

Chapter 37

Johnny Liu Waits for an East Wind
Unexpected Encounter on the Mountaintop

Everybody knew about the business with Mr Powell. It was as if her file had been pinned up on the notice boards. Worse than that, in fact; for though her file was no doubt full of rumors and falsehoods, only the Party Secretaries had actually read it. Everybody else was working from rumors they had cooked up themselves. Rumors developed from rumors, falsehoods breeding falsehoods. What rumors? Margaret could not know. She could only guess. Nobody would speak to her about it directly. It was all in the silence as she approached, the whispers and titters that started up when she had passed. To the inhabitants of this remote hill station a newcomer was noteworthy enough; that Margaret had come from Beijing, the nation's capital, was sensational; that she had been banished here as a result of a scandal with a foreigner—a spy!—was Grand Opera.

The one consolation Margaret had nursed, since learning of her assignment here in the far west, was that she would be well away from anyone who knew what had happened, and from the whispering, rumors and sly glances that incidents of that kind always generate. She had not thought that her file would arrive ahead of her and its contents become so generally known. Margaret cursed her demon, who snatched away from her even her feeblest hopes.

Margaret tried to act as if there was nothing unusual in her situation. She approached her new colleagues in an open and straightforward way;

but it all went wrong. If she spoke to a woman, she would be stared at even as she spoke. Then there would be a quick answer, or a silly one, or sometimes a cutting one. The older women were the worst. Once Margaret went to an office in the administration building to get some supplies of paper. The woman in charge was a middle-aged Chinese from Gansu. She had a pinched, cold face—what the common people called a Class Struggle Face. As this woman counted out the last sheets of paper, she suddenly said: “Tell me, Teacher Han. What do you think is the most important attribute for a young woman in our socialist society?” Quite off guard, Margaret improvised something about the value of education. Class Struggle Face cut her short. “No. The most important thing is self-respect. Don’t you think so, Teacher Han?” Caught unawares by the thrust, Margaret could think of no riposte. Walking back to her classroom she could not hold back tears of rage and indignation.

Male colleagues were not so bad. Some even showed her goodwill and small acts of kindness, though with what motive she didn’t know. Best of all was Branch Secretary Zhang, who never allowed her to pass by without stopping her for a chat, giving her some advice on the weather or local conditions. But these were small comforts. Margaret had no wish to be close to any man.

At last she adjusted. *Submit to Heaven and follow your fate*, she chanted to herself as a mantra. Fate was fate, and there was nothing she could do but let it play itself out. She withdrew from her colleagues, keeping all talk on a purely professional level. In the refectory she sat by herself, or, when that was not possible, kept her eyes on the table or read a book. She tried to absorb herself in her work, and spent two or three hours every day preparing lessons.

Margaret shared a dormitory room with three other single women. All were Chinese. Tibetans and Chinese did not share living accommodation, she was told. Why not? “Because Tibetans are too dirty,” said one of the girls, giggling. Of the four, Margaret was the only teacher. The others worked in the administration. Two were from Sichuan. They were low types, almost illiterate and with coarse manners. The other was from Shanghai. Her name was Wang Yong, and she was an old Red Guard who had been sent here in 1968, when the authorities re-asserted control

after the first wild phase of the Cultural Revolution. She was an intelligent, serious-minded woman, who had had a decent education before leaving the city. Thirteen years of exile, however, had made her melancholy. She rarely seemed inclined to talk, and spent most of her time reading and re-reading an incredibly dog-eared copy of *Red Chamber Dream*. Though not bad-looking, she was extremely short-sighted, her eyes hardly visible behind thicknesses of lens. Margaret guessed (but was too polite to try to find out) that she had never married because she still cherished the hope of being able to return to Shanghai. If she had married a local man, all hope of that would have disappeared. A move to Shanghai would have involved not only getting a residence permit and job for herself, but for the man too—a double impossibility.

Margaret loved *Red Chamber Dream* herself, and had read it often enough to know even the minor characters and incidents. She tried to make some conversation out of this, but was hopelessly outclassed. Wang Yong could repeat word-for-word long conversations between servant-girls whose names Margaret only just remembered. Margaret felt drawn to her anyway. If Wang Yong had heard the rumors about the Conservatory incident, she showed no interest in them. The two exiles took to sitting alone in the dormitory room after supper, reading silently, while the Sichuan girls played cards in a recreation room in the administration building.

