

Chapter 22

The World's Greatest Tenor Enters the Middle Kingdom
Teacher Powell Bids Farewell to a Favorite Student

When Cinelli stepped into the auditorium the whole audience—students, faculty, family members (including both Margaret's parents) and visitors—rose to their feet and applauded. He was brought in through the big double doors at the back, so those seated in the body of the auditorium all had to turn a hundred and eighty degrees to face him. From her own seat up on the stage, Margaret had a clear view of his progress down the center aisle.

The first thing she noticed about him was his size. The man was a giant, not only in girth but in height, towering over the little cluster of Professors and leaders who accompanied him to his seat two-thirds of the way to the front. There was only one other foreigner in the entourage, a lugubrious middle-aged man in a dark gray suit and tie, and Cinelli towered over him, too. After Cinelli's size you noticed his smile: a dazzle of Adriatic sunlight filling the hall with warmth, color, pleasure, life.

For all his size he moved easily, as a trained stage performer should, bowing repeatedly in acknowledgment of the applause, sometimes raising his hands to applaud back, and always the smile, the smile, flashing forth from a nest of black beard. It took some time for them to get him seated; everyone at the Conservatory was genuinely glad to have him amongst them, and they would not stop applauding. Already beginning to be infused by that sunlight, people were smiling and laughing to each

other, and applauding, applauding. Three or four times he stood up again to bow and applaud back. The tension that had built up during their long wait—everyone had to be seated an hour before Cinelli's arrival—was gone, and everyone was in a good mood. It was clear that Cinelli himself was at ease. Indeed, he had dressed for ease: pale slacks, short-sleeved blue shirt open at the neck, loafers. Margaret had rather expected him to be in formal wear, as he usually was in photographs.

The entire third and fourth years of the international opera department were up on stage, forty-two altogether, with the Conservatory's orchestra. The best singers, all but one from the fourth year, had solos and a duet. The others were a choir, singing in support of the soloists where required, and with contributions of their own at strategic points: the bridal chorus from *Lohengrin* half-way through the concert, and "O sole mio", an Italian folk song that was Cinelli's trademark, as a finale, with everyone on stage joining in.

Because Margaret's voice was considered the best of the sopranos, her solo was placed at the end, before the choral finale. It was "Vissi d'arte" from *Tosca*, a piece she liked to sing, which she felt suited her voice. Though not one of the most difficult arias, it had some challenging features that made Margaret proud to have mastered it. There was tricky *messa di voce*, and the vocal score at one point followed a different rhythm from the accompaniment. Cinelli watched her all the way, his hands folded over each other in front of his face. She was aware of him watching even when looking at her score, or watching Professor Shi, the conductor. When she finished, to her astonishment and delight Cinelli stood up and called out in his huge voice: "BRAVA! BRAVA, BRAVISSIMA!" Everyone in the hall followed suit, of course, and Margaret felt herself blushing hot with pride and pleasure. She could see Father beaming, nodding at her, and Mother looking slightly stunned. It was only Cinelli's second bravo in the concert. The first had been for Enrico Wang, a third-year student, a tenor, who everyone knew was a prodigy, who had sung the Flower Song from *Carmen* to utter perfection. Margaret bowed twice, then made her way back to her seat, the hall still applauding her. No sooner had she sat down than she had to stand again,

for the finale. This went off very well, Cinelli throwing his head back and laughing freely when he realized they were doing his signature song.

Afterwards Cinelli came up on stage to shake hands with the singers. The lugubrious man accompanied him. First Cinelli went along the line of soloists, nodding, smiling, shaking hands. He said something in English to Johnny Liu, who had done a solo “Non più andrai”, and laughed, and Johnny Liu laughed too. When he reached Margaret he took her offered hand in both of his, and made a little bow.

“Una voce poco fa, qui nel cor mi risuonò”, he said. “Can you understand?”

“Yes,” whispered Margaret. He had quoted the opening lines of a well-known Rossini aria: “A voice I just heard is echoing in my heart”.

