Chapter 20

Comrade Deng Xiaoping Finds Food for His Soul
Father Returns to His Principles

"It's a judgment," said Father, nodding to emphasize his words. "It's Heaven's judgment on me for going against my principles. I knew, I always knew no good would come of it."

"You don't have to say that now, husband. The poor girl's upset. What use is it to tell her these things?"

"It's my fault too," said Half Brother gloomily. "I was the one who persuaded Father."

They were assembled at the dinner-table for Yuezhu's nineteenth birthday. Some great political shift was under way, and Father's chief's faction was in the ascendant. Father and Mother had returned to Beijing the month before, to a spacious new apartment in the elite district between Jade Abyss Lake and the Temple of the Moon.

The move had rescued Yuezhu from a painful decision. The physiologist at the Conservatory had declared her unable to dance, at any rate for the foreseeable future. Since she had no home to go to in the capital, she had stayed on in the dormitory. For a while she had even continued to attend the classroom lessons, and apparently could have gone on doing so indefinitely; but the sympathy of her classmates had become too much to bear. Having been explicitly barred from dance classes by the physiologist, by mid-March she had ceased participating in the life of the Academy altogether, and occupied her days with solitary expeditions

to the capital's many parks and monuments. There was a general assumption by everyone concerned that she would eventually pack up and leave to join her family in Guangzhou. In fact she had not even told them in her letters anything about what had happened. Some part of her, deep in her deepest heart, longed for and believed in a miracle that would restore her health—and then, how foolish it would have looked, to have written letters saying her dance career was finished! But Father had been reassigned to Beijing, to this splendid new apartment, and Mother had come to the Academy to tell her about it, and of course the state of affairs could not then be hidden.

"Oh, what does it matter?" Yuezhu poked listlessly at the bean curd in her bowl. "I can't dance any more, that's all."

Just hearing them talk about it sent her to the verge of tears. She didn't want to hear her misery talked about. She wanted to suffer it alone, in silence, toting her burden of despair through the unpeopled splendors of the Summer Palace, limping with them beneath the blossoms at Purple Bamboo Park, under the unbearable bright skies of spring.

"From a bad action there's bound to be a bad consequence," Father continued, pursuing his theme. "I should never have let Eldest talk me into it." ("Eldest" was his word for Half Brother.)

"We don't know for sure," Mother pointed out. "The army has the best doctors. Perhaps you could have them look at her. There may be some cure."

"There are certain doctors at the Beijing Medical Institute the senior leaders call on sometimes for an opinion," said Half Brother. "It might be possible . . . "

"What's the use?" said Yuezhu. "If there was a cure that would let me dance, wouldn't the doctors at the Academy know about it? Whatever another doctor did, we'd have to persuade the Academy to accept his result. By that time I'd have lost the rest of this year. I was old already when I entered, for a dancer. They won't accept me again at nineteen, to start my second year over. It's hopeless."

Yuezhu was unhappier than she had ever been. She had not known—not truly known, in her blood and marrow—how much dancing meant to her, until she heard those terrible words from the physiologist: *You will*

not be able to dance, not for a long time. The sentence rang in her head like the doleful note of a temple gong, reverberating in the sounding-box of the skull, the ring of bone. She had dreamed of a miracle during those lonely last few weeks at the Academy; but somehow, once her family knew about her injury, denial turned to resignation, and she had sunk into fatalism. Hope, the demon Hope, had deluded her again.

Still she could not altogether resist his susurrations. Father and Half Brother between them somehow arranged for her to see Professor Piao, a specialist at Beijing Medical Institute. Professor Piao was one of the most renowned practitioners in the field of spinal injuries. During the most fevered period of the Cultural Revolution (so Half Brother told it) he had been sent down to the countryside to learn from the poor and lower-middle peasants; but had been recalled after only a few months to attend to the daughter-in-law of a very senior personage, who had slipped a disk while six months pregnant. Since then he had held his position at the Institute through all the varying political winds, and had several times been called to Zhongnanhai to attend to the country's leaders.

Professor Piao ordered some X-rays taken. When they had been developed he favored Yuezhu with a personal examination. Her X-ray pictures were right there in Professor Piao's examination room, fixed to panes of white frosted glass lit from behind. The panes glowed creamy white in the spaces between the pictures. Also in the room was a stainless-steel sink, a chair on which she had deposited her clothes, a tall apparatus of tubular metal and webbing straps whose purpose Yuezhu could not guess at, and Professor Piao. Yuezhu lay face-down on the vinyl couch, quite naked, facing the unfathomable apparatus, while the old man—Professor Piao was at least seventy—prodded her back with his bony fingers.

