Chapter 39

Does Heaven Speak?
Old Bolmo Rescues a Snake

"Do you know the story of Liu Che on Tai Mountain?"

"Who?"

"Emperor Han Wudi. Do you know the story about him?"

"I know a lot of stories about Han Wudi," replied Margaret, a bit defensively. She thought she probably *did* know a lot of stories about the Wudi Emperor, though she couldn't think of any at that moment. There were so many emperors, so many stories. Anyway, why not just say Han Wudi? Why use his personal name? Was Norbu trying to impress her? She thought so; and she thought it a bit odd, too, to hear a Tibetan making free with the personal names of Chinese Emperors. Though Tibetans were Chinese too, of course.

They were sitting out in the open among the ruins of the monastery. Margaret was leaning back against a remnant of wall. The remnant was about three feet high. It had actually formed one arm of a corner, so that if seen from vertically above, Margaret was sitting beneath the base of a capital "L". The wall that made the upright of the "L" had survived to a height of six feet. Norbu was sitting on the wall above and behind her, leaning back against that higher wall. They had walked up from the valley and examined the ruins of the monastery. Norbu seemed to have figured out the complete floor plan: here the monk's refectory, here some lecture halls, here a dispensary for their traditional Ti-

betan medicine, here a hall for images and prayers. Tired at last they had come to this wall, to sit and eat the barley cakes and small sweet apples—grown in the arboriculture unit—Norbu had brought. His first suggestion had been that the two of them sit together on the ground and eat; but Margaret had firmly vetoed this, and banished him to the top of the wall.

"Liu Che was a great emperor, wouldn't you say? I mean, he was successful. He chastised the Huns, he sent Zhang Qian off to explore the west, he extended the borders of China, he even wrote some famous poems. Wouldn't you say he was successful?"

Norbu sounded like a school textbook. Well, at least it showed he did some reading. "Yes, of course," said Margaret. "One of the greatest emperors. Everybody knows." She glanced up over her shoulder at him. He was stretched out there on the wall, in the angle of the corner, looking off across the ruins, shading his eyes with a hand, one leg hanging down lazily against the wall to her right.

"But you know" (he went on) "Liu Che was very unhappy."

Margaret laughed at the way this was said, as if he were talking about an acquaintance. "How can you know that?"

"It's easy to see, from the histories. Now, do you know why he was unhappy?"

"Because his favorite concubine died." Margaret thought she remembered this from somewhere. Anyway, it was a fairly safe answer so far as emperors were concerned.

"Hm. Well, now I begin to respect you. You really do know some history. But that wasn't the main reason. The main reason was, that he had no religion."

"That's silly," said Margaret. "Anyway, nobody had any religion at that time. Religion came in the Tang Dynasty, everyone knows that. And Han was before Tang. You see, I know more Chinese history than you." She felt she had definitely scored a point on this.

"Well, you're right. Real religion, Buddhism, came in the Tang. But before that there was Taoism, you know. Since ancient times. And ancestor worship, which the Confucians practiced. So you can't say there was no religion."

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"All right. Well, which story do you want to tell me? I'm sure I will know it. And I'm sure you'll get it wrong."

"Liu Che had no religion. This made him very unhappy. He wanted religion. Most particularly he wanted Heaven to speak to him. So he asked a Taoist how this could be arranged. The Taoist said he had to go to the top of Tai Mountain and perform a sacrifice." [Tai Mountain is a peak in Shandong Province, foremost of the five holy mountains of ancient China.] "Then Heaven would speak to him. So Wudi went to Tai Mountain. He had some servants go ahead and take up all the equipment for the sacrifice. Then he went up himself, with just one servant. When he got to the top of the mountain, he made the sacrifice. Then he waited for Heaven to speak to him. Do you know what happened?"

Margaret had never heard this story before. She wondered if Norbu was just making it up. Determined not to take it seriously, she said: "The sky cracked open and a fairy came down and kissed him." She laughed heartily at her own wit.

"No. That's not what happened." For a while Norbu didn't say anything more. When Margaret glanced up at him he saw her movement, and grinned down at her.

"Well?" prompted Margaret. "So what happened?"

"Nothing happened. Heaven didn't speak to him. He didn't hear anything, up there on the mountain. Nothing, just the sound of the wind."

"What a silly story. An empty story. If he didn't hear anything, then what's to be told? Your stories are very boring, Norbu."

