went through the group exercises, she felt that everything she did was just striving, striving hopelessly, to attain Taohua's grace and fluency of movement. Taohua said her people could all dance, and whenever there was a public occasion—a wedding, New Year, harvest home—the whole of her village would dance all night. They even danced at funerals, she said: appropriate dances, grave and slow, accompanied only by slow tapping on a drum. It made

Yuezhu's flesh creep to hear this, but she thought it might not be polite to say anything.

The National Minorities were very primitive and backward in their customs, of course. Under the leadership of the Party they were being shown a modern way of life, but you couldn't expect them to change all at once. With this settled conviction in her mind—everybody knew the Minorities were backward—Yuezhu was astonished when Taohua told her that the people of her tribe laughed behind their backs at the Chinese and called them The People Who Couldn't Dance.

Yuezhu herself laughed out loud at the time, at the absurdity of Minority people looking down on their Elder Brother Chinese; and Taohua laughed with her, somewhat nervously, perhaps thinking she had spoken out of turn. Later, alone, Yuezhu felt indignant about the remark, and resolved to show Taohua that she could dance just as well as anyone from a grass hut in some godforsaken mountain village. Along with her indignation, she felt some unease. It was true, after all, that nearly all the dances they practiced were from one Minority or other—Tibetan, Yi, Miao, Dai, Korean. There was only one dance associated with the Han Chinese, the rather feeble *yangge*, which none of them really took seriously. Well (Yuezhu reflected), it might be true that her ancestors had been somewhat remiss in the field of dance, having been too busy civilizing All Under Heaven; but it was still inconceivable that Minority peoples, who were only half-way from being monkeys, could out-perform Chinese at anything.

For all her backwardness, Taohua was in some ways very worldly. Some of the things she knew, things she knew from her sisters or from living so close to the animals, were really disgraceful. She knew, or claimed to know, everything about the private relations between men and women, for example. One day she favored Yuezhu with a full account.

Yuezhu stared at her, quite unable to credit the fantastic tale. "You're crazy," she said, and laughed. "That's the silliest thing I ever heard! Why would people do such a thing?"

"It's how babies are started. Married people all do it."

"Nonsense!" Yuezhu could not exclude a fleeting thought about her own mother and father doing this thing—but the thought was too absurd

to be tolerated, and she dismissed it at once. "I don't believe it," she said. "It's nonsense, I don't believe it."

Taohua seemed not to want to press her point. Notwithstanding her worldliness in these particular things, she deferred to Yuezhu, who of course was pure Han Chinese, as being wiser and smarter than herself. She did, however, say: "Well, the thing about the *jiba* being hard and stiff is definitely true. Sometimes you can see Teacher Bai's. It makes his pants stick out in front."

For a week or two after that Yuezhu, in spite of her doubts, could not resist looking at Teacher Bai's pants to see if his *jiba* was sticking out. However Teacher Bai was always standing when in class, or walking about, and his dark-blue pants were quite baggy, so she could make nothing out. Soon she forgot Taohua's absurd tale. Then one day in early spring, soon before Yuezhu's twelfth birthday, after giving her a particularly long passage to read out in class, Teacher Bai asked Yuezhu to stay behind when the other students filed out. He was sitting down when she went to stand in front of him, sitting in a chair at one side of the room. In his lap he was holding a battered old book for which he, or some previous owner, had fashioned a dust-jacket of coarse brown paper.

"Han Yuezhu, your voice really has a most remarkable quality. Tell me, have you ever done any singing? I didn't see you in the graduation choir."

"Oh, no. I was one of those doing the Loyalty Dance. Since we had to practice the dance we were excused from singing. Now I'm with the dance group, the one they started in September."

"Ah. You like dancing better than singing?"

"Oh, yes! Singing is very boring. You just open your mouth and . . . sing. Dancing is much more interesting. To express the idea of a story by movement."

Teacher Bai nodded. "Well," he said in his clumsy way, "we must all make what contribution we can to the Socialist Reconstruction of our country."

"Yes," said Yuezhu. There was an awkward pause. Teacher Bai coughed to break the pause. The other students had all left the classroom now,

though the door was still open and students were passing to and fro outside.

"I wanted to ask you to read something for me," said Teacher Bai. He held out the book to her. She took it. On the cover, in Teacher Bai's own rather fussy script, was the title: *Three Hundred Poems of the Tang Dynasty*. Yuezhu had heard the title before—perhaps Mother owned a copy—but she had never read it.

"Page eighty-eight," said Teacher Bai. "Bo Juyi's 'Song of Endless Sorrow'. Just the last few lines, from 'She sent by messenger . . . ', can you see it? If there's a character you don't know, ask me."

Yuezhu knew all the characters. It didn't seem like a difficult poem, though very sad. It was about the Xuanzong Emperor, his love for Lady Yang and his grief at her death. As she read Yuezhu could sense Teacher Bai watching her face, nodding slightly to the rhythm of the lines. Yuezhu had often heard poems read—apart from the previous summer's concert, the Red Guards had held all-day readings of Chairman Mao's poems—and had a good idea of how it should be done, exaggerating the tones and caesuras.