“You ‘ave a beautiful voice,” said Cinelli. He was speaking in English now, but with a strong accent which softened and palatalized the rough sounds: *byu-tyi-fwool*.

“You must sing *bel canto*”, he said, still holding her hand in his two. “Your voice is made for *bel canto*. Fioritura, coloratura—don’t be afraid to sing *hanything!*” Then, to Margaret’s astonishment, and infinite embarrassment, he lifted her hand six inches, bent down low, and kissed it. Over his shoulder Margaret saw Secretary Kang, Party Secretary for the whole college, looking at her face, with no expression at all on his own.

“A moment to remember all your life,” said Secretary Kang in Chinese, as Cinelli moved on. Margaret was speechless. Cinelli went on to shake hands with everyone, including every member of the choir, which (as the classmates all said afterwards) was a thing no Chinese celebrity of his standing would have done. Foreigners seemed not to stand on their dignity at all!

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“Did you know he can’t read music?” said Mr Powell, pouring himself some tea.

“Is it true?” said Johnny Liu. “Such a great musician cannot read music?”

Mr Powell laughed. “I don’t think singers are really counted as musicians. Even composers aren’t necessarily—Wagner could not play the

piano, you know, nor any other instrument. From that point of view, every well brought up middle-class girl of his period was a better musician than he. Though of course none of them gave us the ‘Liebestod’. Vinnie is in the Italian tradition, according to which a singer is not required to do anything but sing.”

“Do you really think he is a great singer?” asked Margaret.

“Oh, yes. A poor actor, and in some ways regrettably unimaginative with his voice—but great, yes. Greatness and perfection are different things. Callas was great, everybody knows it, but she never got through a performance without making a mistake somewhere.”

Callas, Vinnie: Margaret recalled Mr Powell’s remark about names, when he had awarded “Margaret” to her. Would she one day be Margaret to the world of opera? And then, when she had gone on to her next life, as “Han”? She looked out of the window, out across the campus. The office Mr Powell shared with Signor Russo, the voice coach for Italian and French, faced south. At this time of the morning it was full of sunlight. Some residual smoke from Mr Powell’s last cigarette was hanging in the air, and the sunlight played on it in trembling shafts of gold. The windows were open; she could hear people talking on the campus below.

She had come to Mr Powell’s office with Johnny Liu, simply to talk in that relaxed way that was possible with foreigners. Especially with Mr Powell, since the clearing of the air between them a month earlier. Margaret came often to see Mr Powell now. There was something new in his manner—something wry and self-mocking—that she liked very much. It was an agreeable way to pass time. Of which there was now plenty: this was the quiet, inconsequential period between Cinelli’s visit—the high point of the year for everyone—and graduation in early July. There were some paper examinations to come on opera history, opera production, English and political science, but no-one took them very seriously. Assignments would be announced a day or so before graduation, and if you weren’t marked for a decent assignment by now, the examinations would make no difference. Margaret already felt confident of her own assignment. She would join the national opera company that was being formed. So she had been assured, more or less, by Professor Shi. All of the dozen or so outstanding singers in her graduating class would go to form the

nucleus of this new company. Some of the others would help to establish new international opera departments, at the Conservatories in Shanghai and Guangzhou. Others, including Johnny Liu, were developing plans to go abroad, which was more and more possible now.

Looking out of the window across the sunlit campus, Margaret could see the back of the Dance Academy. She smiled inwardly now to think of her earlier folly: the hopeless longing to be a great dancer, when in truth she could never—she saw it clearly now—have been anything but a mediocre one. And all the time carrying this greater gift within herself, unknowing. Truly fate was unfathomable. If there had been no earthquake in '76, if she had not strained to surpass the others for fear of Father's disgrace, then she might have gone on for years trying to be something she was not meant to be. To fail at last, and probably quite soon, for dancers had a short professional life. Whereas opera singers often carried on into their sixties. Cinelli himself—*Vinnie*—was, what? forty-five, forty-six, and at the height of his powers; while Barbara Bacon, the great Australian soprano, was over fifty and could still cause a sensation with her famous mad scene from *Lucia*.

