

Chapter 15

A Young Man's Tears Flow at Parting

An American President Makes Little Impression

The family was to move to Beijing. It happened all at once, a few weeks after the downfall of Lin Biao. Father announced the move over dinner one evening.

“The whole brigade's moving up there,” he said. “Part of the Consolidation.”

Yuezhu had heard this word “Consolidation” several times the past week or so, in Father and Mother's talk or on the barracks loudspeakers, but she had no idea what it meant. Father explained it all, speaking very frankly, as he did to her nowadays, and with obvious satisfaction.

“My chief, Divisional Commander Ho Pinghui, you've often heard me speak of him. Old revolutionary from the Long March. Well, he grumbled about the Cultural Revolution, like a lot of others. When the Ninth Party Congress came along he was frozen out by Lin Biao. Lin wanted to get all his own people in, everywhere important. That's why we've been sitting out here on our rear ends these two years past, watching the bamboo grow. Now since Marshall Lin's downfall there's been a big shake-up going on. You know the saying: ‘When the lips are gone the teeth are cold’. All the people Lin moved up are under suspicion of being in his plot, so the leaders want some good reliable old soldiers around them, people they know had nothing to do with Lin. People like my chief. That's why we're going to Beijing.”

“Shall we be able to see Half Brother?” asked Yuezhu at once. Father smiled and nodded and said he hoped they would, Half Brother’s unit currently being stationed in Hebei Province next to Beijing. However, he added, things were in such a state of flux that no-one in the military could be sure where he’d be posted to this time next week, so Yuezhu should not get her hopes too high.

Lying awake under her mosquito net that evening, the full glory of their new posting came home to her. To Beijing! Capital of the People’s Republic! Where Chairman Mao lived! Where he had proclaimed the People’s Republic from Heavenly Peace Gate! Where Prime Minister Zhou Enlai had built the Great Hall of the People! Where there were all the best schools, best movies, best parks, best restaurants! There would be a new middle school—surely, in Beijing, a school with a dance group!

Sleeping, Yuezhu dreamed of Beijing (which she had never seen): the red walls of the Imperial City, boulevards a hundred meters wide, the Summer Palace with its stone boat and seventeen-arch bridge. Sometime in ’66 or ’67, in one of the public rooms at the barracks, she had seen a wall calendar with a picture of one of the great Red Guard demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. In the picture, the sky above Heavenly Peace Gate was full of bright red balloons, each trailing a streamer with one of Chairman Mao’s Thoughts on it in gold script. Now, in her dream, she mingled with the throngs in Tiananmen Square—everyone smart-dressed, everyone handsome—and the air above them full of bright red balloons.

She was full of the excitement of it when she told Mustache, walking between classes the morning after Father’s announcement. To her surprise, Mustache looked stunned. He stopped dead, stared at her in obvious dismay for a moment or two, then, in a voice oddly hoarse, asked: “How long will you be in Beijing?”

For ever, I hope, was Yuezhu’s inward response; but seeing poor Mustache’s face, she could not say it. “I . . . I don’t really know. These army postings, you know . . . they’re unpredictable.”

Mustache was still looking at her with that devastated expression. All her life, through much greater trials and revelations, Yuezhu was to remember his expression at that moment. At last he lowered his eyes, turned, and continued walking. Having seen his distress, Yuezhu’s joy

was eclipsed. Mustache was in love with her! It was clear to see now, and she wondered why it had never occurred to her before. She could think of nothing to say, and they walked along in silence to the door of their classroom. Just outside the door, still out of earshot of the classmates, Mustache stopped, looked at her again, and said in his normal voice: “I hope you will write to me from Beijing.”

“I will. Of course I will.”

That was Tuesday. Mustache did not come to school on Wednesday or Thursday. Yuezhu sought out his sister, in one of the junior classes. Mustache was ill, said the sister. Nothing serious, only a sore throat.

