

## Chapter 17

### Words of Encouragement Beneath the White Stupa An Old Revolutionary's Principles Come Under Siege

In August Yuezhu went off to a camp organized by the army, helping the peasants in Hebei Province. These peasants, though kindly, were even less willing to be helped than those in the southwest, and it was quite easy to avoid work altogether. Yuezhu took long walks along the raised paths between the fields with a fellow-sufferer, a girl a year older than herself who had been deeply attached to a boy from the Mongolian nationality until her parents found out and forbade the friendship.

“You shouldn’t be so close with people from other races,” the girl’s parents had said. “They are not like us. You are storing up trouble for the future. ‘The eagle doesn’t mate with the crow.’”

The two girls wandered the endless rectangles of raised yellow earth, united in self-pity.

The start of the new school year brought no relief. It seemed to Yuezhu a thwarting of fate, a violation of nature, that she was at West Wall District Number 14 Middle School, not the Dance Academy. The lessons were mere drudgery, the dance group sessions without purpose. The dances themselves seemed puerile now, irrelevant to the real business of dancing, which Baoyu was now engaged in at the Academy, which she herself should have been engaged in if she had not made a mess of the lying down and getting up at her interview. So unfair!—after all her years

of dancing, of acquiring these skills, after all the applause, to be failed on a ten-minute interview!

She missed Baoyu, somewhat to her surprise. She perceived, through her gloom of solipsism, that the other members of Number 14's dance group missed him, too. He had been silly, of course, often ridiculous, sometimes annoying; but he had given their activities a spirit and color they did not now have. He had been an inspiration to them, too, his skill and grace setting a mark for them all.

Baoyu came to visit her, appearing at the compound one Sunday in October. Sunday was the Dance Academy's one day off, apparently. They went to Bamboo Park, and sat on a grassy bank watching rowers on the lake.

"So unfair!" she complained to him, unrolling her train of thought (very nearly her only train of thought nowadays). "They didn't see me dance at all."

"You're certainly good enough for the Academy," agreed Baoyu. "There are dancers there less capable than you."

"They probably got in by a back door. Everyone says that's how things work nowadays."

Yuezhu did not know whether or not Baoyu's father had opened a back door for him. If she asked him he would certainly tell her, but she did not want to ask for fear of poisoning their friendship. Certainly Baoyu's father was powerful enough. On the other hand, Baoyu's abilities were so obvious, and the dearth of male applicants so acute, he had really had no need for a back door.

"Well, why not?" Baoyu shrugged. "If the selection process is so unfair, why not try by any means to circumvent it? You should apply again, but this time have your father speak to Secretary Kang. He's the head of the Revolutionary Committee for the whole Conservatory. He's an older guy, not an idiot like most of them. An old soldier, I believe. I'm sure if your father speaks to him he'll accommodate you."

"My father has very strong principles. He wouldn't even accept a maid, although we are entitled to one. Everywhere he travels he goes hard sleeper class. He would never open a back door for me. He hates back doors."

“But you’re his only daughter. I’ve heard that a clever daughter can always bend a father to her will.”

“You don’t know my father and his principles.”

“Well, the heart can rule the head, if the pressure is strong enough.

The sternest father’s heart will melt  
 Faced with a weeping daughter.  
 You know, when all is said and done,  
 Blood is thicker than water.”

Father, as it happened, was away from home on a mission until December. By the time he returned, Yuezhu had resolved to follow Baoyu’s advice. She tackled Father at once, as soon as he was rested from his journey. Father was sitting in one of the plush armchairs after dinner, reading *Reference News*, of which he was now entitled to a personal copy. Yuezhu knelt on the rug in front of him, in a position which she thought would touch him, a supplicatory position.

“I’m going to apply to the Dance Academy again,” she said. “You always taught us never to give up, Father, to persevere through all difficulties. So I’m following your instructions.”

Father put down his paper and smiled at her benignly. “Good, good, Precious Pearl. I’m sure this time you will succeed.”

Yuezhu lowered her head. “Perhaps not,” she said, addressing the rug. “Having rejected me in ’74 they’re not going to look kindly on me in ’75. It will be more difficult to get accepted this year. Last year they’d only just started classes, not many people knew. Now everybody knows. They’ll be getting thousands of applications from all over the country.”

“Well, then, you must redouble your efforts,” said Father.

Yuezhu allowed a strategic pause to develop. Then (still looking at the rug) she said: “The head of the Revolutionary Committee at the Conservatory is an old soldier, Comrade Kang Yimi from the Eighth Route Army. Perhaps you know him?”

She heard Father getting out of his chair. Looking up, she saw that he was furious. His eyes were bulging and his lips were pressed tight to-

gether. Hastily she got to her feet. Father was already yelling by the time she got upright.

