

Chapter 21

A Great Party Shows Symptoms of Decline
Moon Pearl Receives a New Name

When the visitor had gone, Secretary Kang walked back the length of his office to the window that looked out across the campus. Now—it was early April—the trees he'd had planted last year were beginning to be in leaf. Planting trees was a pet project of Secretary Kang's. Some new ones were being planted along the walkways that crisscrossed the campus. There was a cart with some of these new trees laid out in it right under his window, their root structures wrapped in burlap. A donkey was harnessed to the cart. Apparently the donkey was being recalcitrant; one of the workers was beating him with a bamboo cane, lashing at the donkey's hindquarters with dull ferocity. Each time the cane landed the donkey made a little jump in the air; but that was all the motion he would concede. Secretary Kang watched for a while, until interrupted by a knock at the door.

Secretary Kang walked over and opened the door to reveal Little Chen, the girl who kept the leaders supplied with thermos flasks full of hot water for tea. She came in, smiling nervously at Secretary Kang. She was nervous because, in the first place, she was at the very bottom of the Conservatory's administrative hierarchy, he at the very top; and in the second place, because Secretary Kang occasionally helped himself to certain favors from her, favors she was not eager to grant but, given his position, could not refuse. She replaced one of his flasks, fumbling with

the handle. She was nervous all the time, feeling herself under Secretary Kang's eye, and nearly knocked over his tea-cup.

"Little Chen, do you know the International Opera Department?"

"Yes, of course. Who doesn't know them? I hear them singing all the time. So loud!"

"The Branch Secretary for that department has the surname Guo. Go and fetch him for me. Right now. His office is at the beginning of the corridor leading to their classrooms."

The girl scurried out, thankful that no more was required of her. Secretary Kang re-locked the door and went back to his window. The worker was still flogging his donkey, who had not moved forward an inch. In the middle distance one of the foreign teachers was crossing the campus on a path, one so far untreed, transverse to Secretary Kang's line of sight. He had two students with him, laughing at something the foreigner was saying. Secretary Kang experienced a mental twitch of distaste. He did not like foreigners. For one thing, they were an administrative nuisance—endless arrangements to be made for their food, their travel, their accommodations. But fundamentally he just didn't like them. He thought they were always laughing up their sleeves at him, at Chinese people, at China. *Five thousand years of civilization, and still you are so poor? The country that's supposed to have invented everything, yet you are the beggars of the world?* That was what they were thinking, so he believed. Well, fuck their mothers. If China was poor, whose fault was that, if not the foreigners who had pillaged her for most of this century past?

But it was policy now, since the opening up in '77, for every institute of higher education to hire foreign teachers. The Music Conservatory had five of the devils, striding around as if they owned the place, eating with their fancy knives and forks, fucking each other—it was common knowledge, the instructions were to let them get on with it, so long as they didn't corrupt the morals of the Chinese students—writing who could say what lies back to their own countries in their sinister spidery script. A, B, C, . . . Fuck their mothers! But it was policy, you couldn't argue with policy.

And now this visitor, out of the blue. Well, it was a windfall, that was the only way to look at it. It was a wrong thing, of course—who knew that

better than himself, an old Party man from before Liberation? But many things were done now that didn't bear close examination. Class struggle had gone by the board, and it was every man for himself now. Well, he had made revolution; now he could reap the rewards. You couldn't say it was unfair. That was the only way to look at it. In any case, the visitor had shown him the chop of a senior person, a very senior person—one who lived in the national leaders' compound at Zhongnanhai, quite possibly. You didn't cross people like that, not unless you were looking for trouble.

Another knock at the door. This was Branch Secretary Guo from the International Opera Department. By the time Secretary Kang had got back to his desk, Branch Secretary Guo was settling himself in one of the big stuffed armchairs—the one the visitor had sat in while Secretary Kang entertained him.

“Old Guo, we have an important matter,” said Secretary Kang, looking across the desk at his junior. “Public Security matter.”

“Ah,” said Branch Secretary Guo, nodding his head slowly. “Old” was merely a term of address: Branch Secretary Guo was no more than thirty-five. He was short, short enough to be slightly comical, and possessed of a pale circular face which always—always, so far as Secretary Kang knew—had a rather idiotic eager-to-please look plastered across it, under a peaked army-green cap. “An important matter,” he repeated. “Public Security. One of the foreign teachers?”