When she had finished she looked up to wait for Teacher Bai to dismiss her. He was not looking at her now, he was looking down and to one side. There was another uncomfortable pause, in the middle of which Yuezhu saw, to her horror, that Taohua had been right. Teacher Bai's *jiba* was sticking up inside his pants, making a sort of tent. Worse yet: at the apex of this phenomenon the blue pants showed an elongated oval of darker blue—a stain, a wet stain. Shocked, disgusted and embarrassed all together, Yuezhu flushed. Teacher Bai looked up now, but seemed not to perceive her consternation.

"Thank you," he said. "Such a lovely voice! Thank you."

Yuezhu could not resist telling Taohua about this. Taohua expressed muted triumph at the vindication of her extraordinary theories.

"I *told* you," she said. "It's big and stiff with a shining round pink head. If you jiggle it with your hand the juice squirts out."

The shining round pink head was a new detail. Something about it, about the way Taohua introduced it, made Yuezhu want to ask: And have you done this yourself? Have you jiggled one and watched the juice

come out? But she had an awful suspicion that the answer would be Yes. The Minorities were so backward! And the whole topic was really too shameful and disgusting to pursue.

* * *

That year was Half Brother's second year in the army. He had been away the whole of the first year doing his training, coming home only for four days at Spring Festival. When he came home he was quite changed. He looked fit; in fact he looked younger than when he'd left, with his head shaven and his cheeks shining like a country boy. But his high spirits seemed to have deserted him. Yuezhu wanted to hear all about his training, but he would only say: "Very hard, it's very hard." When she pressed him to tell her some of the things they did, he snapped back irritably: "These are military things, our country's National Secrets. Do you think I can talk openly about them to a kid?"

Father seemed pleased with him, anyway. He and Half Brother had long talks together in the living-room, Father smoking cigarettes one after another and sipping tea from his covered cup, Half Brother eating sunflower seeds (he did not smoke), nodding as Father talked, adding some words about his unit, the commanding officers, the advantages of certain kinds of assignments. Yuezhu did not pay much attention to the little she overheard. She gathered that Half Brother had the ambition of getting into some Special Security unit, though what exactly that meant she did not know.

It was also Yuezhu's last year in elementary school. In the second semester, after the Spring Festival, she threw herself into dance training and rehearsal. The dance group was to give a big show at the graduation ceremonies, with a program of four different folk dances. The group had lost two of the original eight girls and no less than five of the eight boys (all but one of these latter the result of ridicule by their classmates, everyone said), but the nine remaining were all keen, and persuaded the school to shift to three nights' practice a week—Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

As a further mark of approval the Revolutionary Committee endowed the dance group with a gramophone and a stack of records, so now the

3791-DERB

group no longer had to rely on the handful of students and teachers who could play flute or *erhu*. The gramophone and records had been found, covered in dust, in a storage room somewhere. The gramophone itself was a fine Russian model in a dark-wood cabinet, with doors at the front that could be opened to regulate the volume. The records were not altogether satisfactory, being mainly heavy orchestral music in the western style; but further searching turned up some revolutionary and folk tunes suitable for dancing, and the group considered themselves imperially well-equipped.

One of the dances they were to do was from Taohua's own nationality. Part of it involved Yuezhu and Taohua dancing together while the others knelt down low in a circle around them. The dancers were supposed to be water sprites, the others water lilies. This was the dance Yuezhu concentrated on most. It showed her together with Taohua, their skills in direct and obvious comparison. Yuezhu knew she was not as good as Taohua. She knew that Taohua knew this, too; and also that Taohua would never be bold enough to speak directly about it. The dance teacher, a middle-aged woman teacher called Ma, was not so shy.

"Pull your head further back, Yuezhu! Your arms won't take the correct position unless your head's up. Watch Taohua, look at how she holds her arms."

I don't see how I can pull my head back any further. I feel as if I'm swallowing my chin already. This was only thought, not spoken. Only the very worst elements among her classmates would have talked back to a teacher's criticism.

"Do you want to do this dance or don't you?" Teacher Ma continued. "Come on, again! One, two, three . . . "

Yuezhu could not dislike Taohua, did not want to dislike her; yet the conviction grew on her that her dancing would look poor next to her friend's. She thought of giving up her place in the duet, but by the time the thought gained any traction rehearsals were too far advanced. She resigned herself to ignominy. Then, one stifling Monday evening in late June, two weeks before the performance, Taohua was gone.

"She has gone back to live in her village," said Mrs Ma. "We'll have to cope without her."

"But . . . how could she leave now, so close to the show?" they all asked. The dance group were puzzled and dismayed. Taohua was their best dancer, and they were proud of her, even those who were also jealous of her.

"Is she ill?" asked Yuezhu. She had not seen Taohua all that day; but that signified nothing, as they were in different classes.

"I don't know," said Mrs Ma, bent over the gramophone to set a record on the spindle. "I don't know anything. She's gone, that's all. We'll have to cope without her."

Apparently the school had to cope without Teacher Bai, too. He disappeared at the same time as Taohua. Yuezhu never saw either of them again. Her classmates gossiped that something disgraceful had happened, something very dirty; but nobody really knew anything. Yuezhu wondered if Taohua had jiggled Teacher Bai's *jiba* and somehow been found out. However, she said nothing about it. She didn't know whether Taohua had spoken to anyone else about the *jiba* business, and didn't want to implicate herself in any way.

Since there was no time to train anyone else to do the water-sprite dance with her, Yuezhu did it alone. She was nervous, though, and embarrassed somehow for Taohua's absence, and lost the music a couple of times. The applause was no more than polite.

3791-DERB