“You dare to suggest this? Knowing me, knowing my principles, you dare to come to me with this filthy back door business?”

“I’m sorry, Father. It’s only . . .”

“You think I struggled and bled all those years just to bring a new aristocracy into the world? You think the Communist Party just rode on the backs of the people to establish a new dynasty?”

“Father, please . . .” Yuezhu was close to tears. Hearing the noise, Mother came in from the kitchen. She stopped just inside the doorway, watching them.

“Now you want me to take gifts to this Kang character? What do you think I should take—a watermelon, perhaps? Or a carton of cigarettes? And ask him to open a back door for my daughter? Pei!”

Father flung down his paper to the floor with great vehemence.

“I’ve spoilt you! I’ve raised you the wrong way! You’re a *xiaojie*, a little Princess, aren’t you? Never tasted bitterness, never suffered hardship, never faced defeat or disappointment.”

Yuezhu actually was crying now. “Father, don’t be so cruel. How can you say I’ve never faced disappointment? Don’t you know what I’ve been suffering this last few months? Don’t you know . . .”

“Suffering? You want to talk to me about suffering?” Father jabbed a finger at himself, at his nose. “*Ts!* I’ve walked across mountains covered with ice, wearing shoes made from straw. I’ve gone five days with no food. I’ve got up and walked twenty miles with a raging fever. I’ve seen men die screaming, with their guts hanging out of their bellies, and places the Japanese had passed through, the people impaled on stakes along the road, little children skinned alive. You talk to me about suffering? It’s a word you don’t know the meaning of!”

“Old Han, Old Han, calm yourself.” Mother had come forward to stand with them, and addressed Father in the style of old revolutionaries. She raised an arm, putting it between the two of them. “It’s only a small thing she asked. No need to make such a fuss about it.”

“No need? My principles . . .”

“Yes, yes, we all know your principles. But it wouldn’t hurt you to put in a word for her. Everybody does it nowadays.”

“Everybody does it! If everybody hangs themselves, must I hang myself, too?”

“I thought you might help me,” said Yuezhu, recovering her courage a little after seeing that Mother supported her. “Such a small thing for you, and it means so much to me.”

Father looked from one of them to the other, apparently speechless now. Then he bent to pick up his newspaper, sat down in the armchair again, and reopened the paper with a snap, shutting both of them out.

“Come help me in the kitchen, Yuezhu. There’s no talking to him when he’s like this.”

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After seeing the depth of Father’s intransigence, Yuezhu did not dare raise the subject again. She sank into depression.

“You shouldn’t be so discouraged,” said Teacher Li at dance class one evening. “You can apply for the Academy again this year. You’re not too old. They’re taking applications right now, for next year.”

“What’s the use?” asked Yuezhu. “My chance is less next year than it was this year.”

“Nonsense. They’ll know you’ve had a year’s more training. They’ll give you the same consideration as everyone else.”

Yuezhu didn’t believe it, but she applied anyway. The application, once filed, only depressed her more. She felt she was applying for another rejection. At last her low spirits made her ill. Mother took her to the army doctor, who examined her tongue and throat with a flashlight. Tonsillitis, declared the doctor. They’ll have to come out. A few days’ discomfort, that’s all.

When she woke from the operation Yuezhu at first felt nothing. Then she sniffed to clear some mucus from her nose, and the muscular movement caused the back of her throat to burst into flames. She cried out, or tried to—all that emerged was a croak, and it was some minutes before the fierce dry burning in her throat subsided to ordinary dull pain.

She had a room to herself, at least; and the hospital was much better appointed than the dark, grimy Number One in Seven Kill Stele, where she had once visited a classmate stricken with gastritis who had, in fact, subsequently died. Here there were no peasants milling in the corridors, no broken windows or scurrying rats. The walls of her room were fresh painted, the bare concrete floor swept clean. There was a bedside table with a plain white water-jug and a glass tumbler. She tried to drink a glass of water, but the pain of swallowing was too great. She ejected the mouthful she had taken into the glass where it swirled brown, flakes of clotted blood settling very slowly like tea-leaf fragments.

Mother came to visit that afternoon, bringing some cold rice gruel seasoned with ginger, and tea in a flask. With patient coaxing she got Yuezhu to swallow half a dozen mouthfuls of gruel.

“Half Brother will be home for Spring Festival,” she said. “His unit has given him leave.”

Half Brother! If Father would not yield to her, perhaps she could enlist Half Brother to the siege! There had been a time—when?—somewhere in her early childhood—when Half Brother and Father had fought over Half Brother’s admission to the University in Chengdu. She could remind him of that, try to bring out the arguments he had used at that time. Half Brother was doing well in his unit, this she vaguely knew. He could confront Father not as a rebellious kid, but as a fellow-soldier—much inferior in rank, to be sure, but a comrade in arms nonetheless.