“No.” The ghost of the shadow of a thought stirred in Secretary Kang's mind. “Mm, not necessarily. It concerns one of the students. In the International Opera Department. Your department.”

“Right, right.” Branch Secretary Guo nodded eagerly. “My department.”

Heaven, the man was an idiot, thought Secretary Kang. Perhaps actually retarded. But so much the better. Depending on how he decided to handle the thing, the less people understood what was going on, the better. And he'd known Guo for three and a half years, since the International Opera Department was established. The man was perfectly reliable.

“I'm ready,” said Branch Secretary Guo, sitting up and forward in the armchair like a dog waiting for a bone.

Secretary Kang got up and went to the window again. He stood at the window with his back to Branch Secretary Guo, to impress on him the gravity of the matter. Incredibly, the worker in the quadrangle below was still thrashing his donkey. The creature's hide must be made of steel, thought Secretary Kang.

"It's a student in the international opera department. A fourth-year student, 1977 intake. Family name Han, like in Han Lin'er." [Using the name of a 14th-century rebel leader to illustrate the surname.] "Given name Yuezhu, 'yue' for 'moon', 'zhu' for 'pearl'."

"Who is Han Lin'er?" asked Branch Secretary Guo, grinning at his own ignorance. Of course, you couldn't expect a clod like that to be acquainted with history. When Secretary Kang had joined the Party in '46 they'd made you read books. If you couldn't read, the Party taught you. The educated ones taught the ignorant ones, and everyone was lifted up. That was when the Party *was* a Party—a Party worth fighting for, worth dying for. Now it was, what? Opportunists, and morons with good connections. Now it was every man for himself. Well, he could play that game well enough, too. You had to swim with the current. His thoughts returned momentarily to the envelope in his desk drawer. Swim with the current, live according to the morals of the age you found yourself in. That was the only way.

"A *zhuo* on the left and a *wei* on the right," said Secretary Kang, sketching the girl's surname character on his palm, held up for the other to see. "Find out everything you can about her. Get her classmates writing reports. You know. I want to see reports on her. Everything she does, everything she says. Her background, her family—everything."

"I'll go!" said Branch Secretary Guo, like the hero of a propaganda movie volunteering for a suicide mission. The role required that he leap to his feet; but he was having some difficulty struggling out of the armchair.

"Keep it under your hat," said Secretary Kang. "It's Public Security, remember."

When Branch Secretary Guo had gone, Secretary Kang went back to his window. The worker was sitting on the tail of his cart between two trees, smoking a cigarette—taking a break, apparently, from beating his

donkey, who still, so far as Secretary Kang could see, had not moved a single centimeter. The little thought stirred again, the one about the foreign teachers. What? Perhaps. Two birds with one stone. Yes, that might be the way to do it.

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Some days after this Yuezhu was crossing the campus heading for the dormitory, for her afternoon siesta. At the front of her mind was the Cinelli visit, which was new news. Vincenzo Cinelli, the World's Greatest Tenor, was to visit China in June. He was going to give a concert at the Great Hall of the People, and pay a visit to the Conservatory. Naturally he would be most interested in the International Opera Department, her own department. They were going to put on some kind of show for him, though it hadn't yet been decided exactly what form the show would take. Perhaps a full-dress production, though it was short notice. The classmates all knew Cinelli of course. Who did not know him? Well, probably ninety-nine per cent of the population of China did not; but that was because foreign-style opera was still hardly known here. Cinelli's visit would help to make it known. Yuezhu's best friend, Johnny Liu, had a portrait of Cinelli on the wall by his bunk—a miniature oil painting he'd done himself from a magazine illustration. Of course, Yuezhu had never been to Johnny Liu's dormitory; but he had brought the portrait to class to show her. It was very well done, clearly Cinelli. Johnny Liu was quite gifted in that way, as well as having a fine baritone voice.

Thinking of the Cinelli visit she did not notice Samson Lü until it was too late to avoid him without discourtesy. Yuezhu did not care for Samson Lü. Not that he was bad-looking, or objectionable in any very direct way, but there was something about his manner that grated. Also, he had the reputation of being one of those who wrote small reports on his classmates for the leaders. Everyone was careful what they said around Samson. Still, it being too late to avoid him, she smiled as he came up, though in a way she hoped would not encourage conversation.

“Han Yuezhu. I've been looking for you.”

“Well, I'm not hard to find.”

He had stopped. It was clear from this, and from what he had said, that there was no avoiding an exchange with him. Yuezhu resigned herself, and smiled again, more easily.