He laughed again and jumped down from the wall. He stood in front of her grinning insolently, his hands on his hips. "Sometimes what's missing is more important than what's there."

"Well, you should know. In your case, it's the brains that are missing. Really, what a silly story. What's the point? And anyway, how do you know what happened? You said he went up the mountain alone."

"Not alone. With one servant."

"So I suppose this story comes from the servant."

"No. When they got back to the capital, the Emperor had the servant put to death."

"In that case, how do you know nothing happened on the mountain?"

"Why else would he have the servant put to death? He did it to save his face. He didn't want people to know that Heaven had refused to speak to him."

This was reasonable. That was the way emperors behaved. But what a silly story. She said nothing for a few moments. The wind sighed and moaned. When you heard the wind you felt cold, whether it was really cold or not. She thought of mighty Han Wudi standing up there by his altar on top of Mount Tai, all dressed in red silk and cloth of gold, hearing nothing but the wind, and the poor doomed servant on his knees in the *koutou* position. Somehow this picture was itself chilling. Perhaps it was listening to the wind that had made Norbu think of this story. Listening to the wind and being on a mountain, of course.

"Of course" (Norbu went on) "Liu Che could have saved himself all that trouble if he'd just read Confucius. *Tian he yan zai?*" ["Does Heaven speak?"—a famous rhetorical question uttered by the sage in the *Analects*.]

Margaret knew the tag, and knew of course that it was in the classical language; but she did not actually know it was from Confucius. She had received all of her general education during the Cultural Revolution, when the antique philosophers were *personae non gratae,* and such of their apothegms as she knew had come to her extramurally and at random. She had no stock of organized knowledge about the ancients. Clearly Norbu had the advantage of her here. But how did he come to know this stuff? He was the same age as herself, presumably had had the same education. He must have done a lot of reading on his own.

She stood up, brushing the dirt and grass from her slacks. "Did we finish all the cakes?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes."

"Then I think we should go back."

"All right."

* * *

They walked side by side back down to the ridge.

"You still haven't told me the point of the story," said Margaret.

"The point is that people need religion. Even emperors. And you can't find religion in the sky."

"Well, I don't think that really applies nowadays," said Margaret cautiously. She knew the Tibetans were very religious, though she knew nothing about the nature of their devotions. She supposed it was all a matter of exploitation, as it had been in the old society: corrupt priests enriching themselves from the gullibility of superstitious peasants. Still, Norbu had behaved himself very well, and she had quite enjoyed their little outing. She did not want to offend his religious sensibilities, whatever they were.

He was looking sideways at her as they walked. "Why not? What makes us different from Han Wudi?"

"Well, this is the modern age. We have science. Once people have science, they don't need religion."

"Don't you feel religious sometimes, Yuezhu?"

"Not really. When I was a kid I sometimes said a prayer to Guanyin. But I don't believe in temples and priests and monasteries. Those things belong to the old society."

"If you're going to have religion, you need monks and priests to study the principles, to figure out what's true and what's false. And you need temples and ceremonies to get people into a religious mood. What's wrong with that?"

"I don't know. I just don't think we need those things in the modern world."

"Well, here in Tibet we think they are essential. We don't understand how people can live without proper religious ceremonies."

"That just proves that Tibetans are very backward. Anyway, why do you keep saying 'here in Tibet'? This is Qinghai Province. Tibet is a thousand miles away."

"No. This is Tibet. This is Amdo Province of Tibet. Our Dalai Lama was born here, not a hundred miles from where we are now. Have you heard of our Dalai?"

"Yes. He's a bad person. He's the leader of the splittists."

Norbu stopped. They were on the ridge now, at a point where it fell away steeply at their right, down to the valley. The station was out of sight

to their left; all that could be seen below was the river, silver in the reflected light of the sun, and some piles of rock. The sun was very high, though this was mid-afternoon by clock time. It was warm, too, and the air perfectly clear. Just at the threshold of hearing was the wind, sighing as Margaret had heard it that day by the roadside, when she first arrived.

They stood in silence for a moment or two, looking down at the glittering river. Norbu had slipped one hand into his jacket, as he had when he swore not to harm her; to the place where he kept the picture of that scholarly man with glasses, the picture of his father. Margaret did not much like the drift of the conversation. She didn't want to talk about the Dalai and his splittists, nor about questions of geographical nomenclature. Everybody knew things like that spelled trouble. Best to just accept what you were told and get on with your life. Why make trouble?