Sitting there in the mid-morning sun, listening idly to Johnny and Mr Powell speaking of operatic greatness, Margaret's thoughts drifted back over her four years at the department. The first year had seemed like a vacation after the Dance Academy. The department had been organized in a hurry, and there were many changes of direction and spells of confusion. Politics (she could see now, though she had not understood it fully at the time) had played a large part in the general air of disorganization. The leaders had wanted to ensure that nothing counter-revolutionary be taught; yet since they knew absolutely nothing about foreign opera, they had had to be persuaded libretto by libretto, score by score. In the first year only two operas had been approved for detailed study: Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* (satire on the decadence of the feudal aristocracy) and Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (tragic indictment of western imperialism). Verdi's *I vespri Siciliani* was passed at the end of that year, on the grounds that it showed the righteous anger of the common people against foreign oppression. At a certain point during the negotiations over *I vespri* one ingenious faculty member had offered to rewrite the libretto to place

the story in China of the 1930s, the Sicilians turned into Chinese, the French into Japanese. Secretary Kang had vetoed this, once the opera's plot was explained to him, on the grounds that the business about pater-nity (the plot turns on the Sicilian hero discovering that the French vil-lain is his father) would make the Japanese too human. But *I vespri* had passed anyway, and after that the leaders seemed to have worried less about the political content of the operas. Or perhaps they had just wea-ried at having the plot of Donizetti's fifty-ninth potboiler explained to them.

All the hesitations in that first year about which operas were correct for study and which were not had anyway been of only theoretical inter-est to the voice students. Professor Shi was in charge of their timetable, and he had an eccentric philosophy about voice training, which he had forced through the school committees. The philosophy was, that a stu-dent of voice should sing nothing in her first year of study. That first year should (according to Professor Shi) be devoted to the muscular develop-ment of the chest, abdomen and diaphragm by means of endless repeti-tive exercises. Some of the exercises involved vocalizing; but it was vocalizing in the abstract—long sessions of yelping and squealing un-der Professor Shi's careful direction. To actually sing an actual song, said Professor Shi, would capture the student's attention, detaching that atten-tion from the real business of first-year training, which was to build a wall of hard, obedient muscle around the lungs.

"Before you learn to write," said Professor Shi, "you must learn to handle the brush. Before you learn to sing, you must learn to handle your lungs, your diaphragm."

So instead of learning actual operas, actual repertoire, the classmates had been put through long sessions of voice training, muscular exercises and sight reading—tedious beyond all endurance at the time, but an excellent foundation for their further studies. By the time the leaders had settled on what operas might be sung, there were two dozen diaphragms tensed to a condition of physical perfection, ready to sing them.

"I'm sorry?" Margaret was suddenly aware of having been addressed by Mr Powell. He and Johnny Liu were both smiling at her, at having interrupted her reverie.

“I asked what Vinnie said to you. Before he kissed your hand.” Mr Powell had his tenderest look for her. *He* would like to kiss my hand, I’m sure, thought Margaret.

“He said I should sing *bel canto*.”

Mr Powell nodded approval. “So you should, indeed. You have the range already. With a little more work on your *passagio*, you will have the evenness. You would already make a fine Rosina or Adina. One day, perhaps, a Lucia—a Norma, even.” He laughed. “We have not had a decent Norma since Callas stopped singing.” He nodded, to show that he was serious. “Yes, sing *bel canto*. It’s good advice, from a master.”

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The day before the graduation ceremony was hot, the still dry desert heat of Beijing. Margaret rode a bus down to West Wall to see Mother and Father, who were to attend the ceremony. Father was still glowing from his daughter’s triumph at the Cinelli concert.