Apparently satisfied, Professor Piao turned to the sink and began washing his hands. "You were studying ballet," he said to the faucet.

"Yes. At the Academy of Dance."

"Well, you'd better forget about that." Professor Piao flicked a cold glance at her. "Put your clothes on."

Yuezhu climbed down from the couch and began dressing. She had been a little shocked at taking her clothes off in front of Professor Piao,

and had tried to maneuver herself on to the couch without letting him see her private parts. His manner was so distant, however, she had lost her self-consciousness before he finished.

"There's nothing to be done?"

"I didn't say that, did I?" replied the old man irritably. "There is an operation, *zhuiban qiechu shu*." Apparently feeling this was sufficient information to divulge to a patient, he fell silent, drying his hands on a spotless white towel.

At first Yuezhu did not understand the expression. Professor Piao was from Shanghai, and spoke Mandarin with a heavy accent. *Qiechu* she recognized at once, with alarm, for it meant "amputate". *Shu* was a surgical operation . . .

"Amputate . . . what? The disk?"

"Yes. It's ruptured. The juice inside is seeping out, and pressing against the nerve. This kind of tissue cannot really heal. You will always have some problem with it. The only solution is to remove the disk. Remove it, and then join together the bones of the spine, above and below it. You will be a few millimeters shorter, of course."

Professor Piao chuckled. He had been quite cordial with her, Yuezhu reflected, considering that he had dealt with the most senior of the country's leaders, and she was merely the daughter of a Brigadier. She had been rather afraid of him, expecting that he would be brusque or plain rude with her—as, of course, considering his position, he was entitled to be.

"And that . . . that will let me dance again?" The demon was chittering wildly in her ear now.

"Dance? Oh, no. I shouldn't think so. There will always be a certain stiffness. For a year or two, until the bones are fused, you will have to move quite carefully."

Professor Piao was nodding at her, smiling as he spoke to take the edge off his words. "As I said, you had best forget about dancing. In fact, this operation is quite new, and the results not always predictable. All that can be said for sure is, that in the case of a severely ruptured disk, it will remove the main cause of pain. In a case like yours, where the pain is not crippling . . . I really would not recommend it."

"So my case is serious enough to stop me dancing, but not serious enough to justify an operation?"

Professor Piao stiffened a little. He turned away, dropping the used towel into a stainless steel pedal bin. "There is no question of you doing any kind of gymnastics, athletics, or advanced dancing, operation or no operation. Not this year, not next year. Possibly never. You had better reconcile yourself to the fact."

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Reconcile herself Yuezhu could not. She accepted the situation now, but not the blank empty condition in which it left her life. No-one and nothing could comfort her. Mother tried her best, but was constitutionally incapable of understanding the depth of her loss. Mother's own life had been one of resignation and duty, almost (Yuezhu reflected, now having ample time to reflect) almost like a woman in the old society. The saying in those times had been *san cong si de*—the three obediences and four moralities. The three obediences were to one's father before marriage, to one's husband after marriage, to one's son when the husband was gone. Mother would never have let such a feudal expression pass her lips, but she had been brought up in the old society—had been sixteen at Liberation—and her thinking was set in that mold. She had never had any strong ambition for herself, had easily subsumed her own will to that of her parents, her husband, the Party.

Looking at Mother, listening to her clumsy efforts at consolation, Yuezhu even developed some real feelings of guilt about her passion for dancing. After all, that was what they were *supposed* to be like, all of them, everybody: selfless, sacrificing personal considerations for the good of all, Serving the People, rustless cogs in the great machine of History. Personal ambition was bourgeois, probably counter-revolutionary. Perhaps her present misery was, as Father had said, the judgment of Heaven on her.

Father himself was very busy, sometimes coming home at nine or ten in the evening. Mr Deng Xiaoping's position, and therefore Father's chief's, was waxing stronger day by day, and Father was in meetings all the time. Half Brother had gone back to his unit, whatever it was—even Father did not seem to know. Baoyu called on her two or three times in April and

May, to walk with her in North Lake Park or by the Jade Abyss Lake, but his visits only made her more desperately miss the discipline and companionship, the sense of *purpose*, of the Academy, and she found it difficult to talk to him. On the last occasion she was actually quite rude, and Baoyu was clearly hurt; but they parted before she had made any apology, and she thought he might not come again.