The family was to leave for Beijing on Friday morning. On Thursday afternoon all the classmates came up to Yuezhu to say farewell. There was no great ceremony about it. Students—especially those from army families—arrived and left all the time. Yuezhu thought Mustache might come in for the purpose, but he did not appear.

Instead he came to her parents’ apartment that evening. He would not come in, so Yuezhu stepped out into the corridor to say good-bye. Mustache had brought gifts for her: a neat little boxed set of writing paper and envelopes, a fountain pen, a little pack of Shanghai candies, a pretty plastic barrette for her hair, and a fine thick exercise book with a pink plastic cover. Inside the exercise book, on the first page, written in Mustache’s somewhat clumsy, ill-proportioned characters, were two lines from a well-known untitled poem by the Tang dynasty poet Li Shangyin:

Silkworms cease making silk only when they die;
Candles end their weeping only when burned away.

[“Making silk” being a sound-pun on “thinking of you”.] When she had read the lines and closed the exercise book, Yuezhu looked up at Mustache to thank him. Mustache’s face bore an expression of utter hopelessness; and before she could actually say anything, he started to weep.

Yuezhu could think of nothing to say to comfort him. Clearly he was in the grip of very strong emotion; but she herself felt nothing, except embarrassment and a sort of incipient irritation. She had

thought they were just friends. How was she supposed to know he was in love with her?

“Zizhong,” she said, using his personal name. “Zizhong . . . I’m sorry. I didn’t know . . .”

She put the exercise book back into the cloth bag with the other gifts, and set the bag down on the bare concrete floor. Mustache had his hands over his face now, pressed flat against his face. Yuezhu reached up tentatively and touched his arm.

“I’m sorry, Zizhong.”

“Not your fault,” mumbled Mustache. “My fault.”

“You should have told me.”

“Wanted to. You didn’t seem . . . I didn’t think . . . Oh, Yuezhu!”

Mustache took her hand with one of his. His hand was all wet from tears. His face was wet, too, all over, and his eyes were red. So many tears!

“You will write to me, won’t you?” said Mustache, looking at her with his red eyes.

“Of course I will.”

“Use the paper I gave you.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I will come to see you in Beijing.”

“Yes. Good. All right.”

He had a wild look now, and for a terrifying moment Yuezhu thought he was going to grab her and kiss her. But he just turned and went off down the corridor, leaving her standing there with her bag full of treasures. It was the most embarrassing thing Yuezhu had ever experienced. If this was the love between men and women that was spoken of in the old stories (Yuezhu reflected, letting herself back into the apartment), she wanted no more of it.

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They traveled to Beijing by train, hard sleeper class. With the rank of Colonel, Father was actually entitled to travel soft sleeper; but he chose hard class anyway, saying that the People’s Liberation Army should always stay close to the common people, and not seek privilege or favor. It

was a long trip: up and through the Qinling Mountains, the peaks glittering white in the clear cold air; down into the valley of the Wei, where civilization first took root and the Yellow Emperor, first ancestor of their race, rode in his chariot to court; on to Xi'an, the ancient capital of the Empire, from which Li Longji, last truly great Emperor of the glorious Tang dynasty, fled in ignominy from the armies of the rebel An Lushan, purchasing the loyalty of his own troops with the life of his dearest concubine; along the Yellow River plain, dust and donkeys, to Zhengzhou; then northward over the rich heartlands to Beijing.

They had been assigned an apartment in the West Wall area, where high cadres and military people lived. The apartment was grand beyond Yuezhu's wildest imaginings. There were huge soft armchairs, such as you saw in newspaper photographs of the nation's leaders playing host to foreign delegations. In the kitchen was a refrigerator—a monster of a thing in gleaming white, made in Poland, humming and clanking to itself in odd unfathomable rhythms as if to impress them with its grandeur and their own provincial backwardness. Most astounding of all, there was a TV—Chinese this one, made in Shanghai. Yuezhu turned on the TV at once, as soon as they had all their bags in the apartment. At first there was nothing on the screen; then a random fuzziness, and a rising hiss from the speaker.

