

Chapter 47

Tales of Success in the Land of Opportunity
An Intimate Alliance with a Trusted Friend

Johnny Liu was doing well for himself. Though technically an illegal immigrant, with no right to earn wages, he had no problem finding work.

“At first I worked the restaurants” (Johnny Liu explained). “That’s easiest, but the pay is lousy and the hours terrible. You work lunch hour, then get kicked out in the afternoon with no time to go home and take a nap; then you’re expected to be back there in the evening and work till midnight. So I got into construction. I’ve done plumbing, electrical, dry-wall, everything. The construction’s all controlled by unions in New York. They’re very powerful, and they’ve raised wages so high nobody can afford to employ them, except the government. So all the private construction work is done by immigrants. It’s good money and you learn a lot. But now I’m driving a truck. Delivery, all over the area. Long Island, New Jersey, even Pennsylvania. I like this best. Set your own hours, nobody watching you.”

This was driving in from the airport in Johnny Liu’s own car which (he told Margaret) he had bought at an auction for two thousand dollars.

“America is great. You can get anything. There’s plenty of work and plenty of money. The land of opportunity!”

When he had finished boasting about himself and trying to explain the niceties of U.S. immigration policy, Johnny Liu told Margaret about Professor Shi.

“He came to New York on an H visa, sponsored by one of the music colleges. Then he got a U.S. patent for the Iron Bride. I helped him find a patent lawyer. He’s making a lot of money from it.”

“Really? How can he make money from that contraption? Are there so many singers training in the States?”

“He sells it as exercise equipment. The Americans are crazy about exercise, you know. There are health clubs everywhere. Special machines to exercise every part of your body. Professor Shi’s started his own company.”

“Wa! So ingenious! Who would have thought it of old Shi? So scholarly and eccentric—yet he can become a successful businessman!”

“You can’t judge a book by its cover, Little Sister. I always thought old Shi was much more worldly than he let on.”

“Still, he had such a good position in China. To suddenly go and start a business in America—I wouldn’t have believed it.”

“You’ll be surprised at the fellow-countrymen you meet here. College teachers? Any number of them—working in restaurants, or as children’s nurses, or domestic help. Full professors too—oh, you’ll meet them. Old Shi’s done better than most, of course.”

“Yet still. To go from the prestige and status of a college position to . . . to . . . to living off one’s wits. It seems very strange.”

“Prestige, status—yes; and a salary of, what? Four hundred yuan a month? A hundred U.S. dollars. *Ts!* Restaurant work here pays five dollars an hour, plus tips. You can make five or six hundred dollars a week waiting tables. Off the books, no taxes. Send half back to your family in China, they can live like emperors. That’s what people do.”

“I never saw such things in England.”

“Of course you didn’t. Because the immigration laws are so strict in England, that’s why. Here, you can come in on a student or tourist visa, and just get a job right away. Those European countries, nobody will employ you. They’re too scared of the police. I worked with a fellow-countryman who’d lived a while in England, illegal. He nearly starved before he got a U.S. visa.”

“Still I’m surprised. Professor Shi! I thought he was dedicated to the Conservatory, to his students.”

“He hated the system. Easy to see that. Anyway, he’s coming to dinner with us this evening so you’ll have the chance to ask him in person.”

Johnny drove her to the room he had found. In an exchange of letters while she was waiting for her U.S. visa, Margaret had asked Johnny Liu to get a room for her in New York, ready for when she arrived.

The room was in a place called Flushing, in a quiet residential street lined with trees. Margaret was pleased with it at once. It was a small room but clean, with a bed, a chest of drawers, and an open tube-metal clothes rack on wheels. There was a kitchen used by the whole house, with a big refrigerator and a washing machine, and a bathroom she shared with two other tenants. All the rooms in the house were let to Chinese people. Margaret’s room was slightly below ground level, down some steps from the driveway. The owner of the house was a Taiwanese woman who lived a few blocks away. She turned up as Johnny was explaining the washing machine.

“Miss Han,” said the woman, who had the squat build and coarse dark skin of a southern peasant. “Just arrived from England. Your friend told me. Welcome to America!”

Margaret thanked her, and asked about the rent.