When Father himself came visiting next day, Yuezhu played the invalid for all it was worth. She smiled wanly at his clumsy words of encouragement, made feeble croaking noises in response to his questions, and at last fell back on her pillow in feigned exhaustion, one hand to her throat.

The effect was better than she had dared to hope for. Rising to leave, Father took her hand and pressed it between both of his, looking down tenderly into her eyes. This was the most demonstrative she had ever seen him since she was an infant.

“The conditions here are very good,” said Father. “Don’t worry, they’ll soon have you well. You must rest, Little Pearl. Rest, and don’t worry about anything.”

Yuezhu almost felt she had succeeded right there, but Father said nothing about her application. He said nothing about it next day either, when he visited her again; but he brought a gift with him, to raise her spirits. The gift was in a luxurious box made of shiny white cardboard, like something from a foreign country. Inside the cardboard was airy white tissue paper perfectly clean, and beyond the tissue paper was a brand-new pair of ice skates. Baoyu had ice skates, and used to go skating on North Lake. Months ago, when the previous winter was already ending and the lake no longer safe, Yuezhu had expressed a wish to try ice-skating, without really expecting anything to come of it. It was that that Father had remembered.

“When you’re better you can go skating with your friend,” said Father. “They’re a product of our own country, look—made in Harbin, in the northeast.”

The skates were indeed very fine—glossy black leather lacing up high, with brilliant silver blades. “Thank you, Father. Thank you, dear Father,” croaked Yuezhu, reaching out with her hands to take his. Father squeezed her hands, clumsily. Now she saw his love for her, and the guilt he felt, despite himself, for having refused her. Still she thought she had not sufficient courage to raise the subject of her application directly with him, but she resolved to try the Half Brother strategy at Spring Festival.

She told Baoyu about this when, recovered from the tonsillectomy, she went with him to North Lake, behind the Forbidden City, to try out her new skates. They were permitted to skate only on a restricted part of the lake, encompassed by the shore, Jade Island, and the two bridges leading to the island. Yuezhu had never skated before, but with Baoyu’s encouragement and a dancer’s aptitude, she was soon gliding along confidently. It was a wonderful motion, like something one might do in a dream, like flying almost; and the dreamlike quality was enhanced here by the surroundings: a faint ice-mist hanging over the lake, bare trees on the shoreline, above all towering the White Stupa, a hundred feet high and three hundred years old. The stupa did precisely what it had been designed to do: it impressed upon those playing beneath it their utter insignificance, the transient and illusory nature of everything they

thought important, and it induced the peace and inner silence that can be attained only by acceptance of these truths.

Baoyu was all encouragement. "I miss you very much," he said. "Dear Moon Pearl. We danced together so well. Do you remember when we did Shining Lady Wang?"

"If I get in I shall be a year below you," Yuezhu pointed out. "We'll be in different classes. Perhaps we'd have no opportunity to dance together."

"Oh, but we're encouraged to do extra practice in our own time. We could practice together. You'll love ballet. So much to learn! Different positions, different movements, different kinds of music."

"First I have to get admitted. My only chance is if Father will open a back door for me."

"If your Half Brother will cooperate, it will be three against one. I don't see how your father can resist."

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Half Brother appeared the very day before Spring Festival, the last day of the lunar year. His appearance was dramatic: he was driven to the compound in an army jeep, right into the courtyard of the compound with a squeal of brakes, where he leapt out and up the steps to the entrance hall. Yuezhu did not see this but Mother did. She happened to be at the window. "Wa!" she said aloud. "He has his own driver now!"

Yuezhu ran to open the door. When Half Brother came up onto their landing she threw herself into his arms.

"Little Sister!" he boomed, his voice much louder and stronger than she remembered. "So big now! What, almost seventeen!" He lifted her off her feet and held her, his face six inches from hers. He was very handsome now, handsome and smart, in spite of the severe military cut of his hair.

Father was not yet home. Half Brother embraced Mother, who had been gazing adoringly at him, and laughed merrily at her queries about his health, his diet, his conditions.

"The life of a soldier is a good life," he declared. "Always something interesting! Always something new!"

Yuezhu took her chance right away, before Father came home. In this huge apartment, Mother in the kitchen preparing the evening feast, there was room to speak without being overheard.

“It’s the main thing that matters to me. The ONLY thing,” she explained, filling her voice with urgent emotion. Her voice still had a hoarse edge on it from the tonsillectomy, and she worked this for effect. “I can’t shift him, but perhaps he’ll listen to you.”

“I don’t know.” Half Brother frowned. “His principles are very rigid, you know.”