“They only broadcast certain hours,” said Father. “It's too early.”

Disappointed, but still thrilled at the family's new status, Yuezhu switched the thing off. So much to learn!

Her new school was at first as intimidating as all else in this mighty city. It was new-built, fine stylish modern buildings in glass and concrete, with large asphalt areas for games and drills. There was a science laboratory with balances, retorts and bell jars locked in glass wall cases. There was a grand modern auditorium with a piano, and an entire library of books, most of it unfortunately closed since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

Arriving several weeks into the fall semester Yuezhu had of course expected to find herself behind in lessons, but the situation was much worse than she had feared. Though there was, technically, only a single middle-school curriculum for the whole country, from the frozen rivers of

the far north to sweltering Canton, from the lush fields of the Yangtze delta to the dusty steppe of Turkestan, in reality the Beijing schools were far ahead of the provinces. Even now, five years into the Great Cultural Revolution, with the nation's intellectual life in ruins, the ruins were far more imposing in the capital city, and much better inhabited. Even when classroom studies of history and society have been reduced to the parsing of newspaper editorials, the parsing can be done with or without style, the Thoughts interpreted with or without understanding of thought in general, the barren slogans of despotism served warm or cold.

The very speech of her teachers and classmates set Yuezhu at a disadvantage. Practically everyone was a Beijing native and spoke with the knowing, supercilious drawl of the capital. Yuezhu had been raised to speak Mandarin, which was the only dialect permitted in the military; but it had been book-Mandarin, an abstract construct in the same relation to the speech of the capital as the geometer's ideal points and lines to the strokes of an artist's brush, and in any case modified by the southwestern sounds she had been immersed in all her life. Here she became painfully aware that the cutting winter wind beginning to sweep down from Mongolia was *ferngr*, not *fong*; and that "l" and "n" were two perfectly different and distinct consonants; and, in short, that her tongue betrayed her as a hopeless bumpkin.

There were, of course, compensations. Instead of Russian, the usual foreign language in provincial middle schools, West Wall District Number 14 taught English, with no less than three teachers on staff. An American pingpong team had visited China that spring and the Beijing people all understood, with their instinct born of living at the center of power for generations, that America was now a friend and Russia an enemy, even though these facts had never been publicly announced. Everybody was keen to learn English, to the degree that several teachers sat in on the lessons, chanting the rote phrases and copying out the exercises with all the others. A year behind, Yuezhu started at a great disadvantage, but there were two other pupils in the same situation, and elderly Teacher An (in Beijing, apparently, it was quite all right to refer to people as "Teacher", or even as "Mr" and "Mrs" instead of the more proper, revolutionary "Comrade"), gave them catch-up lessons after school. Yuezhu discovered

an aptitude for foreign languages, quickly piling up a big vocabulary which she carried everywhere with her in the smart, durable exercise book Mustache had given her, running her eye down the word lists when other classes got boring, until every word, and even its position on its page, were fixed in her mind.

Teacher An's obsession was phonetics. "You can have ten thousand words of vocabulary," she would say, "but they are just fart gas, no use at all, unless people can understand what you're saying."

"Every people has its own way of making speech sounds," she would say. "An English 't' is by no means the same as a Chinese 't'; an English 'a' is quite different from a Chinese 'a'."

"Air comes out from the lungs through the mouth and nose," Teacher An would say. "If there is nothing to obstruct it, it comes out silently. To make a sound, you must obstruct it. Only four things can obstruct it: the lips, the tongue, the soft palate, and the vocal chords. Of these four, only the tongue is really capable."

Teacher An could draw the standard phoneticist's diagram—the cross-section of the human speech apparatus—almost instantaneously, with a few swift strokes of the chalk. She drew a dozen or more each lesson, showing the human tongue in all its versatility: the tip advanced or retracted, the surface high or depressed, the body of the organ bulked back or forward.