“Last Sunday of every month, I come round. If you can’t be here that day, please let me know. My phone number on the wall there. Your friend already paid first month and deposit.” The woman snickered. Clearly she thought Johnny and Margaret had some intimate connection.

“We are old friends,” said Margaret. “Glad to help each other.”

“Right, right. We are all Chinese, we must all help each other.”

That evening Johnny took her to a seafood restaurant in a busy district nearby. Professor Shi was there already, waiting for them inside by the cash desk. He looked more bohemian than ever, wearing a beige fisherman’s smock under his jacket, his gray hair pulled back in a pony tail, a tiny gold ring in one ear. Professor Shi reached out to take her hand in both of his.

“My star pupil! I read about your appearance at Wexford. Wonderful! With Cinelli and Miss Bacon! And now you have joined Mr O’Toole’s legions. He he he he! You must let me coach you! I’ll give you a special rate.”

This remark was intended seriously, it emerged over the meal. Profes-

sor Shi's business responsibilities were not very onerous, the paperwork all delegated to a firm of attorneys in Chinatown who specialized in handling regulations and permits for non-English-speaking businessmen. Professor Shi kept himself busy with voice coaching and work as a journeyman musician. He even had a membership card for the American Federation of Musicians, which he showed them very proudly.

"Americans think it's very difficult to get these things. Permits, visas, certificates. We Chinese have a big advantage here: we're used to dealing with bureaucracy. Track down the right person, wait patiently a few hours in his office, greet him with a smile and a small gift, bend the knee. . . We think nothing of these things. Americans haven't the patience. I tell you, Little Han, you can get anything here! *No problem!*"

No problem! was said in English, the first English Margaret had ever heard Professor Shi speak. She supposed he must have learned some to find his way around here in New York. Certainly he was quite Americanized, with his pony tail and union card. Listening to Professor Shi burbling on, listening without really taking in the words now, her thoughts drifted. It seemed to her, watching him—so animated! so full of spirit and vitality!—that their life in China had been lived as if under some great pressure, as on one of those planets where the force of gravity is supposed to be a hundred times stronger than on Earth. It was a crushed life, a life lived beneath the rotting bulk of some vast dead beast. And then the human spirit, once relieved of that pressure, once it had crawled out from under that massive carcass, filled and expanded with natural energy, glowed and shone, throwing out buds and brilliant flowers. Here in the West everything was allowed. You would never think that society could be stable with such license; but somehow it was. She watched the cars going past on the big main road outside the restaurant window where they sat. The cars all had their lights on, and the lights were reflected from the road, which was wet from rain. Stable and prosperous, with everything allowed. Really, China's system was very backward and stupid. Impossible to make your own way without powerful friends or family. "Heaven is high, the Emperor far away". . . who had said that to her? Oh, Mustache, so many years ago in Seven Kill Stele. What had happened to Mustache?

“Little Sister, are you awake?”

“Ha? Oh, I am sorry. I was just thinking how different things are here in the West.”

Professor Shi laughed. “Everything is better here. Even the air smells sweeter. I hope I shall never go back to that *gui difang*.”

Devil place. Margaret was shocked to hear him say it. “I thought you were happy in your work at the Conservatory, she said. Such a good position.”

“*Ts!* China is a jail. I was one of the upper-class prisoners. Yes, I was a full professor. Yet still I had to *koutou* to those morons! Secretary Kang—do you remember him? Our great leader. Responsible for all the affairs of a music conservatory—and he couldn’t tell the front of a piano from the back! Yet we couldn’t get anything done, couldn’t buy a score, without his permission. That ridiculous frame-up of the Englishman—what was his name?—Mr Piao” (using Mr Powell’s Chinese name). “They can just come at you out of the blue like that, come at you and destroy you, any time you’re inconvenient to someone more powerful than yourself. The whole country’s like that—ignorant bureaucrats running everything, no law or rights. Just as in the old saying: ‘The rulers can burn mountains, but the common people are not allowed to light a lantern.’ It’ll never change. Power will always mean everything in China, human qualities nothing.”

Johnny Liu nodded agreement. “We are a hopeless country. Chinese people can only flourish outside their homeland.”

Margaret felt patriotism stirring feebly in her breast. She hated to hear this negative stuff about China, even from fellow-countrymen. She wanted to refute them, but could not gather her thoughts. Her eyes felt heavy.