Into this void of despair and self-pity, one day late in May, stepped Fate's messenger, in the improbable form of Madame Blaitsky.

The compound Yuezhu's family now lived in was in the nature of an elite barracks, and non-military visitors were not allowed past the gatehouse without invitation. On this particular afternoon, as Yuezhu and Mother were starting their siesta, one of the guards from the gatehouse came knocking, saying there was a foreigner to see them. Mother went to investigate. Five minutes later there were voices in the corridor, Mother and someone else, a woman with a northeastern accent, whose voice for some reason Yuezhu did not immediately recognize. *Go away! Go away!* willed Yuezhu, fanatical now in her seclusion. But the visitor did not go away. Mother called through to the bedroom, and Yuezhu had to go and be polite. To her surprise it was Madame Blaitsky. Yuezhu offered a courteous greeting.

"How is your back now?" asked Madame Blaitsky. And even this simply query, kindly intended, pierced Yuezhu with more pain than the disk had ever given her.

"It's much better," she said. "So long as I don't try to dance."

Seeing Madame Blaitsky brought back to her the training, the barre and mirrored walls, the endless repetition, the smell of the other dancers' sweat, all the hope and challenge and attainment and camaraderie of the school . . . everything, everything. *Please, please go away!* she inwardly shrieked.

"It's really a tragedy," Madame Blaitsky was saying to Mother. "I could see how she loved to dance. Same as myself at her age, nothing else in her head but dancing."

"It's a shame," agreed Mother. "But our daughter has many abilities. Her foreign language skills are excellent. She may become an interpreter or translator."

"Really?" Madame Blaitsky looked over at her, eyebrows raised somewhat. "Would you be satisfied with that, Little Han?"

"The Party's will is my will," replied Yuezhu mechanically.

"Of course, of course." Madame Blaitsky cleared her throat, and addressed herself to Mother again. "Well, the damage is done, I'm afraid. Our doctors all agree: your daughter cannot dance."

So why have you come here to torment me? But Yuezhu only said: "The doctors were very kind. I'm really grateful to them."

Madame Blaitsky nodded appreciation of this little act of grace. Catching her eyes, Yuezhu suddenly saw the older woman's sincerity. It came right through, lancing the armor of her selfish despair. Madame Blaitsky knew her pain, understood it perfectly! Not to be able to dance—she understood! Yuezhu's heart warmed to the kindly woman, with her round Slavic face and strange blue eyes.

"I've come to make a suggestion," said Madame Blaitsky.

These words, and the sincerity on Madame Blaitsky's face, and the very fact of her having taken the trouble to come visiting, reawoke the demon Hope, and he at once began whispering in Yuezhu's ear. *The doctors have a cure, after all! There is a special Russian medicine to heal the disk! Some special exercises you can do! A few months of these exercises and you will be back at the school!*

Mother was smiling expectantly at Madame Blaitsky. Yuezhu should likewise have waited politely for her to deliver her suggestion; but the murmuring of the demon was too insistent.

"I will do anything I can," she said. "Anything I can, to come back to the Conservatory."

"Right," said Madame Blaitsky, looking at her very tenderly. "To the Conservatory. But you know, there is no possibility of your coming back to the Dance Academy."

"Our daughter has already resigned herself to that," said Mother.

"However," continued Madame Blaitsky, "there is another possibility open to Little Han at the Conservatory. Since she has already studied music."

"I don't understand," said Yuezhu. "I can read music, but I can't play any instrument."

"No. But you have a beautiful voice. Everybody notices that. Beautiful, and very strong."

They looked at her: Yuezhu, fast slipping back into despair, Mother altogether baffled.

"They are starting a new department at the Conservatory, you see. To train young people in foreign-style opera."

Mother frowned. "Foreign-style opera? I didn't know there was a foreign style. Our country has so many different opera styles of her own. Why would we need to train singers for the foreign style? What's the use of that? It sounds like 'Copying the Handan walk'."

This last was an idiom, the name of a story from the Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi.

Copying the Handan Walk

In the period before our country was decisively unified there was a state called Zhao, whose capital city had the name Handan. This Handan was regarded by all the other states as a center of fashion. In particular, the gentlemen of Handan had developed an exceptionally graceful and dignified gait. Everywhere under Heaven, people wanted to walk like the men of Handan.