Wang Yong's surname was Wang, her given name Yong. Among Chinese people of her and Margaret's generation, a person with a two-syllable given name could be addressed in a friendly, familiar way using the given name alone, in the way that Margaret's own family and friends called her Yuezhu; but when the given name was just a single syllable, nobody did this. You just used the entire name. Margaret started out in this fashion, addressing her roommate as Wang Yong. A week or two into the acquaintance, however, Wang Yong asked Margaret to call her just Yong. It seemed odd to Margaret at first, a throwback to the rather self-consciously modern style of pre-Liberation intellectuals, but usage soon overcame her doubts and she saw the rightness of it, appreciated the little added warmth it added to both their lives.

Better than the quiet evenings sitting reading with Yong were the

occasional movies shown in the auditorium at the back of the administration building. Then she could sit in the dark, with no-one's eyes on her, and lose herself in the stories, or in her own thoughts.

The teaching work was not bad. Margaret found herself taking to it with something near enthusiasm. Few of the pupils were actually Tibetan. Most were Chinese, sons and daughters of the workers at the Station, and of the better-off Chinese peasants from the nearby production brigades. The Tibetans were mostly too poor to send their children to middle school (there was a fee—five dollars a term). Those Tibetans who did attend were cheerful, co-operative, and doggedly studious. In contradiction to Secretary Zhang's assertions, they scored well on all her tests. However, they suffered badly from a rough element among the older Chinese students, who beat them up and spat on them when they thought no teachers were looking.

The novelty of having an English teacher drew in a wider clientele, too. Even out here in Qinghai Province, everybody wanted to learn English. A scattering of adults would turn up at her classes: all Chinese, most from the Station, but one or two from further afield. There was a doctor who came in by bicycle twice a week from Nakri, ten miles away, and an officer—quite a senior one, according to Branch Secretary Zhang (this was in the period before insignia of rank were re-introduced into the armed forces)—from the nearby army base.

"You see," said Branch Secretary Zhang, "we're not so backward out here. Everybody wants to learn English!"

To Margaret's relief, the big strange boy from Arboriculture did not show up.

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In November there were snowfalls. The road to Nakri was still passable; but Nakri was the end of the line, with nothing beyond but high pasture land, the great mountain wall, and Tibet. The road from the provincial capital was closed for days on end. The Station went into hibernation. The factory closed down for want of supplies, though of course the workers were paid just the same. Coal was used ever more sparingly, so that

those buildings—the single women’s dormitory was one—which were heated from the central boilers were kept at near-freezing, and everyone was heavily padded the whole time. In the older buildings each room had a *kang*, which could be heated by burning grass, or dried animal dung which the local Tibetans sold at two cents a pound. Those who could crowded into these older buildings with friends and relatives.

At New Year a drama troupe came from the nearby army base and put on a show. There had only been two movies the whole winter, so everyone welcomed them. And they were, indeed, very good. The play was called *Incident at Chungbok Village*. It was about the 1959 landlords’ insurrection in Tibet.

Incident at Chungbok Village

Chungbok Village was a place in central Tibet—a real place, according to the prologue. After Liberation the people there had established a commune, under the leadership of a wise and upright cadre called Tashi. Tashi had a beautiful daughter called Pasang. She was being courted by a handsome young peasant called Penba.

A monastery near the village had been infiltrated by the enemy. The aristocrat who had owned the village before Liberation was hiding there as a monk, with some of his henchmen. When the older peasants came to the monastery to worship, the monks filled their heads with suspicions about Tashi. They planted rumors that Tashi was hoarding away the profits of the commune for his own use. Led by the handsome young Penba, who was among the deceived, the peasants arrested Tashi and beat him. When his daughter Pasang tried to intercede, they beat her too. She and her father were imprisoned in a tiny cell at a corner of the stage. Then the peasants ran wild, and began fighting among each other for the land.

At this point the enemy arrived: the former aristocrat and his henchmen. They told the peasants to stop fighting, that they

were taking control again and everything would be just as before Liberation.