"If you can always know what your tongue is doing, you can speak any language perfectly," Teacher An asserted.

Yuezhu was fascinated by all this. She had never in her life given a moment's thought to what her tongue was doing. It was just there, in your mouth, sometimes getting in the way when you chewed things, its surface an index of your health for doctors of traditional medicine. Now she realized that she had all these years been harboring a wild beast, bucking and writhing in its narrow dark cave. Diligently she tamed the creature, working it round the twelve English vowels and the eight diphthongs, holding the sounds for as long as she could, teasing and coaxing it a millimeter here, a millimeter there. She thought at last she had attained the state of grace sought by Teacher An, in which she always knew what her tongue was doing. She applied this new facility to her Chinese, easily

turning her southern dz, sz, ts to the soft round retroflexes of Beijing: zh, sh, ch.

“Observe Han Yuezhu,” said Teacher An to the whole English class one day at the end of the first year. “She has mastered her tongue. The rest is nothing, just listening and memorization.”

“Learn from Han Yuezhu!
Her tongue knows what to do!”

was Baoyu’s own tribute to her accomplishment. Baoyu was the first real friend she made at Number 14. He was the star of the school’s dance group.

The dance group at Number 14 was a much more serious affair than the one at Seven Kill Stele. Teacher Li, who ran Number 14’s dance group, had actually been a professional dancer herself in her younger days, with one of the Army’s entertainment units. She not only knew the folk dances and revolutionary dances, but even some foreign-style ballet, which she had learned during a spell in Russia in the 1940s. Baoyu pestered her once to teach then some foreign-style ballet, but she claimed she could not.

“You need a barre,” she said, “and full-length mirrors. A floor of sprung wood, special shoes with rosin for the soles. And lots of foreign-style music, which of course is considered counter-revolutionary nowadays. Quite correctly so, I mean,” she added quickly.

For “barre” she used a Chinese word, *wuba*, that none of them had heard before. It sounded slightly ludicrous in Chinese, and some students giggled.

“It’s a long wooden rail set against the wall, with mirrors all around,” said Teacher Li. “You hold onto it for support while you exercise your free limbs.”

Yuezhu caught the idea immediately. From then on, when she did warming-up or practice exercises, she tried to find something to hold on to, to balance herself. There were no mirrors, of course, but when at school she asked Baoyu to judge and correct her positions.

Baoyu had introduced himself to Yuezhu at the first session she attended, in November that first year. He went over to her directly when she walked in to the practice room, where the group were standing round waiting for their instructor.

“You’re a new girl!” he exclaimed, as if this were an occasion for great joy. “How wonderful! You are so pretty!”

He held out a hand to her. The hand was slim and delicate, but held hers firmly.

“My name is Cao Gang, but everybody called me Baoyu, because I like to make friends with girls.”

Baoyu is the name of the main character in *Red Chamber Dream*, the greatest of classic Chinese novels. He cared only for the company of girls and completely neglected the serious, manly side of life, to his father’s anger and disgust. Baoyu means “Precious Jade”, because in the novel Baoyu was said to have been born holding a tiny piece of jade in his mouth. Yuezhu of course understood the allusion at once. Anybody who could read knew *Red Chamber Dream*, even if only through popular illustrated versions.

Baoyu was the same height as herself, but somewhat younger. He was quite extraordinarily good-looking—beautiful, you could say—large mobile eyes in an angel’s face, his frame lithe and wiry, posed now with his feet at an obtuse angle, like a foreign-style ballet dancer.

“I’m the best dancer in the group,” he went on, striking another pose, arms curved above his head now in perfect form. “None of the others can compare with me!”

Yuezhu laughed at his naive immodesty, and told him her name, explaining the characters.

“It’s a lovely name!” exclaimed Baoyu, his mouth puckered in admiration. “Moon Pearl—sounds just like one of Baoyu’s handmaidens! Will you be my handmaiden? I hate my own name. It’s *Gang* meaning ‘steel’, you know. My father thinks everyone should be hard as steel, to serve the revolution. Actually I just want to dance.”