Some young men from the neighboring state of Yan journeyed to Handan just for the purpose of learning the Handan walk. They took lodging in the city, and every day they went out into the streets to observe and imitate the famous Handan walk. Try as they might, however, none of them could master it, and in their blundering approximations to the Handan walk just made themselves look ridiculous, not only to the stately walkers of Handan itself, but even to the merchants and travelers from other states who were resident in the city.

Worse yet, when the young men of Yan returned to their own country, they found that in striving to copy the Handan walk, they had forgotten the customary gait of their native place. Not only had they made themselves ludicrous to the

> people of Zhao, they were now laughing-stocks in Yan herself. They had failed to learn the foreign style, and lost their own style.

Madame Blaitsky smiled—the smile of one who understands large affairs so much better than her listeners.

"You don't appreciate how fast things are changing, Comrade Han. Comrade Deng Xiaoping recently attended a concert given by the Vienna Symphony Orchestra down in Guangzhou. Do you know what he said to them afterwards? He said: 'That is what I call food for the soul!'" Madame Blaitsky paused for dramatic effect. Then: "There is a new wind blowing through the cultural affairs of our country, Comrade Han. The Conservatory is to receive an increase in funding next year. A very large increase."

"Well . . . " Mother was, of course, eager to show her approval of whatever wind was blowing. "Well, it's a good thing."

"Yes. It's a good thing. All kinds of foreign performance arts are to be encouraged now. The American Ballet Theater will visit us this fall. To perform in the Great Hall of the people!" She turned to Yuezhu. "If you want a ticket, I can . . . " But she caught the expression of anguish on Yuezhu's face, and stopped dead. There was an unhappy pause.

"So you are suggesting that my daughter can join this foreign-style opera department?" Mother had gathered things together.

"Yes. Well, I mean, she can *apply* for admission. Since she has some training in music, she has an advantage. Of course, experts will have to listen to her voice, to see if it's suitable. There will be a special interview, I understand. But, to tell you the truth . . . " she made a small laugh . . . "the competition will not be very intense. I am one of the first to know of it. It's all being done in a hurry, of course. They want to start classes in September—only three months! There is hardly time to get the word out. Most of the students who might be interested are committed to other schools. And frankly, it's such a new thing . . . " the laugh again . . . "not very many will be interested anyway. When the style is better known, of course, it will be popular. But right now . . . " she shrugged. "Well, the first year of admission, if they really start this September, the first year—perhaps even the first two years—will really be just to get things started."

"A new thing," repeated Mother, somewhat blankly, with the air of one who thought that in spite of its being a new thing, disaster might yet be averted somehow.

Madame Blaitsky turned to Yuezhu. "What do you think, Little Han? If you want to apply, I can put your name forward."

"I don't know."

"Do you have another plan for September? All the schools and colleges will be open, you know. They're taking students now. There will be nation-wide examinations in December for all colleges. Starting next year it will all be done by examination. If you want to go to college on an interview, a good political record and—she glanced at Mother—if you don't mind me speaking frankly, on a word from your father, this is the last chance."

The news about the foreign-style opera department had hardly penetrated Yuezhu's gloom. It was interesting, in an abstract way, but so what? She didn't want to be a singer. She wanted to be a dancer. And she couldn't. Therefore life had no purpose. What use to talk about singing? Nobody in China listened to foreign-style opera, anyway.

Madame Blaitsky was watching her, reading her thoughts. "There is no hope of your dancing," she said softly. "No hope at all. The Conservatory won't accept you back in the ballet department. But you may be able to come back as a singer."

"I have no experience as a singer," said Yuezhu. "Not in that style."

"Who in China has? You are at no disadvantage."

"I don't know," said Yuezhu. "I don't know." Meaning: *I don't care, I don't care.*

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Yuezhu had no spirit to do anything about the foreign-style opera school. After Madame Blaitsky had left she did not even think about it. But when Father came home and they were sitting at dinner, Mother brought it up. Before she had finished a couple of sentences, Father began shaking his head wildly.

"I won't do anything! I won't do anything! No matter what you say! No more back doors!"

"I don't care," said Yuezhu, in all truth. "I haven't asked you to do anything, have I? I don't want to go to singing school anyway. Singing is very boring. I'll be a teacher, or a translator. I don't care."

Father looked at her, still angry. "Bad deeds have a bad result, haven't we seen it proven? I'm not going to any Party Secretary with gifts to get you in. You'll get in on your own this time, or find something else to do!"