The peasants, now realizing their folly, were dismayed and protested, but the aristocrat just laughed and told them: “Don’t think the People’s Government will help you! Heaven is high, and Chairman Mao is far away! Do as we say, or it will be so much the worse for you!”

There was nothing the peasants could do but submit. The aristocrat forced Pasang to become his concubine; but one night she tried to stab him to death. He woke just in time, and beat her, and put her back in the cell with her father.

However, the handsome young Penba had seen through the enemy’s schemes, and bitterly regretted taking part in the insurrection. He ran away from the village and made a forced march through the mountains. He got lost, and collapsed, and was near death. Then a detachment of the People’s Liberation Army came on him lying by the road. They revived him, and he told them what had happened at Chungbok Village.

The detachment went to Chungbok and defeated the enemy. The wicked aristocrat was captured and dragged away, squealing for mercy. Pasang was freed from her cell, weak and wasted, and re-united with a repentant Penba. Her father Tashi, however, had died from his mistreatment.

The play ended with a beautiful dance by the peasants, to show their gratitude to the People’s Liberation Army. It was, as a matter of fact, a dance Margaret knew, one she had done in high school with Baoyu. Bringing back those carefree times, of course the dance had an extra dimension for her. But even allowing for that, Margaret thought the play as good as anything she had seen outside the capital. The army troupe was really first-rate. The girl’s part was actually played by a girl—presumably one of the nurses from the base, or one of the officer’s wives—and the villainous aristocrat was very convincing, with thick upward-sweeping eyebrows and dark jowls. At the most moving parts of the ac-

tion—when Penba was near death in the mountains, or Pasang was weeping over the body of her father—Margaret was close to tears herself.

At the end of the play, Secretary Ma himself came up on the stage and thanked the actors personally. Then he made an emotional little speech, recalling his own life in the army, and asking the audience to support “our heroic young soldiers”. Still filled with the excitement of the play, they applauded till their hands were sore.

In the midst of this euphoria, Margaret suddenly saw a strange thing. Among those standing by the wall at the side of the auditorium—there had not been enough seats for everyone—was the big strange boy from Arboriculture. And he was not applauding at all. He was just standing there, his feet slightly apart and his arms folded across his chest, looking toward Secretary Ma with the same insolent expression she had first seen. He really was very strange!

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At Spring Festival Margaret went home to Beijing. The driver, Old Bolmo (everyone seemed to call him Old Bolmo, though he could not have been much past thirty), took her all the way to the provincial capital, from where she rode a train back across North China, all bleak and swept with snow.

All through the winter she had looked forward to this time, but in the event the holiday was not a happy one. Half Brother could not be with them. Father’s heart problem had been troubling him, and he was forbidden to drink liquor, eat rich food, or engage in anything that might excite him. Furthermore he was still smoldering from the previous summer’s disgrace. Mother had become obsessive about Father: his diet, his exercises, his bowel movements, his temper. She had no other conversation.

With little to keep her at home, Margaret took to window-shopping in the new stores that were springing up everywhere now. The whole city was under reconstruction, it seemed. New roads, new apartment blocks, a grand new hotel. Some of this must have been under way when she left—it had only been five months ago—but the bustle and noise were more striking to her now, after the silent desolation of Qinghai. She mingled with the crowds in Wangfujing, in the parks, in the dumpling restaurants.

She stayed well clear of the Haidian district, where the University and the Music Conservatory were, having no wish to be reminded of what was past. The past, however, came looking for her, in the figure of Johnny Liu. Johnny appeared at the apartment one afternoon after siesta, three days before the end of her leave.

“Enrico Wang saw you at the Hundred Goods department store,” he explained, naming one of their classmates. “Couldn’t get close enough to greet you, just saw you in the crowd.”

Johnny had come up to the capital from Shanghai a month before to get a visa from the American Embassy. His cousin in New York was sponsoring him, as promised, and the Chinese authorities had just granted Johnny a passport. The passport was at the American Embassy, waiting for the visa.

“Ten thousand preparations all made,
Now I only need an east wind!”

said Johnny Liu, quoting a classical tag.

At Johnny’s suggestion they went walking in Jade Abyss Park. There was a thin pearly ice-mist everywhere, and the bare branches of the trees were rimed with frost.