The food was first-rate, as Johnny Liu had promised. Margaret knew this was Johnny’s good nature at work—trying to give her a warm welcome, to ease her passage to this new country. But she was jet-lagged and before she had eaten much found herself blinking to stay awake. Knowing Johnny and Professor Shi must be noticing this, she apologized several times. Johnny laughed off her apologies, but still Margaret felt bad that she had let him down, spoiled his expensive treat. The bill was more

than seventy dollars. When they took her home at last she fell asleep in her clothes right there on the bed, waking in the early morning to Taiwanese pop music from a neighboring room and a nagging feeling of guilt towards Johnny Liu.

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Colman O'Toole had a tiny office high up in a building on Broadway. It was an old building, the elevator closed by a clanging metal grille. Colman's door was dark polished wood with a frosted-glass panel proclaiming him:

C.J. O'TOOLE
ARTISTE'S REPRESENTATIVE
THEATRICAL & OPERATIC

Colman came out from behind his desk to shake Margaret's hand.

"Welcome to America, my dear. How do you find New York City?"

"A bit smelly," said Margaret, who had come in from Flushing on the subway, following directions prepared for her by Johnny Liu. She was still puzzling over the "e" in "artiste".

Colman laughed merrily, his spare chins wobbling. "'Tis little enough you've smelt yet! Wait until the summer!"

He sat her down and beamed at her across the desk. "Have you got a voice coach?"

"I've only been here a day."

"No time to lose. You'll be wanting to broaden your opportunities, I'm thinking, now that you're a free agent. Break out from your mezzo past. Well, for the time being your past is what you have to trade on, dear girl, so I shall be sending you in to audition for both mezzo and soprano roles. Meanwhile you should be in the hands of a good voice coach, strengthening your top. I can recommend someone if you'd like."

"My old music professor from Beijing is in New York. He teaches voice. I think I shall train with him."

"Good, good, so long as he suits you. Have you got any money?"

“Not much. A few hundred dollars I saved with Royal Youth International.”

“You’ll be after needing a day job. Anything that will support you, with an employer tolerant enough to give you time off for auditions and travel.”

“Travel?”

“This city unfortunately produces more opera singers than it can consume locally. You must be ready to accept engagements out of town.”

“Oh dear. Shall I really be able to find such an understanding employer?”

Colman chuckled. “Probably not. But there are jobs aplenty in New York, and you will survive. All young singers do, somehow.”

The great gothic diary was on the desktop in front of him. Opening it now, Colman gave her details of the recital he had her booked for at Brooklyn Academy of Music, and of an audition in a place called Philadelphia.

“Auditions will be your life from now on, dear girl. Until you are sufficiently well known that the houses come looking for you.”

“I wonder if I shall ever reach that level,” sighed Margaret.

From Colman’s office she went to see Professor Shi. He lived in an airy loft on Perry Street, in a place called Greenwich Village. This was not a village at all, it was just another district of Manhattan. The main room of Professor Shi’s loft was forty feet square, lit from above by a big skylight. Its principal item of furniture was a shining new grand piano. There was a stack of very expensive-looking brushed-chrome sound equipment against one wall, and a bookcase full of CDs, sheet music, and stacked colored brochures of the Iron Bride. On the floor at one side was the apparatus itself, modified somewhat from the form Margaret was familiar with, painted white and with the padded parts done in a pleasant beige cloth instead of Class Struggle green vinyl.

Professor Shi was dressed like a landlord in an old movie: loose pants in fine blue silk, white socks and white-soled black slippers, a high-collared silk jacket with frogged buttons. This somewhat heavy

attire was quite suitable for the apartment, which, for all its size and appointments, was cool.

“Better for the voice,” said Professor Shi. “The heating system here dries up the air. Come, let’s try some scales. I always loved your voice, Han Yuezhu. It will be a pleasure to hear it again.”

They went through some of the exercises Margaret remembered from the Conservatory. Professor Shi seemed pleased.

“Strong and clear,” he said, nodding approval. “But I perceive a loss of control. Have you been keeping up your exercises?”

Margaret admitted she had not. The confusion and disorientation of moving from one country to another had upset all her routines.