“It’s beautiful music, I see that now. Food for the soul, as Comrade Deng Xiaoping says. Our country can only benefit from such things.”

“I wish your half brother could be with us,” said Mother. “But . . .” she shrugged resignation . . . “his duties.”

Half Brother was in the south, that was all Margaret knew. His duties, whatever they were, took him all over the country, and his furloughs were sudden and unpredictable. Margaret knew now that Half Brother was in some high-security branch of the military—the nuclear forces, perhaps, or Intelligence. She thought Father knew more, but was not allowed to say.

After dinner Margaret rode a bus back to the Conservatory. Walking across the campus to her dormitory she heard footsteps hurrying behind her. Turning, she saw Samson Lü coming up, wearing a look of relief.

“Han Yuezhu! I’m glad I could find you. Where have you been all day?”

As if it were any of your business. But Margaret was too polite to say this. “I’ve been at my parents’ place,” she said.

“Mr Powell wants to see you.”

“Mr Powell? Why?”

“He wants to say good-bye. He’s leaving soon after graduation, to go traveling round the country. He especially wants to say good-bye to you.”

“Well, he can say good-bye to all of us tomorrow, after graduation, can’t he?”

“Oh, but you know Mr Powell has special feelings for you.”

Margaret felt herself flushing. “I didn’t ask him to have any feelings for me. It’s not something I’ve encouraged. You know that.”

“Of course I do.”

In the failing light Samson looked paler than ever, a white ghost grinning at her beseechingly.

“Come on. Just give him a few minutes of your time. The poor guy’s so lonely. He’s been sitting in his office all day marking the second year English papers.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I should go there alone. So late in the evening.”

“No problem. I’ll go with you.”

Margaret considered. There was nothing else to do. It was two hours to her accustomed bed-time, and the choice was to sit chatting with Mr Powell, or gossiping with the girls in her dorm room. “All right,” she said. Mr Powell had been sincere with her, after all. She owed him for that.

Mr Powell was at the desk in his office with the light on. He had two piles of examination papers on his desk: a very short pile on his left, a much thicker one on his right. He stood up at once when they came in.

“Margaret. What a lovely surprise.”

“You’re very busy, Sir.”

“No, no.” Mr Powell indicated the short pile. “Almost finished. Come, sit down. Hello, Samson.”

She sat on the sofa with Samson. Mr Powell sat in the armchair opposite and tried to interest them in his iced tea, which he made by running cold water into his bathtub and sitting pans of tea in it till they cooled. There was no refrigerator available to the foreign teachers.

There was talk of graduation and assignments. Samson Lü had got a remarkably good assignment, as an interpreter and organizer at the

Ministry of Cultural Affairs. There would, he said, be lots of travel all over the country, probably abroad too, and hosting of foreign delegations.

“I shall have a life of banquets!” he shouted, quite carried away with his good fortune, his rather unpleasant high-pitched laugh pealing round the narrow office. Margaret thought it odd that Samson should have pulled such a good assignment. He was an indifferent singer, and his family were just low-level clerks in a government ministry. Possibly he had a well-placed uncle, she thought.

She could see that Mr Powell, too, was made uncomfortable by Samson’s gloating. He caught her glance, and lowered one eyelid in the movement called “wink” in English—a gesture unknown in China. She smiled at him in spite of herself. Perhaps noticing this, Samson Lü suddenly jumped to his feet and said: “Oh! I’ve just remembered! I promised to help my room-mates with their packing!” He almost ran to the door, and was gone before either of them could respond.

Margaret stood up. “I’d better not stay. I mean . . .”

“Oh, rubbish.” Mr Powell shook his head vigorously. “I won’t hear of it. Sit down and let me enjoy your company alone a few minutes. Sod the rules—you’ll be graduating tomorrow, and I’m sure I shall see no more of you after that. Come, come, Margaret, sit down and let’s make a leisurely good-bye.”