Hoping to steer things in a safer direction, she said: "Norbu, I can see you have very strong feelings for your father. I hope you won't think it's impolite of me to ask, but is your father still in the world?"

"No. He went off to his next life many years ago."

"I'm sorry. But I guess he made a strong impression on you."

Norbu looked sideways at her. "I never knew him. I don't remember him at all. I was only two when he died."

"Oh! Oh, I'm really sorry . . ."

He turned to face her. His look now made her think of that first encounter, when she had gone to the arboriculture unit with Branch Secretary Zhang.

"Oh, Yuezhu. You really don't know anything, do you?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"Let's do some arithmetic, Yuezhu, shall we?" The concluding syllable of this sentence, *ba* in Chinese, was drawn out sarcastically. "How old do you think I am?"

"I don't know. Twenty-five, I guess."

"I'm twenty-four, Teacher Han. Born nineteen fifty-seven. Now, when do you think my father was born?"

"I suppose . . . Oh, nineteen thirty. How can I know?"

"Nineteen thirty-two. Now, concentrate. How old was my father in nineteen fifty-nine?"

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"Well, twenty-seven. So what?"

"And how old would my father be, if he were alive today?"

"Ah, thirty-nine. No, forty-nine."

"Forty-nine, yes. Now, tell me, among the Tibetans at the station, how many men of that generation are there?"

Margaret was irritated. She felt she was being got at somehow, but couldn't see how.

"How should I know? Do you think I go around counting people?"

"Perhaps you should try it. You'll find very few men of that generation in the station. Or anywhere in this region."

"Why?" asked Margaret, in all innocence.

"Because, Teacher Han, when the Chinese army came to Tibet in nineteen fifty-nine, they divided the country into two kinds of districts. There were 'full rebellion' districts, where everybody was against them; and there were 'half rebellion' districts, where only some of the people were against them. In the 'half rebellion' districts, the soldiers were given orders to kill only the men. In the 'full rebellion' districts they were told to kill everybody without distinction."

Margaret did not know what to say to this. It was preposterous, of course. Chinese soldiers would never behave like that! Her own father himself had been in Tibet. How could Norbu expect her to believe this nonsense? Yet it was true, there were very few middle-aged men among the Tibetans at the station. But perhaps they had all gone to Chinese cities to look for work. Who knew?

"I don't believe that. That's nonsense! The Chinese army is a people's army. The soldiers love the people. They wouldn't behave like that."

Norbu went on, paying no attention to her words. "My people are Khamba, from south of here. The Khamba are the soldiers of Tibet, very fierce." He flashed a proud smile. "So our district was a 'full rebellion' district. The Chinese killed everybody. If you go to that district now, it's empty. Just a few Chinese settlers and some prison camps. My father died fighting your army. Or else he was put into a camp and died there. I have never known his fate. My mother ran for her life, to here, bringing me with her. This was a 'half rebellion' district, so the women and children were allowed to live." He looked down. "Of course, they suffered a lot. Many

were raped, I have heard. My mother—I don't know. I've never had the courage to ask her. She just survived, somehow."

Margaret thought she had never heard such nonsense. Raped? Of course People's Liberation Army soldiers didn't rape people. That would completely contradict the Three Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points for Attention. How could he expect her to believe these tales? Actually, she was embarrassed. She didn't know what to say to these wild stories. Perhaps Norbu was mad!

At last she just said: "I don't believe you. It's nonsense."

"On what grounds?"

"What?"

"On what grounds don't you believe me? You can see for yourself it's true, about people of my father's generation. And how about Nakri town, down there?" He nodded down at the valley. "What's the use of the town? At the end of a road leading nowhere?"

"I don't know. Who cares?"

"The road used to continue, to Golog in the south. But now there are no people in Golog, so the road is no use. All the people were killed. The Chinese soldiers chased all the people out of Golog to a place where the river makes a big bend. They trapped them in the bend, with their backs to the river. Then they killed them all with machine-guns."

Margaret turned from him and his nonsensical tales and continued on along the ridge. He walked on with her, at her side.

"If what you said was true," said Margaret after a hundred paces, "the Tibetan people would all hate us bitterly. But in fact, many Tibetans have been very kind to me. How can that be, if the Chinese army was so cruel to them? That disproves your stupid story."