Johnny had been looking up old classmates. Several were in the capital, including all those chosen to form the new national opera company. Alfredo, Enrico, Leonora, . . . This one was getting married, that one pregnant already, another was to go abroad.

“I guess you yourself didn’t look up anybody,” said Johnny in his frank way.

“How can I? I have no face with the classmates. I’m sure they haven’t forgotten that miserable business.”

Johnny Liu laughed. “No, they haven’t forgotten. You know how people love to gossip.”

“Oh, are they still talking about it?”

“They still talk. There are a lot of rumors. So bad! People are so bad! You wouldn’t believe.”

“What kind of rumors?”

“About you and Mr Powell. What you were doing in his office that evening.”

“We were *talking*. That’s all.”

“I know that, Little Sister. But other people like to make things up.”

Margaret considered this in silence for a while. Then: “What kind of things? Tell me. What do they say? The rumors.”

Johnny laughed, not altogether easily. “Oh, no. They’re too bad. You don’t want to hear.” Regretting now that he’d got this far into the topic.

“Yes I do. Tell me.”

It took some persuasion, but at last Johnny told her the rumors. Margaret stopped and began to cry, her tears running warm in the frosty air.

“How can people say such things? It wasn’t like that at all! Such filthy things. I could never imagine that! Oh, people are so bad!”

Johnny tried to comfort her. “Of course, not everybody believes those things. Only bad people say them.”

“Who? Who says them?”

“Just some bad people. Leonora, Susanna, people like that.”

“Leonora? She was my friend! How could she say those things? My friend, my friend! Oh, Heaven, why are people so evil?”

They walked on for a while, silent but for Margaret’s snuffling. Then: “How about Qinghai?” asked Johnny. “It must be awful.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad. No poorer than some of the counties in the southwest, really. The main problem is nothing to do. Nowhere to go, nothing to buy. You know. Father said after a year or two he will pull some strings to get me back to the capital.”

“Why wait so long?”

“He has an attitude. About what happened last summer. Says I should eat bitterness for a while. Says it will strengthen my character.”

Johnny laughed. “These old soldiers! Even on that reasoning, surely one year would be enough. He should start talking to people now. It’s a tragedy for you to be wasting your life out there in Qinghai. Your life, and your voice. I guess you have no chance to sing out there.”

“To sing foreign-style opera? They wouldn’t know it from the sound of their stinking yaks bellowing. No, I’ve sung nothing for six months.”

“Well, you should keep up your voice exercises at least.”

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Nakri Agricultural Research Station Number Three was set on the northern slope of a shallow valley. The valley embraced a small river. Between the station and the river were fields of barley and winter wheat. Ten miles downriver was the head of the valley. Here the river met another river, emerging from a neighboring valley. At the junction of the waters was the town of Nakri. The town had once boasted a factory making artificial fertilizer, but difficulties of transportation and supply had closed the factory. Now the town existed only as an administrative center for Nakri Prefecture, and as a trading post for the peasants of the district and nomads from the surrounding hills.

The landscape around the Station was by no means as bleak as Margaret had at first supposed. One morning in early April she saw the gentle slope above the station washed, for as far as the eye could see, with streaks and patches of a delicate pastel yellow. Intrigued, she rose early from her afternoon siesta and went walking out beyond the perimeter wall. This was supposed to be against the rules, but she had done it before, when the station became too confining.

The yellow color came from a myriad tiny flowers growing among the stones and rough grass. This seemed to Margaret like a miracle. There had been no rain—it almost never rained in Nakri—and the snows had melted some weeks before. She knelt to caress the tiny yellow cups. So perfect! Why was nature so beautiful, and humanity so vile? Reflecting on this reflection, she thought she ought to feel sad, yet did not feel sad at all. She rose to her feet and began to walk. After twenty minutes or so she reached a ridge at the top of the slope. Here there was a slight breeze, cool but not unpleasant. Looking up along the ridge she saw there were some ruins in the distance. Invigorated by the exercise, and reluctant to go back to the dormitory, she walked the mile or so to the ruins. They were much more extensive than they had seemed at a distance. Their ruin, however, was complete. It was impossible to make out what function the place might have served. The only part still recognizable was a small

group of stables off at one side. Everything else was just jumbled, broken stones. After ten minutes Margaret had lost interest in the ruins themselves. But Johnny Liu's remark about keeping up her exercises had been bobbing on the surface of her thoughts since she returned to the station from Beijing, and even as she was climbing the hill she had had it in mind to do some voice practice once she was far enough from the station that no-one would hear her.