Reluctantly she sat. Mr Powell was so kind, she hated to disappoint him. Besides, there was no-one around in the building at this time—it was dark already—and the door was locked. Samson Lü might snitch, of course, that would be entirely in character; but what did that matter, at this point in the semester?

“Shall you be coming back to the Conservatory next year?” she asked, to fill the somewhat awkward pause that had developed.

Mr Powell shook his head. “I don’t think so. No, I’m sure I shan’t. There are some things back home . . . Well, suffice it to say I left some loose ends I really oughn’t have left, which I must tidy up before I get on with my life.”

Margaret thought it would not be proper to ask for details, and Mr Powell did not seem inclined to supply them unbidden, so another awkward pause opened up. Mr Powell broke it with a laugh.

“Come now, Margaret, let’s not be so ill at ease with each other. After all, I have exposed myself frankly to you. There is no law to say that partings must be sad. You know, I was thinking, while I was marking those damn papers: I have not seen much of the Chinese sense of humor. I’m not even sure that you have one. Would you care to disabuse me?”

“I’m sorry?” Margaret had not quite followed the English.

“Make me laugh, Moon Pearl. Give me a happy memory to go away with, back to glum, smoky old London.”

“Laugh at what?”

“Well, tell me a joke.”

Margaret tried to think of a joke. Most of those she knew had been manufactured to make a political point, like the one everyone knew about Wicked Landlord Zhou Bapi and his rooster. She knew that this would not please Mr Powell, who was allergic to Chinese politics. At last she could only recall a tale from her childhood, the Duck Soup Joke, which Half Brother had told her one day during the period they were confined in barracks, when the Red Guards were being suppressed. She had thought it very funny at the time. Now it seemed childish, but at least it had no political content.

The Duck Soup Joke

There was once a man called Zhang, famous for his generosity and hospitality. A scoundrel decided to take advantage of him. He learned from gossip that Zhang’s best friend was called Lao Chen. So he went to Zhang’s house and knocked on the door. When Zhang opened the door, the scoundrel said: “You don’t know me, but I am a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of Lao Chen.”

Hearing this, Zhang ushered him in to the best room in the house, and sat him in the best chair. “You do me such honor!” said Zhang. “How can I make you more comfortable?”

“Well, to tell the truth,” said the scoundrel, “I’m rather peckish. If you have something to eat, that would be fine.”

“Of course!” said Zhang. “Will duck soup be all right?”

The scoundrel replied that it would be fine. He loved duck soup.

“Wonderful!” said Zhang. “Please make yourself at home while I kill a duck.” He left, coming back after only a few minutes with a steaming bowl. He set the bowl before his guest, and urged him to eat his fill. The scoundrel began to eat the soup. He could not help but notice that it tasted like nothing but hot water.

“Excuse me,” he said boldly, after a few mouthfuls, “but the soup is rather thin, isn’t it?”

“Who did you say you are?” asked Zhang.

“Why,” replied the scoundrel, “I am a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of your best friend Lao Chen.”

“Just so,” nodded Zhang, “just so. You are a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of my friend. This”—he indicated the bowl—“is the soup of the soup of the soup of the soup of my duck.”

To her surprise and pleasure, Mr Powell roared with laughter. “Very Chinese!” he said, when he was through laughing. “Slyness and symmetry! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

Pleased with her little triumph, Margaret relaxed. “You should tell me an English joke,” she said. “Otherwise the game isn’t finished.”

“Oh, I am a poor raconteur.” Mr Powell laughed. “And not English at all, as I am bound to keep reminding you. We Welsh have no jokes. We are a melancholy race, ever since we lost the best part of our country to heathen invaders.”

He really seemed to mean this, his face lapsing into a quite woeful expression for a moment. He got out of his chair and walked to the window.

“I’m sure you can’t be melancholy all the time,” said Margaret. “Actually, I have often seen you laughing and making jokes.”

Mr Powell said something she didn’t understand at all—twenty or thirty words, not one of which she could recognize.