"No. You don't understand Tibetans at all. Let me tell you. Some Tibetans have been infected with your Chinese attitudes. They are the ones that hate you. The least Tibetan of the Tibetans, they hate you. They would kill you if they could. Sometimes they get the chance—then they take it. That's why you're not supposed to leave the station alone. But those are new-style Tibetans. Most Tibetans don't think like that. Most of them are like Old Bolmo."

"Yes. He's always very kind to me."

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"Yes. Do you know why?"

"I guess he's a nice man."

"Well, he is. A real Tibetan. But that's not the reason. He's kind to you because he feels sorry for you."

"What? Sorry for me? Why?"

"Because he knows you have no religion. Listen. I take lifts into town with Old Bolmo sometimes. Once, he nearly killed me. There was a snake on the road. When Old Bolmo saw the snake, he jumped on the brakes. The truck went right off the road. Wa! I was scared. Then he got down and lifted the snake off the road with a shovel. So carefully! That's Old Bolmo. He's a real Tibetan, religious in his bones."

"I don't understand. Why did he care about the snake?"

"Because he's religious. You see, we Tibetans believe that life never ends. How could it? 'Beginning' and 'end'—these words only belong to material things. Your body, of course that can have an end, and your eyes and ears and tongue will have an end, but your spirit can never end, because it's not a material thing. After your body has gone, your spirit will find another body. Now there are many living things in this world, millions of living things, but very few of them are human beings. So the chance that your spirit can find a human body is very small. Whether it can or not, that depends on the quality of your spirit. And the quality of your spirit, well, it's like the quality of your body—it depends on nourishment and exercise. That's why we have religion, to give our spirit that nourishment and that exercise. That's why human beings must have religion. If you have no religion, then your spirit will become weak and frail. While you are alive, it will have no strength to endure suffering; and when you die, it will have no chance to find a human body. It will only be able to crawl into the body of a beetle, or a snake. And a beetle or a snake has very little opportunity to practice religion, so your spirit might endure thousands of lives as beetles or snakes before it can find a human body again. That's why Old Bolmo feels sorry for you. Because you have no religion. When you die, you will become a beetle or a snake. When Old Bolmo looks at you, he sees a pretty young girl. But he thinks: 'This poor girl, so innocent and sweet, yet she has no religion. After she dies, her spirit will endure a thousand years of being a beetle or a snake. What

a tragedy!' He really thinks like that. I know him well. I can tell you for sure, to see you makes him feel sad. That's why he was so kind to the snake. He thinks: 'This poor snake may be carrying the spirit of a pretty young girl like Han Yuezhu. I must treat it gently.' As I said, he's got religion in his bones. You can't even say he thinks those things. He really doesn't think at all. He couldn't even tell you what he believes. He's not an educated man. Religion just come naturally to him, by instinct."

Margaret thought she had spotted a flaw in this theology.

"If he really believes as you say he does, he should kill the snake. Then the spirit would get a quicker chance to find a human body, instead of having to wait for years. According to your theory, we should kill all animals. Then every spirit would have the chance of a human body. Really, this religion of yours is so stupid!"

"But there are only so many human beings, and far more animals. If we killed all the animals, those millions of spirits would have no place to go. They would just wander in the darkness for thousands of years. That's even worse than being a snake. At least a snake can enjoy some small pleasures. A spirit without a body is just existing in darkness and silence. Without eyes, how can it experience light? Without ears, how can it experience sound? That's the worst thing of all. So the answer is not to kill animals, but to treat them with kindness."

Margaret felt a little impatient with all this. It was all very well to say a prayer to Guanyin or Shangdi when you needed some help in life. There might be ghosts and spirits after all, for all anybody knew; probably there was some kind of life after this one; and *someone* must have created the universe. But priests and temples, incense and statues, one's soul flying off into beetles and snakes—those things were all nonsense. Superstition.

"Really," she said, "you Tibetans are very backward. Feudal."

"But don't you see? We Tibetans think you Chinese are backward. We look down on you, because you have no religion. We think *you* are backward! Like wild people, like savages, with no religion!"

Margaret thought of Mr Mackenzie, the music teacher from New Zealand, his shouting match with Alfredo Zhang. *This is supposed to be a civilized country? You're slaves, all of you! Look at you, all so ABJECT! You have no more rights than cattle! No rights, no freedom! You are*

savages, barbarians! You would eat each other if the dictators told you to! Savages! Barbarians! There's no civilization without freedom!