“Han Yuezhu. Can I have a word?”

She thought she recognized the tone. He was acting the go-between! This one—who would have chosen this one to make an introduction? Knowing how everyone distrusted him! Setting aside the unsuitability of the messenger, though, the message itself was not very surprising. Yuezhu knew by now that she was pretty, and that men wanted to be introduced to her. There had been several go-betweens in the last two years at the opera school, since the new, liberal winds had penetrated down to student life in '79. She had turned down all these approaches firmly and briskly, feeling no need of this kind of attachment and wanting no repeat of the awful embarrassment she had gone through with Mustache. In this respect, she was aware of being thought a little odd by now. Most of her female classmates, including all of those with any claim to good looks, were spoken for. She was the only holdout. Yuezhu puzzled about it to herself often. She didn't think there was actually anything wrong with her; it was only that she felt no need for that kind of permanent connection yet. For permanent it would be: those already paired off would all marry in the year or two after graduation—that was understood. To break an agreement of this sort was widely regarded as flagitious. There had, in fact, been two such incidents the previous semester. Plump, cheery little Musetta Wang had been introduced to a boy from the instrumental department, a cellist, in her second year. After a few months she'd decided it was a mistake, and broken up with him. The boy had mimeographed a long complaint against her and distributed it among all the students and teachers. Poor Musetta had hardly dared show her face for months. The other case was worse. A fine, handsome boy with a lovely tenor voice in Yuezhu's own department, International Opera, had been introduced to a girl in the Dance Academy. The girl was devoted to him; but after a year or so he had dropped her. They had apparently been doing *tongfang* in secret. On this basis, the girl, whose family was well-placed, got the boy charged with raping her, and he was sent to Reform Through Labor for three years. *Lucky not to be shot*, everyone said, for rape was a capital

offense. Still, everyone could see it was unfair, since the girl had been infatuated with him, and obviously gave her consent. No, Yuezhu was content with her life as it was. She did not want all those complications. She liked boys, and found it easy to be friends with them, but didn't want to take things any further at this point.

"All right," she said to Samson Lü. "I'm listening."

"It's about your personal thing."

"I thought it would be."

Samson Lü laughed. His pasty face flushed. He looked down, and seemed to have lost his words.

"I really don't want to accept any introductions," said Yuezhu, feeling a bit sorry for him. "I'm quite happy with my life as it is."

"But you are twenty-three," said Samson. "Just two weeks ago, right? Girls all want to be married before they're twenty-five. After that, it's difficult to find anyone who'll take you."

"Oh, I'm sure I can find someone to take me." Yuezhu laughed at her own vanity. "Even when I'm twenty-six and all wrinkled up."

"And you must consider"—Samson Lü was plowing on doggedly through his script, now that he had found his place—"that we shall all be graduating in a few weeks' time. We don't know what our assignments will be. You may end up in a unit with few eligible men."

This was, in point of fact, quite true. With the rush of marriages after graduation, what men would be left unmarried? But still Yuezhu could not make herself care about it. She had had enough of Samson Lü and his clumsy approaches now.

"All right. Who did you want to introduce anyway?"

"Ah . . . that is . . . Really . . . since you are so negative about it . . ."

He had lost his spirit again. "You can just tell me the name," said Yuezhu. "I don't mind. I won't tell anyone."

"No. No . . . it's not . . . suitable." Samson Lü turned and half-ran down the path the way he had come, back to the boys' dormitory.

What a strange business! thought Yuezhu. Usually a go-between at least got to the guy's name, even if he could see you weren't interested. Certainly (she smiled to herself) if she ever needed a go-between, she would not use Samson Lü. No need to anyway; Johnny Liu would be a

fine go-between. Smooth and smart, with his Shanghai worldliness, he could talk anyone into anything.

She told Johnny Liu about the botched introduction, when they were in the weight room together. They were lying on their backs on rubber mats, each with the top part of the torso covered by an apparatus of black-painted metal and straps padded with green vinyl. The purpose of the apparatus was to press weight down on one's chest. By breathing against the weight you could cause the apparatus to rise and fall, thereby strengthening the diaphragm and the intercostal muscles. This contraption was called Iron Bride by the opera students, after an instrument of torture used in ancient times. It had been invented by Professor Shi himself, and the department possessed two of them: one for men, one for women. This was necessary because the thing actually sat on one's chest, so it had to make some accommodation to the breasts of the female students.