She tried a couple of scales, but the results depressed her. There had been some change in the color of her voice, it seemed. It had a rasp to it, a hard dry edge pulling down the top notes and coarsening the lower ones. Her breath control was wobbly, too, she perceived. Diaphragm out of condition, she reasoned, and the effect of the thin, dry air. Retreating from the scales, she worked through some basic exercises, small yelping and trilling sounds, pure vowels and silent aspirations. This felt more comfortable. So: she was stuck here in Qinghai Province, where the air was thin, cold and dry. All right: she would find a way of singing suitable to the air, and keep her voice in trim regardless.

Thus resolved, Margaret stood there in the ruins on the mountain ridge, the slope flushed yellow beneath her down to the tiny silver river, and yelped and trilled, testing her voice against the thin air, probing for the necessary adjustments. Now that she was breathing self-consciously, filling her lungs with the mountain air, she tasted the clarity and purity of it. The Beijing air was very polluted, everyone knew that. Especially in winter, when everyone was burning low-grade coal. Up here, between the stony unpeopled earth and the ultramarine sky, the air was nothing but air. She ended at last with some scales that did not sound so bad after all. Whether they were accurate or not (she reflected, walking back down) was another matter. She had not been blessed with perfect pitch, like Anna Wang. But then her voice was far stronger than Anna's, even here in this thin whispering air.

It became Margaret's habit, then, all through that spring, whenever her schedule permitted, to climb up onto the high mountain ridge and do voice exercises. The insecurity of singing unaccompanied was an irritation; but that could be remedied on her next trip to Beijing—some tuning forks, a good Japanese cassette player like the ones at the Conserva-

tory, some tapes. The mere fact that she was using her voice—even if only for the appreciation of the occasional unwary yak—lifted Margaret’s spirits, and made her exile easier to bear. It was easier in any case by now. Colleagues still looked at her askance, and there was still a certain amount of giggling and whispering to newcomers, or when certain subjects came up, but her novelty value had worn off.

One day in May Margaret skipped siesta and went up to the ruins on the mountain ridge to do her exercises. She had progressed by now to the point where she allowed herself to sing full arias, those few she had in her repertoire: “Un bel di” from *Butterfly*, “Porgi, amor” from *The Marriage of Figaro*, “Vissi d’arte” of course, and two or three others. Standing there in the ruins on this particular afternoon, she had done all her exercises, and finished up with “Un bel di”—a piece she liked to sing, as she fancied it showed off the color, the emotional expressiveness, of her voice. Now she was going through some small relaxation exercises, de-tensing her diaphragm ready for the walk back.

“GOOD MORNING!”

The voice was very loud, and spoke in English. Margaret’s blood froze. Ghosts! The place was haunted! But *English*? She looked around. There was nothing to see. Then someone laughed, very loud, just behind her. She looked: a broken wall twenty yards away. Then a face came up from behind the wall. It was the big, strange boy from Arboriculture. “GOOD MORNING!” he boomed, and roared with laughter again.

“Oh! You scared me almost to death! I thought you were a ghost!”

The boy, who had one of those Tibetan names you could never remember, walked round from behind the wall, grinning confidently. “How about my English?”

“Terrible. It should be ‘good afternoon’. But you know, it’s very bad to sneak up on a person like that. How long have you been here?”

“Since lunch.” He had his hands on his hips, carelessly, and was looking at her with that arrogant, almost sneering, look she had seen at the play.

“Were you here the whole time I was singing?”

“Sure. Right here behind the wall. I ducked down there when I saw you coming. You were making very strange sounds. After a while I thought

you might be ill, and wanted to jump out and help you. Then your voice started going up and down, up and down. It was very beautiful. Then you sang a song. I couldn't understand it at all, but it was a hundred times more beautiful even than the up and down stuff. Such a lovely song! But I couldn't understand it at all! Was it in English?"