“You must begin at once. Go home and do them! That wall of muscle must never weaken. Then come and see me after two or three days. We will arrange a schedule. Fees are waived until you have some steady income. Now, for old times sake . . .”

After some poking among the shelves of sheet music he produced a piano score of “Porgi, amor” from *The Marriage of Figaro*, a piece he had coached her through in college. Margaret had sung it for Poppy a year before, when they were doing try-outs for Royal Youth International’s production, but had not looked at it since. It seemed much more natural to be singing “Porgi, amor” with Professor Shi than it had with Poppy. He did not even look at his own sheet music; his eyes were either on his fingering, or on her face as she rounded the difficult corners.

“Beautiful,” he said when they were done. “Your voice is maturing very fast. And your stage experience shows. You are much more natural now. As if your singing were one part of a performance, not just something done for its own sake, like acrobatics. You have the making of a great dramatic soprano.”

“Oh! if only I dared dream of it! The director of my company in England had me fixed in her mind as a lyric mezzo.”

Professor Shi seemed to think this hilarious. “Lyric mezzo, he he he he! Ha ha ha, lyric mezzo. What a waste! No, your top is firm and strong. It only needs enlarging a little. Go home and do your exercises, and leave everything else to me.”

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Johnny Liu showed her how to find a job by looking in the Chinese newspapers. New York had several Chinese newspapers, and you could find everything you wanted in them. He had found her room in the papers, Johnny Liu told her. His own room, too.

“This is my seventh or eighth room since I came to New York,” he explained. “I keep moving, trying to find a better deal. It’s easy. You just need to know the characters they use for the different districts. *Falasheng*, that’s Flushing, where we are now. *Jiasunhai*, that’s Jackson Heights, a bit pricier. *Ailinhe*, that’s Elmhurst—not a good area, full of South American drug dealers, but very cheap if you’re hard up.”

So far as jobs were concerned (Johnny Liu went on), her visa allowed her to work “on the books”, so she could get any kind of job. However, working on the books you lost a third of your wages in taxes of various kinds. In Chinatown you could work off the books, no taxes, and end up with more money in your pocket.

“I’d like to find an employer who’s understanding about my taking time off. You know, for auditions and rehearsals. And my agent said I may have to travel.”

Johnny Liu laughed, shaking his head. “Forget it. No such employers. Just take the time off, say you’re sick. After a couple of times they’ll fire you, but you’ll probably get paid.”

“It seems very unscrupulous.” Margaret was nervous about the whole thing. Other than as an employee of the Royal Youth International, she had never actually had a job in the West.

“*Pei!* This is New York. Everybody’s playing his own game here. An hour after you’ve left, they will have forgotten all about you. There are plenty of workers for them; there are plenty of jobs for you.”

So it proved. Not much liking the idea of giving up a third of her income in taxes, Margaret took up employment as a salesgirl in a Chinese boutique on Canal Street. The Brooklyn recital, being merely a recital, needed only two rehearsals, both in the evening, and Margaret got through both rehearsals and recital without losing her job. Philadelphia, however, turned out to be a city three hours away by bus. She had to take a day off

work for the audition. The boutique didn't fire her; but with beginner's luck she got the part and had to be away a week, living in a hotel at the expense of the company that had engaged her. It was a mezzo role, covering for Lola in *Cavalleria rusticana*. A cover singer is there only to fill in for a principal; but the beginner's luck was running strong, Lola bowed out for a night with throat problems, and Margaret sang her first full-dress opera to an American audience. By the time she got back to New York the boutique had forgotten all about her. They paid her off with ill grace when she presented herself, but had got a new salesgirl already.

Colman was delighted with the Philadelphia success. "A flying start", he called it, and before she had been back a week had four auditions lined up for her. Now Margaret was working at a Chinese fast-food restaurant on Broadway, filling up and handing out little compartmented trays of noodles, rice, moo goo gai pan. She sang Rossini's Isabella at Amato Opera, an outfit run out of a warehouse on the lower east side by an eccentric Italian. Then she had to fly to Kansas City, halfway across the country, for a Verdi role, taking in Cleveland on the way back for an audition, so of course the fast-food job was lost. At short notice she sang *Carmen* for a small company out on Long Island—a role and language for which she knew she was unsuited, and which she had had no time to prepare properly, but for an audience too unsophisticated to notice. By this time she was sales assistant for a jewelry store on the Bowery, run by a Hong Kong couple who made so much money, and declared so little of it to the IRS, they had to use up all their spare time in trips to the gambling hotels in Atlantic City to spend it all before the little office back of the store silted up with bank notes.