As much to assert herself against Father as from any real desire to be a singer, Yuezhu applied to the new school, going to the Conservatory to sign her name. It made her ache to be there again. Crossing the courtyard she could not help but see the window of the dance practice room, and recall that still frosty morning in her first year, when love for this place, and for her part in it, and for Chairman Mao, had filled her heart. Now she was banished from that Eden, and Chairman Mao was dead, and nothing mattered very much at all.

In less than a week she was called to interview.

The interview was much more businesslike than either of the ones she had had for the Dance Academy. There were four people in the room. Three were sitting behind two teacher's desks pushed together. There was Second Secretary Wang from the Party committee for the whole Conservatory; Professor Zhao from the Department of Performance Music, and a middle-aged woman Yuezhu had never seen before. The middle-aged woman was writing on a pad of Conservatory paper. She glanced up only for a moment when Yuezhu came in.

The fourth person was sitting on a stool next to an enormous brand-new concert grand piano at one side. The first thing Yuezhu noticed about him was his beard. It was an actual goatee, shaped to a point, with a trim little white mustache to match. His grayish hair was long, swept back across his head and down over the collar of his shirt; but the other real oddity in his appearance was his fingernails, which were unusually long, long and curling. Most unsuitable—even inconvenient—for a pianist, Yuezhu thought.

Professor Zhao smiled encouragingly at her. "Little Han. We were sorry you had to give up dancing. Madame Blaitsky said you were so promising."

"Thank you. She is too generous. My ability was not very great."

Professor Zhao nodded. He turned to the middle-aged woman. "This is Comrade Zhang. She studied Russian and German opera at the Leningrad Conservatory. And this is Professor Shi. He is an expert on the Italian opera. He studied in Moscow in his youth, under Italian teachers."

Professor Shi, sitting sideways on his piano stool to face them, smiled suddenly, laugh lines springing out all round his eyes and mouth. He had narrow blue teeth like a rodent.

"We have your file, of course. We know all about you." Professor Zhao laughed uncomfortably, realizing that this phrase was not very appropriate, sounding, as it did, like one of those things that used to be said to the subject of a struggle session. *We know all about you! Confess!* Now, when it was dawning on people that that might be all over, everyone was so sensitive to phrases of this sort. "I mean, no need to go into your school record here. We just want to find out if your voice is suitable. All right? Professor Shi?"

Professor Shi nodded at him, then at Yuezhu. "I want you to sing me some scales," he said. "Just sing 'do, re, mi', following the note I give you. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

"I just want you to sing naturally, without straining at all. Just naturally, with the voice you feel comfortable with. Good, strong, loud notes—but not forcing or shouting in any way. Understand?"

"Yes."

He struck a note. It caught Yuezhu by surprise, and she just stared at him. Everybody laughed.

"Again." Professor Shi struck the same note, a middle C. Yuezhu sang a scale. He nodded and struck another. She sang. Another, another. Professor Shi never once looked at his keyboard. He was watching her, listening very intently. Another, another. She sang twenty or more scales, from all over the keyboard. Finally he seemed satisfied.

"Now," announced Professor Shi, "I want you to be loud. I will strike a note, and you will sing that note. Just that one note, but *loud*. As loud as you can without losing melodic value. Without shouting or straining.

Loud and long. Hold it at the same volume as long as you can, until the breath fails. Fortissimo, tenuto. Understand?"

"I think so."

He struck an A. Yuezhu took a deep breath and sang out the note, stopping when she felt her breath failing. This exercise, too, was repeated all over the keyboard, until Yuezhu began to feel dizzy from hyperventilating. Professor Shi stopped suddenly and stood up. He was no more than five foot two. He came out from behind the piano and approached her, stopping three paces away.

"Let us investigate your acting ability, young lady. You were trained as a dancer, ha? So you can express emotions using your body."

"Yes. I believe so."

"Show me some of these emotions. Show me *angry*."

Yuezhu adopted the posture and expression of a peasant girl accusing the landlord who had oppressed her. To her surprise, Professor Shi laughed. His laugh was merry but rather high-pitched, like a girl. "*He he he he!* All right, now show me *proud* . . . Good, good; now *joyful* . . . "

At last Professor Shi seemed satisfied. He thanked her and bowed low, bowing from the waist with his arms straight down, like a Japanese.

"Thank you very much," said Professor Zhao, nodding to her. Comrade Zhang was writing again. Yuezhu left. Leaving, she closed the door, and so was quite unable to hear Professor Shi saying: "This one! We *must* have this one!"

That same day Comrade Deng Xiaoping returned to the capital, and Father was promoted to Major-General.