Johnny Liu was working out with the male apparatus, of course. He was singing scales as he exhaled, long clear scales in his robust baritone. Yuezhu did not sing while exercising her diaphragm on the machine. She felt it was an unnatural position for singing—she knew of no opera where one was required to sing supine; even in deathbed scenes, one was always sitting up—and also that the pressure from the device might strain her vocal chords or diaphragm. She just counted silently through her three sets of thirty reps, then released the apparatus and wriggled out from beneath. She stood through a cycle of slow deep breaths to relax her diaphragm, then went over to stand above Johnny. She waited till he was inhaling before she spoke.

“Samson Lü came and tried to give me an introduction. Do you have any idea who it might have been?”

Johnny Liu looked up at her from the floor, wrinkling his brow. “You mean he didn't say?”

“No. I told him I wasn't interested at all, and he ran away without saying who'd sent him.”

Johnny Liu laughed. “What a shit! I hate that son-of-a-bitch ankle-rubber. He writes reports for the leaders, you know.”

“Of course I know. Everybody knows. What I don't know is, who sent him.”

Johnny Liu released the catch of the machine and worked his way out from under it.

“Whoever it was,” he said as he got to his feet, “you should consider it. You’re not getting any younger, Little Sister. How old are you now? Twenty-two?”

“Three. Oh! He knew that! How did he know my birthday? Did I mention it to the classmates?”

“Not that I noticed. But you really should make some plan, you know. Graduation is only three months away. Less than three months. After that we are out in the world. You might as well get something settled. You don’t know what conditions will be like at your unit.”

Lying in her bunk that night, Yuezhu thought about what Johnny Liu had said. He was disinterested, of course. They were really like brother and sister, had been since they met in class the first semester. Johnny was a worldly man, as all Shanghai people seemed to be. There had been a connection with one of the college workers in their second year that everyone had talked about, and another the following year with a girl from Instrumental, a sluttish girl with a bad reputation. But he had made it clear to Yuezhu that he meant to try by every means to get abroad, to go and live in America; and he did not want any hostages to fortune. Johnny’s class background was not very good, and his family had suffered a lot in the fifties and sixties. He bore a big grudge about that—against the Party, against the country—and had told her frankly that he could not believe he had any future in China.

She wondered, not for the first time, if there was anything wrong with her, that she did not want to settle a connection, to get engaged. Certainly she liked men, and enjoyed the friendships she had with them. It seemed to have been a pattern in her life: Johnny Liu, before that Baoyu (now a sensation at the Royal Danish Ballet); before that Mustache at high school; before that, who? That friend when she was a child, whose father had turned out to be a counter-revolutionary. There now: they were all slightly counter-revolutionary, weren’t they? More pattern. Baoyu had merely been indifferent to politics, but Mustache was a cynic—the first she had known—and Johnny Liu frankly hated the Party, though of course he only said so in private to her. And the boy—oddly, his name escaped

her for the moment—his people were counter-revolutionaries of course. So: she liked the company of men, so long as they were just friends, and politically heterodox. What did that mean? She puzzled over it for a while, but could not get any meaning out of it, and at last fell asleep. In a dream she was in the bamboo grove by the road leading out of Seven Kill Stele. Liang Weilin—in her dream she knew his name at once—was not naked in this dream, nor an iridescent butterfly. He was, in fact, nowhere to be seen. She turned this way and that, looking for some trace of him; but there was none. Yet he was there, she knew. He was there, out of sight somewhere in the bamboo. He was there, and *he was watching her*, and she woke with a start to the sound of the loudspeakers on the campus playing “March of the Volunteers” for those who liked to do calisthenics first thing in the morning.

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A day or two after this dream the mystery of Samson Lü's approach was solved. Yuezhu was doing voice exercises with the foreign voice coach, Mr Powell. Mr Powell was something of an oddity among the foreign teachers. He did not mix with the others much, nor did he attend their get-togethers, nor the sightseeing trips organized for them by the authorities. He seemed to like being with the Chinese students. He kept the door of his office open—the foreign teachers shared offices in pairs, but Mr Powell's colleague rarely used the office—and students just wandered in and out. When not entertaining students Mr Powell went off on long bicycle rides through the city, or sat in his room listening to opera tapes on a cassette player he had bought. Mr Powell was short for a foreigner, and rather thin. He had a face that looked older than it ought to—he was thirty-seven—and he smoked cigarettes, which everyone thought odd in a voice coach. Nobody knew much about his history, though one of the Chinese teachers, who had seen the papers he submitted when applying for the job (and who was, consequently, the source of information on Mr Powell's age), said he had been a singer with Welsh Opera for many years. Johnny Liu, who could read a person better than most, said he thought there was some personal calamity in Mr Powell's recent past—a divorce,

perhaps. Everyone knew that foreigners were always getting divorced. Whatever his personal history might be, Yuezhu herself liked Mr Powell, and thought him a good teacher.