There was a comprimario role—servant to Verdi's Lady Macbeth—at the Performing Arts Center of a famous college in New Jersey, which led to a principal role in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at that state's Opera Festival, so there went the jewelry job. The role was a success, though in too small a venue to be noticed much. It led to an audition in Boston, travel not paid. By the time she got back from Boston, Margaret's bank balance stood at forty-four dollars. She found another job quickly enough, at a fabric store in Allen Street, but was beginning to wonder if she could really sustain the freelance life for long.

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She told all this to Johnny Liu, visiting with him at his room one Saturday.

“It’s the travel that really hurts. Sometimes they will pay your fare, sometimes they won’t. But there’s always some expense involved, and of course you’re not earning anything while you’re traveling, and as often as not you’re going to lose your job. Yet I have to take advantage of these opportunities. I *have* to. For my career. But I just can’t afford it.”

Johnny Liu considered. “How about your other expenses?”

Margaret laughed. “What other expenses? I eat, I sleep.”

“How much do you pay Professor Shi?”

“Nothing. He knows my situation. He won’t let me. I’m embarrassed, of course. But it’s a necessity. He’s raising my range, he really is. I can reach E flat now, quite strong. And teaching me so much. He really understands my voice.”

“Wa, you’re lucky. Voice coaches here charge minimum sixty dollars an hour. So what’s your biggest expense, after travel?”

“Rent, of course. Three hundred dollars for that place.”

She was sitting in Johnny Liu’s single chair. He himself was stretched out on the bed, hands behind his head. He looked up at the ceiling for a while without speaking. Then he swung round to sit on the edge of the bed, elbows on knees, hands clasped. Looking squarely at her, he said: “I’ll make a suggestion. But maybe you won’t like it.”

“Why not? I’m willing to consider anything. You think I can get a place with lower rent?”

“Why do you need a room? Two can live cheaper than one.”

“I’m ashamed of you,” said Margaret, when the meaning had sunk in. “Making such a suggestion.” She laughed—a nervous, unnatural laugh, as she heard herself make it.

Johnny Liu did not laugh. He was very serious.

“Why not, Little Sister? We’ve known each other long enough, haven’t we? Who’s suitable to live together, if not us? It’s only for convenience, we both know that. There’s no deception involved. It would save you three hundred dollars a month. More: we’ll save on food, too.”

“I’m sure that’s not the main thing on your mind.” Again the clumsy laugh—she could not help it, it seemed.

“What’s on my mind is, I’m trying to help you.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know very well what you meant. Yes, there is only one bed.” Johnny Liu patted it with his hand. “And yes, I have strong needs, just like every other man. And how about you, Yuezhu? Women also have these needs, don’t they?”

“I don’t have that need,” said Margaret. But she was thinking of what Mr Lubetsky had said. And of Johnny Liu using her personal name, which she had very rarely heard from him.

Johnny Liu shrugged. “Maybe you don’t know you have it.”

“If I don’t know, why shouldn’t I just continue not knowing? Not knowing hasn’t done me any harm.”

“You’ve never done that thing?”

“No, Elder Brother. I’ve never done it.”

“Really? How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven last month.”

Now, for the first time in the conversation, Johnny Liu smiled at her. “Twenty-seven, Little Sister? Then it’s time. You can’t fight nature, you know. It’s a need, like eating and sleeping. It’s not good to go so long without it. It will affect your *yinyang*.”

“*Yinyang*? Since when are you an expert on traditional medicine, Elder Brother?”

“Doesn’t everybody know these things? You have to keep your *qi* in balance or your health will suffer.”

“Elder Brother, you really disappoint me. I never thought I’d have to fight *you* off.”