“But don’t we have to adjust our principles sometimes, to deal with changing circumstances? America was always our great enemy; but when Mr Nixon came to China, we showed him a friendly face.”

Half Brother laughed. “It’s a good argument. I’ll see what I can do.”

Yuezhu supposed he would take Father aside some day during his visit and try to persuade him. She was caught unawares when he brought up the subject that very evening, at the family’s New Year’s Eve dinner.

They had had two toasts in Five Grain Liquor, Yuezhu joining in the second toast at Father’s encouragement. He touched his liquor cup to hers, smiling into her eyes with the smile he had for her nowadays, and said: “Drain your cup!” Perhaps seeing Father’s kindly affection toward her inspired Half Brother to speak.

“Why don’t you put in a word for Little Sister at the Dance Academy? You know she’s set her heart on getting accepted.”

Yuezhu held her breath in fear that Father would explode again; but he was only silent for a moment, reaching with his chopsticks for some bean curd.

“It’s not the right way to do things. You all know my feelings about that.”

“Right or wrong, it’s the way things are done,” said Half Brother. “If you stick so doggedly to your principles, you will just get left behind. You, and your family. What will Little Sister do with her life if she can’t be a dancer? It’s the only thing she cares about.”

Mother was saying nothing, just watching Father warily. Yuezhu, once she recovered from the shock of Half Brother’s boldness, could not help adding her own supplication.

“Father, please. Half Brother’s right. If I don’t get into the Academy I really have no future. I’m not good at anything else, only dancing.”

“You’re good at languages,” said Father. “The best in your class, is what I heard.”

“How can I make a living from that? Be a teacher? You know what a poor life they have.”

“I don’t know. A translator, perhaps.”

“What, sitting in a dark office at a desk, turning English into Chinese all day long? I should die of boredom!”

Mother spoke up, using Father’s full name as she sometimes did, for gravity. “You should help her, Han Dingguo. Blood is thicker than water.”

“And then what will happen to our revolution? Are we to fall back into the ways of the old society, man struggling for advantage against man, without regard to method?”

“No, Father,” said Half Brother. “It’s nothing to do with going back to the old society. If you don’t open a back door for Little Sister, someone less qualified than her will get in in her place, because her people were willing to do what you won’t do.”

“Then that person will come to a bad end. Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“Father, honored Father.” Half Brother leaned forward on the table, tapping his left index finger against his palm to make his point. “The revolution is over. Those battles have been fought and won. Now we have a new battle, and we need new strategy. Our country’s leaders know that. Listen: in my unit we have to review a lot of foreign material. Since Nixon’s visit we are getting more and more material from America. We have all been shocked by this material. None of us realized how far behind our country is. They are so advanced! Everyone in China is proud of the Yangtse Bridge, right? Well, let me tell you, in America they have a bridge so long that you can’t see one end from the other! Everyone in America has a car, even ordinary working people. It’s true. I didn’t believe it at first, but it’s true. The workers have big houses, surrounded by gardens and trees. They have color TV, they have washing machines—everybody! Yes, you are right: our society is no longer one where man exploits man. Now we have a fair and just

society. But the big world—the world outside China—is not fair and just. It is a competition, a battle. If our country is to advance, to compete with these other countries, we must put forward our best people in every sphere.”

Father listened carefully to all this, chewing slowly on his food. “All right,” he said at last. “I can agree with what you say. Of course our country needs to bring forward our best dancers. But how do we know she is one of the best? Aren’t the authorities at the Academy best qualified to judge that?”

“No, they’re not. They can see her abilities, they can ask about her political attitude and background. But they can’t see her enthusiasm. Oh, Father, we are both soldiers. We know what makes a first-class unit, don’t we? It’s the enthusiasm of the men. Nothing can compare with that, nothing can compensate for that if it’s absent, isn’t this true? Suppose you were recruiting men for a special mission. Wouldn’t you leap at the chance to include a man with this kind of spirit, this kind of enthusiasm? Look at Little Sister. She would do anything to get into that Academy. She’s crazy to dance. Now, tell me: will the Academy be better off with such a student, or not? Will our country be better off, or not?”

Father looked at Half Brother. Then he looked at Yuezhu. He was not angry, but nor was he at ease in his mind. He looked levelly at Yuezhu for a moment, then turned his gaze to Mother.

“Blood is thicker than water,” said Mother.

Father sighed, and looked down at his bowl. He was silent for a few beats; then he made a short laugh.

“Ha! Blood is thicker than water! Ai, ai, ai! Yes, I suppose it is after all.” He looked up at Yuezhu, smiling his fond smile now. “I suppose it is. All right, Precious Pearl, all right. I’ll speak to Secretary Kang.”