It was a rule at the Conservatory that students should not be alone with foreign teachers of the opposite sex. For voice exercises, therefore, the female students went to Mr Powell in twos. Mr Powell himself said the rule was silly. Also a waste of time, since he could only listen with attention to one voice, so the two girls had to take turns, and at any point one of them was sitting idle, leafing through the magazines Mr Powell had placed in the music room for just this purpose.

At the end of this particular session Mr Powell called Yuezhu back as she and her companion were leaving. Mr Powell was still sitting at the piano, sitting sideways, one thin forearm resting on the piano lid. He called her name as she was going through the door. *Yooey-jew*—he could not pronounce it properly, of course. Some of the foreign teachers had made an effort to learn Chinese, and one, who had been two years at the Conservatory, was even quite fluent; but Mr Powell seemed content to remain at tourist-Chinese level. He only ever spoke English to them, except when working from librettos, or using technical terms from Italian or German.

“*Yooey-jew*. Could I have a word with you, please?”

Yuezhu trotted obediently back into the room, leaving the door open, and stood by the piano. Mr Powell smiled up at her from the stool.

“*Yooey-jew*. It’s really not an easy name for us round-eyes, you know. Why don’t you give yourself an English name, like the other students?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t feel the need. I am Chinese; my name should be Chinese.”

Mr Powell smiled, his whole face crinkling up in a way Yuezhu rather liked. “A patriot, is it? Very commendable. But if we were all to stand on linguistic nationalism, I should have to call myself *Ap Hwyl*, do you see? Come, sit down.” He indicated the small wooden chair where the spare student sat while waiting to practice. The practice room was tiny, and this was the only chair—not counting the piano stool, of course. When Yuezhu had seated herself, Mr Powell got up, walked over to the door, and closed it. Yuezhu felt no alarm at this. She knew the college rule, of course; and

she knew that Mr Powell knew it, and thought it silly. She thought it a bit silly herself, at least in Mr Powell's case. Everyone knew he was a *junzi*, a gentleman—an English Gentleman, Professor Shi had said once, though Mr Powell did not thank you for calling him English. He was Welsh, he insisted, which was something different from English, though Yuezhu had never been sufficiently interested to hold the actual difference in her mind for more than a minute or two. However that might be, Mr Powell had been eight months at the Conservatory, and never been anything but polite and courteous to everyone, students, teachers and leaders alike.

“Well,” said Mr Powell, settling back on the piano stool. “I shall not go on trying to get my tongue around your Chinese name. Since you will not choose a name for yourself, I shall choose one for you. From now on I shall call you Margaret. What do you think of it?”

“Margaret?” Yuezhu laughed. “Like your Mrs Thatcher.”

Now Mr Powell laughed. “Whom God preserve. But yes, the same name. Do you like it?”

“I don't know.” Yuezhu did not actually think she *did* like it. That hard “g” in the middle—it was not very feminine, she thought. English and German had too many of these hard sounds. She preferred Italian, with its luscious round vowels and whispering sibilants. You had to go to some trouble to make an Italian consonant hard, write an “h” after it. She could not speak either German or Italian, of course; but she had learned to *sing* them. Then again, patriotism notwithstanding, she did not feel altogether comfortable with her given name. Her parents were uneducated people, after all; and the name they had bestowed on her sounded provincial—even slightly ridiculous—to the refined ears of the capital. “Moon Pearl”—like a *yatou*, a servant girl in one of the old novels! Perhaps Mr Powell was right; she ought to take an English name. Perhaps “Margaret” would do as well as another. “Marguerite” in French—the soprano role in Gounod's *Faust*. Yes, it would do.

“It's a sort of translation,” Mr Powell was saying. “One of your classmates translated your name for me. ‘Moon Pearl.’ It's very beautiful. Can't be done in English, of course, not the whole thing. But ‘Margaret’ means ‘pearl’, you see?”