“You don’t have to fight me off at all. That’s a dumb thing to say. We’re both adults, aren’t we? You can make up your own mind what to do. I’m not putting any pressure on you. How could I? I have no pressure to put. It’s just a suggestion. I can’t see that there would be anything wrong with it. We both know it’s just for convenience. It’s not as if I’m making false promises to you. How can I?” Johnny Liu spread his hands and laughed. “I have nothing to promise. Except to save you some money.”

“What if we develop strong feelings for each other?”

“Well, then I suppose we would get married.”

“But what if only one of us developed strong feelings?”

Johnny Liu laughed again. “Then I think we would have to terminate the arrangement, wouldn’t we? Come on, Little Sister. You have to take chances in life. Nothing is guaranteed. Anyway, it’s not such a big chance you’d be taking. There’s nothing at stake here. Neither of us is going to lose anything.”

“Not true. I’m going to lose something.”

“Something you should have lost before. Something you’re better off without at the age of twenty-seven.”

Margaret was thinking again of Lubetsky’s words. Of his words; and of her voice, her voice, her voice. And three hundred dollars a month. Neither she nor Johnny Liu said anything for quite a long time. Then Margaret said: “All right.”

* * *

The first night with Johnny Liu, Margaret thought she had made a mistake. The *tongfang* business was much messier and more painful than she had supposed, insofar as she had ever formed any suppositions about it at all. Johnny Liu’s *jiba* seemed as big and hard as a bamboo carrying-pole, and when he pushed it into her she felt as if she was being split in half. There was a lot of blood, which she had not expected. Johnny Liu did his best to soothe and reassure her, but still she felt—lying there in the dark after the mess had been dealt with, Johnny Liu sleeping beside her—that she could not go through with it again, and had better find some way to tell him this. Try as she might, however, she could not think of any way to say it that would not make her look timid and foolish.

The second night, still unable to find a way to phrase the larger rejection, she told him she still hurt, and he was sympathetic and understanding. The third night, however, he was very urgent. Lying with her back to him, she could feel his *jiba* big and hard, pressing insistently against her leg and bottom, and Johnny Liu began stroking her hip and breasts with his hands and murmuring her name. Margaret had been to an

especially trying audition and was too tired to put up any real resistance, so she let him do it. The pain was not as bad as the first time, and there was very little blood now, and she thought she might be able to endure the arrangement after all.

After that it was much easier. It was some time before Margaret could honestly say that she enjoyed *tongfang* with Johnny Liu, but she no longer minded it, and living with him was certainly very agreeable and convenient. And there were times when she felt it was at least comforting to have Johnny Liu's large, strong body next to her in the bed, even to feel his arms around her, holding her.

Outside the narrow bed, their relationship did not change to something else, as she had feared it might. He still called her Little Sister; he was still the same cheerful, confident, somewhat boastful, Johnny Liu she had always known. Only now he had a tenderness, a quiet solicitude towards her that had not been there before.

His concern for her *yinyang*, for example, turned out to be quite genuine. Over dinner one evening she mooted the idea of going to a gynecologist and getting birth control pills, to save Johnny Liu the inconvenience of prophylactics. Johnny Liu shook his head firmly at this.

"Birth control pills are no good. They upset your body's natural balance. It would have a bad effect on your voice, I'm sure."

"But those things you use. Such a nuisance."

"Do you hear me complaining? It's not a problem. Don't go putting strange chemicals into your blood for my convenience. I won't ask that from you."

After this conversation Margaret's last doubts about the arrangement disappeared. They fell into a comfortable routine, taking turns at cooking and laundry, shopping together when they could, going to the Chinese movie theaters when there were a few dollars to spare. It was April when she moved in with Johnny Liu. The Boston audition was a success, and in May she went off to sing Rossini's *Cinderella* in that city. After that it was summer.

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Johnny Liu had a sure way to make money in the summer months. He told Margaret about it over breakfast one Saturday, after she came back from Boston. It was a business he had discovered by himself the previous year.

In downtown Manhattan there was a place called South Street Seaport. It was a big open pedestrian area with shops and bars, and some mooring docks for small boats. Young people from all over the city went there in the evenings to drink and meet with each other. It was not a cheap place. The young people paid four or five dollars for a single drink, and they drank until they were drunk. When they were drunk, they hardly knew where they were. That was what gave Johnny Liu the idea. He bought a big Polaroid camera and a shoulder bag to carry it in. Then he walked around South Street Seaport asking the young people if they wanted a picture taken. He asked five dollars for a picture. The Polaroid film was only ten dollars for a pack of ten, the flashbulbs six dollars for ten, so there was more than two hundred per cent clear profit.