“Well, there are many ways to serve the revolution and serve the people,” said Yuezhu, thinking (the cynicism of the capital already beginning to penetrate her sensibilities) that perhaps she sounded some-

what priggish. “If you dance well and give pleasure to others, isn’t that serving the people?”

“Of course it is!” cried Baoyu, pirouetting away across the room. “Look at me, everybody! I’m serving the people!”

Yuezhu soon got used to Baoyu. She thought him the sweetest of all the boys she had known. He was vain, of course, and sometimes silly, but there was no malice in him, nothing at all secretive or indirect. It was impossible to imagine Baoyu telling a lie—he wouldn’t have known how. He had an odd way of speaking, which added to his charm: when the mood took him, he would lapse into impromptu verse, or at any rate doggerel—little rhyming couplets or quatrains, like the jingles in infant story-books or the *duilian* pairs of harmonized mottoes that country people stuck to their doorposts for Spring Festival, black or gold characters on red paper.

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It was with Baoyu that she first saw *Red Detachment of Women*. This was one of the revolutionary ballets that had come up since the Cultural Revolution began. It was about some peasant women in Hainan Island during the war against Chiang Kaishek, who had liberated themselves from their cruel landlords and formed their own army unit. A movie had been made of the ballet the previous year, but Yuezhu had left the southwest before the movie was shown there. When Baoyu knew this he got tickets to the movie at one of the Beijing theaters, and they went to see it together. He had seen it before, when it first came out in the capital, but said he didn’t mind seeing it again.

“When you’ve seen foreign-style ballet,” he said, “these folk dances we do seem very tame.”

Yuezhu had never seen foreign-style ballet before. *Red Detachment of Women* overwhelmed her. The thrilling leaps and turns, the precision of the ensembles, the vigor and crash of the music, all left her breathless.

“So beautiful!” she sighed to Baoyu coming out of the movie theater. “Why can’t we learn this kind of dancing?”

“Needs too much equipment to learn it, just as Teacher Li said. That would be ‘expert’.”

Politics at this time was dominated by a conflict between the adjectives “red” and “expert”—an antithesis that the ingenious Professor Bauer has traced back to the religious controversies of the Bronze Age. To be “red” was to dedicate oneself heart and soul to Chairman Mao and the revolution. To be “expert” was to believe that specialized knowledge or technique was more important than political ardor. The Party had declared that redness, with some allowances, was to be preferred to expertise.

We must all be red!
 Never mind learning skills.
 Chairman Mao’s Thoughts
 Will cure all ills!

as Baoyu put it—speaking, so far as Yuezhu could tell, in all seriousness.

Baoyu could always get tickets for anything. His father was an important official in the Public Security Bureau, who had somehow avoided the purges and reorganizations of the late ’60s. He had access to all kinds of privileges.

Seeing how much Yuezhu had liked *Red Detachment of Women*, Baoyu pulled off his greatest coup. In February, when the American President Nixon came to visit China, the national leadership put on a performance of this very ballet for him in the Great Hall of the People. Baoyu’s father was invited, along with most of the senior cadres in the capital, and somehow found two extra tickets. It was the greatest experience of Yuezhu’s life to that point. Not the fact that the American President was there (from their position they could catch only a glimpse of him—a very smart-looking man with surprising dark-brown skin the color of coffin-wood and very white teeth) as that she herself was. The Great Hall was magnificent, the seats upholstered in red velvet, the stage vast, the ceiling as remote as the sky itself. And the performance, when at last it began (everyone except the most senior cadres had had to seat themselves two hours early so that everything was in order when the President arrived) surpassed the movie version a thousand, ten thousand times! You could see the dancers, their actual faces and bodies, *actual people*, and hear the

thump of their feet on the stage. The orchestra seemed to come from everywhere, all around, rolling and crashing from the walls and the ceiling so high. Yuezhu watched in a trance, completely taken out of herself, her soul merged into one soul with the bright colored stage, the leaping dancers, the rolling, crashing music.