"No. It was Italian."

"Ah." He nodded and repeated the word: "Italian."

"I'm sure you don't even know where Italy is."

He grinned at her, large even teeth, very white. "Southern Europe. Next to Switzerland, Yugoslavia and Greece. Capital is Rome. Home of Marco Polo, also many famous painters, sculptors, architects—for example, da Vinci, Michelangelo." (He used the Chinese versions of the names: *Dafenqi*, *Mikailangqiluo*.)

This was more than Margaret knew. Irritated, she turned her back on him and stared off down the hillside. While she had her back to him she heard a light *thud*—he must have vaulted the wall. She turned: he was standing ten yards away, on this side of the wall now, still grinning at her.

"My name is Norbu," he said. "Branch Secretary Zhang introduced us. I'm sure you remember."

"Of course I remember. What are you doing up here, anyway? Shouldn't you be at the station, looking after your trees?"

"No. Trees look after themselves pretty well. There are no sudden crises with trees. That's the advantage of working with plants, rather than with animals or people. Besides, it's still siesta time. But I don't take siesta. I go out walking instead."

"Why?"

"Exercise. Keep me strong." He certainly looked strong. His hands and feet were very large, she noticed.

"Usually I walk along the valley. But sometimes I like to come up on to the hills to be alone." He made a gesture round at the ruins.

"Why to this place? It's just old stones."

The boy's expression changed. He looked at her coldly. Then he dropped his head and turned away from her. He reached out to the wall, and put his hand on it, gently. "Do you know what this place is?"

"No. Some ancient castle, I suppose."

He said nothing. After a few seconds he turned back to her. He was unfastening the buttons on his jacket. "Do you know who this is?" He pulled open one side of the jacket.

"What? Who?" Then she saw that there was something inside the jacket. She peered more closely, as best she could while unwilling to take a step towards him. Stitched into the inside of the jacket was a little fabric frame containing a small piece of paper, no more than three inches square. It was a photograph, a color photograph, she saw. Or rather it had been: friction with the inner garments had removed most of the color. All that could be made out was that it was a picture of a man, a bald man wearing glasses. He looked like an intellectual.

"No. Who is it?"

"Guess."

"Your father?"

The boy smiled. He seemed satisfied. He closed his jacket. Then: "You don't know much, do you?"

"What?"

"I thought Chinese people knew everything. We Tibetans are only backward children. We don't know anything. But, thank Heaven, we have our elder Han brothers to come and teach us. Teach us how to be civilized. Teach us to use the toilet. Teach us about socialism." (He was using the exaggerated, gushing tone of a propaganda movie.) "But actually, I find you seem to know very little."

Margaret didn't get this at all. "What are you talking about? We are all Chinese. You're a minority, that's all."

The boy grinned his open, white-toothed, insolent grin. "I know all about you, though. You were sent away from Beijing because you were caught having *tongfang* with a foreign spy."

Margaret blushed furiously. She felt shame and rage together. "It's not true! You don't know anything about me! That's just a wicked rumor!"

The boy looked at her in silence for a few seconds, then dropped his eyes. "Oh, don't get so upset. You Chinese are such prudes. Here in Tibet we don't make such a fuss about it. It's a natural thing, isn't it?"

"What do you mean, 'here in Tibet'? This is Qinghai Province. Tibet is a thousand miles away." She waved in a random direction at the distant

mountains. Now he was looking at her again. The way he looked gave her a strange feeling in the belly. He had his hands on his hips again, his big hands, insolent and self-assured.

“Would you like to have *tongfang* with me?”

Margaret was stunned. How could anyone be so coarse? “Why . . . That’s . . . Oh! Disgraceful! What’s the meaning of it? Oh! Oh!” She turned and ran, dodging through the scattered broken stones. Behind her she heard the boy laughing his huge laugh.

“GOOD AFTERNOON!” he shouted to her as she ran. “GOOD AFTERNOON, TEACHER!”

Margaret soon lost her breath in the thin air. She stopped, feeling dizzy and a little sick. Looking back, Norbu was still standing there among the stones. He waved. “GOOD-BYE!” he called in English. “GOOD-BYE, TEACHER!”

With as much dignity as she could muster, Margaret set off down the slope, back to the station.