“A Welsh poem,” Mr Powell explained, turning back to the room.
“Something like:

With Hope I woke, and labored long,
With willing heart and merry song.
By evening time, when hope had fled
'Twas with Despair I went to bed.”

“Why, I’ve had just the same thought myself,” said Margaret. “Hope always deceives us, and leaves us with despair at last.”

This seemed to please Mr Powell. “There, you see,” he said. “We are kindred spirits, thinking the same thoughts.” He crossed the room and sat beside her on the sofa. The sofa was not very wide; he was right next to her. Margaret felt uncomfortable, and wondered how she could politely take her leave.

Mr Powell took her near hand and held it in both of his. “Margaret,” he said, in quite a different tone of voice. “I should apologize. I have imposed myself on you.”

“No, no. It’s quite all right.” Now Margaret was contemplating a run for the door.

“We’ll say good-bye now.” He was looking right into her eyes. “You know you have my best wishes for your success, which I feel sure will be great. You have a magnificent voice, Margaret.”

“Thank you.”

“But I want to impose on you just once more. A small thing.”

* * *

Margaret walked back to the dormitory. Had she done the right thing, allowing Mr Powell to kiss her? Perhaps not; but there had been no stopping him, anyway. He really was rather nice. Not tall enough to be really handsome, but wiry and . . . masculine. Some Chinese boys were so spoiled and effeminate, and so timid. Or sly and untrustworthy, like Samson Lü. Not Johnny Liu, of course. Johnny wasn’t afraid of anything, and you could trust him completely. Handsome, too—there was no doubt of that.

If she were someone else, she might be in love with Johnny Liu. Or even with Mr Powell. But she was Margaret Han, and she only wanted friendship. She wondered, as always, whether there was something wrong with her. Or perhaps there was someone she was fated to meet by the principle called *yuanfen* in pop songs and the old religion, and she just had not met him yet. According to the old religion, a fated couple were bound together from birth—through all their many lives, in fact—by a thread of red silk, invisible of course to mortal eyes. Perhaps she was one of those. Perhaps that was why she did not respond to these people who adored her. Mr Powell, so passionate! So intent on her lips! Yet—she had to be frank with herself—stirring her not at all.

When he was close to her, Mr Powell had emitted a faint delicious fragrance. It was *aftershave*, something foreign men put on their faces, after shaving of course. She had asked him about it, and he had told her. How strange—men wearing perfume! But all the foreign men used it, he told her. You could buy it in China, too. He had bought his at the Friendship Store in Beijing during the Spring Festival vacation. His lips had seemed big, with a kind of velvety texture that was rather nice, and arrived accompanied by a faint acid taste of tobacco, by no means unpleasant. Zhang Hui had gone out with Leonora Wang for months before he'd kissed her, according to Leonora. What did her own lips feel like? Margaret wondered. Mr Powell was deeply in love with her, she was sure of that. For him, it was a sad thing, a small tragedy perhaps. But that was not her fault. She had not invited him to fall in love with her, and her own conduct, so far as she could see, had been blameless. Except perhaps for allowing him to kiss her, which she had just been unable, at the time, to think of any way of resisting. Well, no doubt Mr Powell would soon get over her, once back among his own people. Everyone said that foreigners had a very loose system of morality, that they married and divorced just for fun and were incapable of serious attachments. Some of her classmates thought Mr Powell already had a wife in England. There were a lot of stories like that in the newspapers, now that people were being allowed to go abroad. A woman would go to a foreign country to marry a man, only to discover that he was already married. Then she would be abandoned in the foreign

place, and have to beg for her living, or something worse. But really, Mr Powell didn't seem the type who would do that.

When she reached the dormitory old Mrs Feng, the door-keeper, was standing just inside the doorway. She was an ill-tempered creature, with never a kind word for anyone. Now she just watched silently as Margaret crossed the lobby and started up the stairs. When Margaret reached the first landing she thought she heard the old woman speaking to someone in her rough hoarse voice, though there had been no-one else in sight at the doorway.