"Ai," she said, "we poor Chinese! Westerners look down on us because we have no freedom. Tibetans look down on us, because we have no religion. Really, we Chinese must be very primitive people! Real savages, you say! But to tell you the truth, I don't *feel* like a savage at all. I feel that I am quite civilized. And my family and my friends, they are civilized, too. We Chinese have been civilized for five thousand years. We are the most civilized people in the world. We are not savages!" She had raised her voice at the end of this, but somehow the thin dry air made the emotion in her words sound harsh. She cleared her throat, and tried a more reasonable tone. "How about you, Norbu? Do you feel like that, too? Do you think I'm a savage?"

He said nothing to this for a while, until she thought he'd chosen not to answer it. She glanced at him, walking alongside her. He was looking down, deep in thought.

"No," he said at last. "I can't say I do. I've had too much Chinese education, I guess. When I was eleven a truck came and took me to Xining. Me and thirty other kids. They put us in a Chinese school. That was the policy at that time: to make us Chinese. They'd given up on the older generation of Tibetans, but they thought they could turn the kids into good Chinese citizens. We were seven years in that place. Our parents weren't allowed to see us. My mother didn't know if I was alive or dead. Then the policy changed and I came back to Nakri. They hadn't made me Chinese, of course; but I wasn't really Tibetan any more, either. I'd forgotten the prayers and the ceremonies. I didn't even know the forms of address for the clergy, not that there were many left alive. My mother tried to teach me, but you know, if you don't practice those things every day, you always have to strain to remember them. And we couldn't practice, not in public. It was banned."

"That was in the Cultural Revolution. A lot of mistakes were made," said Margaret carefully, repeating the official line.

"Yeah, well." Norbu seemed not to want to dispute the point. "Anyway, I can't really be religious. Not like my mother, not like Old Bolmo, people like that, with no education at all. I can't be that religious. Oh, I

believe in religion, all right. But not in my bones, the way simple people do. I wish I could be like that, but I can't. But yes, I believe in religion. And yes, I feel sorry for you Chinese, with your poor empty lives. Nothing to think about but money and face. And always afraid of each other, always suspicious of each other, always trying to get some advantage over each other. Yes, I feel sorry for you living like that. And your ugly concrete dormitories, and your clumsy soldiers, and your stupid Marxism which even a child can see through, and your movies full of lies, and . . ."

Margaret stopped abruptly and confronted him. "I won't listen to this. Now I see what you are. You're a splittist! You're against the country! Well, let me tell you something: I look down on you! What's more natural than to love your country? Even the simplest people, even criminals, love their country. But not you—you hate your country! You're against your country! You want to split your country!"

Norbu had also stopped. He watched her levelly as she spoke, with a slight smile. "No," he replied, "I love my country with all my heart. I hate anybody who wants to split my country." He said this with great sincerity.

"Well," said Margaret, somewhat deflated, "then you shouldn't say bad things about your fellow-countrymen."

"I was talking about religion, that's all."

"Oh . . ." forget it." Margaret turned away and continued walking. "If you want your stupid religion, you can have it. I don't care." She could hear him walking too, close behind her. Why was he being so disagreeable? Actually, he wasn't such a bad guy. Much better educated than she had supposed. Better educated than she herself, Margaret was ready to admit. She tried to think of something to say, to change the subject, but nothing came.

"Yuezhu?"

"Mm?" Stopping and turning again, she saw him standing some paces behind her. He was smiling in a rather sheepish way, a way that made him look very appealing somehow—vulnerable, for all his bigness and rough manners. Yuezhu felt the strange movement inside herself again, in her belly.

"I want to apologize to you." Norbu stepped up to her, right up to her. "I'm sorry. My tongue ran away with me. I ask your forgiveness."

"Oh, all right. But you really shouldn't say such insulting things. Nobody likes to hear them."

He was right up to her now, right in front of her, with that uncertain smile on his face. His eyes were deep and dark, his teeth very white.

"Seal it."

"What?"

"Your forgiveness. Seal it."

"What do you? . . . Oh!"

Too quickly for her to react, Norbu took her face in his hands and kissed her on the lips. His hands were so big they seemed to encompass her entire head. Margaret twisted away and stepped back.

"So much for your promise! Now I can really see you're a bad person!"

Norbu was just standing there, grinning at her triumphantly, the smile cocky and insolent now. "I promised not to harm you, didn't I? Well, where's the harm in a kiss?"

"If it's not wanted, then it's taking advantage." Margaret turned away. "Come on. I've had enough of you. This trip this afternoon was a mistake. Let's go back."