Yuezhu thought it flattering that Mr Powell should put so much thought into awarding her a name, but having given it her attention for a full minute, she could not summon up any further interest in the matter. Mr Powell, to the contrary, seemed to find the topic inexhaustible.

“Now your name will be Margaret Han. It’s a good name: a double dactyl, truncated. With your voice, Margaret, you will travel all over the world. It’s good for you to have an English name, one people can remember. The really great singers are always spoken of using the Christian name, you know. Until they are dead—then we use the surname.”

Yuezhu thought there had been quite enough about names. To change the subject, she asked: “How about Mr Cinelli’s visit? Has it been decided yet what we shall do?”

Mr Powell laughed again. “‘It is being discussed at the highest levels’, I think is the appropriate expression. All bogged down in politics, I’m afraid. Like so many things in your country.”

Yuezhu bristled at this. She did not like to hear foreigners criticize China. Of course there were things that were wrong—everyone knew that. But these things were for Chinese people to manage, not for foreigners to pass slighting remarks about. But they all did it, she knew that by now. They were just insensitive on this point, there was no point being upset about it.

“It seems clear, at any rate, that we shall not be doing a full production. That was the leaders’ wish, but the organizers of the visit said he could not give us more than a hour. Apparently the schedules for these things are worked out in the finest detail. So I suppose we shall do a concert. I would have given up both concert and production if he could have done a master class for us, but I’m afraid my voice does not carry very far in these great matters. And Vinnie does not believe in master classes. Says they are a waste of time, that voice students need long, steady coaching from a teacher who gets to know them. Not a bad argument, perhaps.”

“I wonder if I shall have the chance to sing for him. What an honor that would be!”

“I have no doubt you will sing for our distinguished guest. You are our best soprano voice, by some distance.”

“Oh!” Yuezhu’s hands flew to cover her mouth, in modesty. “It’s kind of you to say so, Sir. But I’m sure it’s not true.”

Actually Yuezhu knew perfectly well that it *was* true. It had become clear to her, to everyone, as soon as they had started singing in earnest early in the second year, that her voice was exceptional. In range, power, control and quality she was far ahead of the other girls. Now, two and a half years later, she had internalized the fact of her superiority. It was a solid, quiet satisfaction to her, like the knowledge of having a decent sum of money in the bank.

Mr Powell was smiling across at her in a rather odd way. He caught her eye, and looked down.

“I hope Samson didn’t take you too much by surprise,” he said, looking up again. Margaret thought he looked nervous. She did not immediately connect what he said with Samson Lü’s approach three days previously.

“Samson? What did he do?”

“Well, not much, I gather. I asked him to act as go-between for me, but I’m afraid he fluffed it.”

Margaret stared at him while it sank in. Then her hand went over her mouth again and she felt herself blushing.

“You . . . Sir . . . You asked Samson to introduce you? Oh! I don’t . . .”

“I’m sorry, truly sorry. It was foolish of me. Though actually it was Samson who suggested that particular approach.” Mr Powell laughed, a nervous laugh. “His idea, but now he tells me he didn’t have the nerve to follow through with it.”

Margaret’s head was spinning. “I’m not sure . . . I don’t know why . . .”

“Why? That I can tell you very easily. I am in love with you, Margaret. Have been since I first saw you. Our first voice training class, do you remember? September 11th last year.”

“Oh! Mr Powell . . .” Now it was Margaret’s turn to look down. She could not face him. “I didn’t know that.”

“Of course you didn’t. And the way things are set up here, I had no opportunity to tell you. I thought it was quite hopeless, anyway. Then Samson told me that there are many marriages now between foreigners and Chinese. Several every year, here in Beijing.”

Marriages! The man was really serious! Margaret could only stare at the floor. The voice training room was in one of the older buildings, and had a floor of worn wooden boards, still showing some traces of pre-Liberation varnish.

“I just have to know, Margaret. Is that something you would consider? Marrying a foreigner?”

Margaret struggled briefly to find some words that would not give him pain. She liked Mr Powell; and besides, though it was something she could not have admitted, even to herself, she was flattered. Who is there, who has there ever been, that was not flattered by a proposal of marriage, from any source? But struggle as she might, at last only one word would do.

“No,” she said. “No, no. I’m sorry . . .”

She half expected Mr Powell to burst into tears like Mustache. Instead, he made an odd exhaling sound, somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. “Ah, well,” he said. “I didn’t really think you would. But Samson said you were fond of me, and I thought: if you don’t play, you don’t win.”