In her dormitory room the other seven girls were already in bed. Margaret had not realized it was so late. Strangely, none of them greeted her. They all seemed to be asleep. This was unusual; there was generally some chattering until the lights went out, or at least someone would be sitting up reading. Perhaps they all wanted to sleep well before the graduation ceremony next day. Margaret climbed up to her bunk. Instead of undressing immediately, she lay there for a while musing, thinking about Mr Powell back in England. What was it actually like in foreign countries, she wondered? You were told so much about the darkness and oppression of bourgeois society, yet the foreigners one saw seemed quite cheerful and healthy, and kinder in nature, actually, than most of one's Chinese acquaintances. Perhaps, as Gorky said, a bourgeois society was really two societies, who hardly knew of each other's existence. Perhaps all the foreigners one saw in China came from just one of those societies, the gentler one.

Just as she had decided to undress, in case she fell asleep in her day clothes, there was a tapping on the door. Margaret did nothing, waiting for one of the lower bunks to get up and attend to it. However, nobody got up.

"Hey!" she called. "Junliang! Leonora! Come on!"

Nobody answered, nobody moved. What was wrong with everybody? Margaret climbed down and went to the door. "Who is it?"

"Branch Secretary Guo wants to see Han Yuezhu."

Branch Secretary Guo? That half-wit? Margaret supposed it might be official confirmation of her assignment. It was just like Guo to get you out of bed for news. She opened the door. The caller was a muscular

woman in a dirty white jacket. Margaret recognized her as one of the paramedics from the college clinic. The woman's husband was a Branch Secretary in one of the other departments.

"Okay," said Margaret brightly, "I'm Han Yuezhu. Let's go!"

Margaret was glad. She had heard unofficially, from Professor Shi, that the assignment was all settled, that she was to join the new national opera company. But this must be the official notification. Nothing was official until the Party Secretaries had ruled on it. She trotted off behind the muscular woman. At the foot of the stairs was Mrs Feng the door-keeper, peering up at them as they came down. What was so interesting? Margaret felt the old hag's eyes on her as they stepped out of the dormitory building. It was dark outside, but lights could be seen in the main building, across the campus at the end of the path.

A person she did not know was sitting at Branch Secretary Guo's desk: a youngish man with his head cropped down close like a soldier, wearing a smart open-necked short-sleeved khaki shirt, three or four pens clipped into the breast pocket. He had a folder open on the desk in front of him, white sheets of paper both recto and verso. Branch Secretary Guo himself was sitting at the left side of the desk, Secretary Kang at the right. There was a single other chair facing the desk, unoccupied. Standing against the wall in one corner, behind the desk, was a small older man in a baggy blue tunic, wearing a cap.

"Do you want me to stay?" asked the muscular woman.

"No." Secretary Kang waved her out. "Comrade Han, sit down."

Margaret sat down in the empty chair facing them. The crew-cut man at the desk turned his head to the older man standing behind him, who made a slight nod. The man turned back and began unscrewing the cap of a fountain pen, apparently preparing to write something.

"What did you do this evening?" asked Secretary Kang, in quite a pleasant tone of voice. Still Margaret saw nothing wrong. She supposed he was just making polite conversation. She was still feeling pleased with herself, anticipating the news of her assignment. She supposed these strangers were from the Ministry of Culture, which was organizing the national opera company. Of course, she could not answer truthfully; but since they were only making small talk this did not matter.

“Well, I spent the afternoon with my family over West Wall District. I came back around eight o’clock and went to the TV room to watch the Nationalities show. Then I had to get some water for my dormitory. After that I went for a walk out to the . . .”

BANG! Crew-cut had come alive, slamming his fist down onto the desk. His eyes were blazing, his lips pursed in a thin line, the character *yi*. There was a moment of terrible silence.

“Don’t play with us! We know everything! Everything you did this evening—we know it all! Now, why don’t you start telling the truth!”

Only then did Margaret feel fear.