The first time he tried it (Johnny Liu went on) he had started too early. The young people had just laughed at him and walked away. As the evening wore on, however, and the young people filled up with drink, they became more willing to have their pictures taken. By the early morning hours, when the bars closed down, the customers were so drunk they often forgot to take change. Johnny could make four hundred dollars on a busy night. It was no good if it was raining, of course. And the security guards were a problem until he'd worked on them a little. New security guards—they changed all the time—threatened to call the police on him, and he had to appeal to their sympathies, say he was a poor student from China struggling to get through college.

“Why don't you just bribe them?” asked Margaret. “Give them a ten dollar bill.”

Johnny Liu laughed at her innocence. “You really led a sheltered life in China, Little Sister, didn't you? Let me tell you about bribery in a situation of that sort. Yes, ten dollars will do the trick tonight. Tomorrow they'll want twenty. Next week they'll be asking for a cut of the profits. Better to rely on charm and tact.” He cultivated the security guards care-

fully (Johnny Liu went on), always giving them a smile, always stopping for a chat. They were all black; and the good thing about black people was, they didn't stand on rules and regulations too much, so long as they liked you. The same with Irish people. The bartenders were all Irish, and he worked them the same way. He could get as many free drinks as he wanted. Johnny Liu himself didn't drink; but he could generally sneak the drinks out to the security guards, who were not supposed to drink. This further cemented his relationship with them. By summer's end that previous year everybody knew Johnny the photographer. When another Chinese with a camera turned up one evening the security guards immediately called the police to take him away. *This your pitch here, Johnny. We don't want nobody else takin' pictures here.* The young people got to know Johnny too, and sometimes came looking for him to take a picture. These special commissions were usually something disgraceful. The young boys especially liked to stand in a line facing away from him and drop their pants together, so that he could take a photograph of their bare bottoms while their girlfriends stood at one side giggling. They called this a *moon shot*. Once or twice, when it was very late and they were all very drunk, the girls themselves even joined in the *moon shot*. Americans really had no shame!

Margaret's own employment was on a more secure footing. After coming back from Boston she had told her financial troubles to Professor Shi in considerable detail. Professor Shi had reached out his hand in some way and found her a position with the one New York employer willing to tolerate sudden absences. It was a record store on the west side in midtown, owned by a man Professor Shi had met somehow. The man was an opera lover, and not only agreed to give Margaret whatever time off she needed, but gave instruction to the store manager that she was to be allowed to play any kind of music she liked over the Classical Department's PA system.

Now Johnny Liu was going to South Street Seaport every night if there was no rain, and had given up daytime work altogether. On Margaret's days off they would go to Central Park together. There was a shed in the park where you could hire bicycles for five dollars an hour. Then you could ride all round the park on the roads where no cars were allowed.

Margaret loved this, whirling along under the trees, in and out of the summer sunshine, feeling the wind on her face. Johnny Liu, who had not kept up his voice exercises, did not have her lung power, and after two or three circuits of the park would fall behind, calling out to her for mercy. Then they would go to the restaurant by the lake and eat ice cream, sitting at a neat white table under the parasol watching the people boating on the lake—a scene of such charm and serenity that Margaret was moved, the first time, to say without thinking: “Wa! Just like a foreign country!” Johnny Liu laughed long and helplessly at this, and went back to laugh at it in spasms for the rest of the afternoon.

The Cleveland audition got her a role in a concert performance of *Aida* with that city’s Opera Orchestra in August. There are few auditions in late summer, and she had no actual engagements until December. Margaret thought she would begin the new season in much the same circumstances as she had begun the last, having made no real progress at all in her career. She wondered if she might not, after all, have been better staying with Royal Youth International, with all its drawbacks; and thought that if Colman could pull off a full contract—a one-year engagement with an established company—she would accept it, even if it were in Alaska.

Then Bellini, whom Wagner called “that sweet Sicilian”, smiled down on her again.