Now Margaret felt she could look at him again. “Oh, Sir, I *am* fond of you! But not . . . I mean, I don’t want . . .”

Mr Powell was smiling now. He waved away her excuses. “It really doesn’t matter. Put it down to cabin fever. It’s an isolated life we live here, you know. Once I get back to my own country, I’m afraid I shall forget all about you, dear Margaret. These last few weeks, especially . . .” He laughed. “China fatigue.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s an expression foreigners in China use. However sympathetic one may be at first, this country has a way of getting under one’s skin. The cruelty and dishonesty . . .”

As much out of consideration for Mr Powell (in some odd way) as for her own feelings, Margaret did not want to hear these negative things. It was true what he was saying, she knew. They had all seen it with Mr Mackenzie, the New Zealander who had been the Conservatory’s first foreign teacher back in ’78. He had come to them curious and keen. Almost at once he had taken up Chinese clothes, including even a worker-style cap and sleeve protectors. During his first semester he had made

great strides in learning Chinese, to the degree that he could even quote poetry. Then something had gone wrong. He had turned cynical and boorish. In a sight-reading class with the second year, Margaret's year, he had delivered a long angry harangue, calling them a race of slaves, passive conformists, the playthings of despots, lesser breeds without the law, and other such nonsense. He had even called them barbarians. This had been too much for Alfredo Zhang, who had started yelling back at Mr Mackenzie: *Call us barbarians? It's you who are barbarians! We were civilized when your ancestors were living in caves! Which one of your stinking grandfathers burned our Summer Palace?* The leaders had soothed everything over; but a few days later, on a trip to Friendship Store in the city, Mr Mackenzie had punched one of the store assistants in the face, breaking several teeth. After that he had been forced to leave. The classmates supposed there would be no more foreigners; but the leaders had instead taken to hiring them in twos and threes, to keep each other company, and in this way trouble had been avoided. Mr Powell, though, did not seem to care for the other foreigners, so it was not surprising he felt this 'China fatigue'.

"You are too lonely, Sir," Margaret said. "You should associate more with the other foreign teachers. Everyone says you avoid them."

Mr Powell's face twisted into a moue of distaste. "Ech! An Italian poof, a German nympho, and a brace of American Jew lefties. I prefer my own company, thank you very much. Though I like yours even better." He grinned at her now, an open, cheerful grin. Margaret felt her embarrassment ebbing. Mr Powell really was very nice.

"I'm sorry, Sir. I'm sorry I disappointed you."

"Think nothing of it. Do you know the story of Diogenes and the statue?" Margaret shook her head. Diogenes (Mr Powell explained) was a philosopher in ancient Greece. One day a friend of his saw him in the public square, speaking to a stone statue. Coming closer, he discovered that Diogenes was actually begging from the statue. "Why are you begging from the statue?" he asked. Replied Diogenes: "I am practicing disappointment."

Margaret laughed at this—she really thought it quite funny. "I hope you don't consider me a statue," she said.

“I hope you don’t consider me a beggar.” Mr Powell laughed too, and stood up, and went to open the door for her.

“And I hope at least, in these few weeks before you graduate, you will come to see me often.”

“Yes, I will,” said Margaret, impressed now by his calm, gentlemanly acceptance of her refusal. She liked him more than ever now. He leaned forward, still smiling, and shook her hand as she stepped through the door.

Voice training had been the last class of the day, and Margaret immediately went looking for Samson Lü. He was in the library. She stood at the glass door of the reading room until he looked up and caught her eye, then beckoned him outside.

“Samson, you are very bad,” she said as soon as he stepped out into the lobby. “Encouraging Mr Powell to seek an introduction to me. Why did you do that?”

Samson giggled, very nervous at having been exposed. “I felt sorry for him. I thought he was lonely. I know he likes you. And I thought you liked him.”

“I do like him. But marriage—really! It’s outrageous.”

“I went too far, I know. I’m sorry, Yuezhu. I was only trying to help. Please don’t blame Mr Powell. He’s a decent guy. And he’s really crazy about you. He told me.”

“Well, I hope you won’t tell anyone else. You made a really embarrassing situation for me.”

“All right. Just don’t blame him.”

“I don’t blame him. I blame you.”

Samson Lü grinned at her, apparently quite satisfied with this. What a strange bird, Margaret thought to herself, walking back to the dorm.