Yuezhu's course in life was set. She was to be a dancer, a dancer of foreign-style ballet, on the stage before an orchestra. However, she did not say this to anyone, not even to Baoyu. So intense was that experience at the Great Hall of the People, so deeply did the longing to dance then enter into her adolescent soul, she cherished the knowledge of her destiny as an intimate thing, an utterly private thing, to be shared with no-one yet.

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Half Brother came home for her fifteenth birthday in April '73. It was his first home leave for a year and a half. Now four years in the army, he was an officer, a Lieutenant, and seemed to Yuezhu taller, broader and better-looking than ever. He interrogated her about her schoolwork, especially about her English.

"I can speak English very well now," Yuezhu said in English, to show off.

Half Brother grinned. *"I also can. Good Morning! Thank you very much!"*

"Oh!" Yuezhu laughed, putting her hands to her face in surprise. "Where did you learn?"

"My unit. We have some Special Duties." Half Brother frowned, to show the gravity of his Special Duties. "Of course I can't tell you anything about them. But we have to study English for these Duties."

"Everybody likes to study English now," said Yuezhu. "Since President Nixon's visit."

"Oh, from even before that, I think. We had a big shock in '69, you know. It brought the true world situation home to us."

"Why, what happened in '69?" Yuezhu could not think of any important event in that year. But she had been only eleven, not really paying attention to public affairs.

“The Russians attacked us on Black Dragon River, up in the far north. There are some disputed islands there, in the river. They hit us with very advanced weapons, terrible weapons.” Half Brother frowned again and shook his head in disapproval of the terrible weapons. “Frankly, we took a beating. From that point our leaders understood that we can’t live in isolation, just devoting all our energies to class struggle. The Imperialists and Hegemonists will wipe us out if they have the chance, if we don’t modernize ourselves. It’s like the Three Kingdoms:” [referring to a period of division in Chinese history, 220 A.D. to 265 A.D.] “the weakest of the three will be swallowed by the other two, as Shu was swallowed by Wei and Wu. We have to make ourselves stronger. For that we need more knowledge, knowledge of foreign things and techniques. And for that we need English, because it’s the international language.”

Part of Yuezhu, the part that had been a Little Red Guard, wanted to say: “Yes, but we have Mao Zedong Thought, which can conquer everything.” But she now understood that this was very naive, that important people—and clearly Half Brother was set fair to become an important person—did not take such ideas seriously any more, if they ever had.

She invited Baoyu to her birthday party. Father was absent on a mission, and it seemed too thin a gathering, with just herself, Mother and Half Brother. Baoyu was a perfect guest, chattering easily about school, about Beijing, about the dance group. He flattered Mother’s cooking, making her smile, and was properly deferential to Half Brother. The People’s Liberation Army wore no marks of rank at this time, but Yuezhu had already told him Half Brother was an officer.

“The army has a very good dance troupe,” he said to Half Brother. “We saw them in a movie last fall, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*.”

“The army exists to serve the people,” said Half Brother. “We have all kinds of singing, dancing, and entertainment units. If the masses like to see dancing, of course the army should be involved in it.”

“Oh! That’s *just* what your sister said to me! Your family’s thinking is very advanced! Until then I’d thought dancing was just for personal fulfillment. My attitudes were really very bourgeois!”

Baoyu’s feigned self-criticism made everybody laugh. “Perhaps you can come and give political instruction to my regiment,” said Half Brother

to Yuezhu. Later, when Baoyu had gone home, he said: “Your friend seems more like a girl than a boy.”

“That’s just his manner. He’s very athletic, actually.”

“Hm, well. ‘After he’s spoken three sentences you know his calling.’ He’s obsessed with dancing, isn’t he? Unusual for a boy. But I don’t think we’ll be seeing him in the army.”