

Chapter 50

A Romantic Tragedy Has Weilin's Full Attention
The Way That Can Be Spoken Of Is Not The True Way

In all his seven years in New York William had never been to the opera. He knew about it, of course. At least, he knew about the Met. The older Wall Street crowd—the MDs, the Treasurers, the white-shoe lawyers and accountants—all patronized the Met. It was a grand place, a class place: a place for people like them, people with money who wanted to show they had finer sensibilities, too. They liked to be seen there, among their own kind, among the power players of business and politics. They liked it to be known that they supported the place from their own pockets, their names printed up in the programs for all to see as “benefactors” or “donors”. They liked to breeze out of the office saying: “Must go, we’re seeing *Don Giovanni*, hate to miss that overture.” They liked to be heard humming a choice aria in the elevator. And—such is the civilizing power of art—whatever their original motives for going to see opera might have been, eventually they liked the music.

William had never been part of this. Though he thought of himself as perfectly respectable now, perfectly Wall Street, and believed that the other players so regarded him, he had never developed any enthusiasm for these extramural displays of wealth and culture. That kind of thing was, in any case, much more indulged in at the older firms on the Street. For all Wechsel Cassidy Bruno’s success and prestige, long-time employees still cherished their image as insurgents—lower-middle-class poach-

ers in the hunting preserves of the gentry. In 1983, when new hires were turning up on the trading floor in British wool suits and silk ties, some of the older hands had even tried to start up a company bowling league at the Madison Square Garden lanes in a rearguard effort to maintain the white-trash ethos.

Furthermore William had never thought of himself as having any particular feeling for music. Perhaps that was a reaction; perhaps he had shut music from his mind after losing Gordon. The Ngs' musical tastes had reached no further than Country and Western, and the stylized declamatory mannerisms of Cantonese opera. William's life since leaving the Ngs had just been too busy. Since those evenings when Gordon had sat head back in his armchair letting the room fill up with Callas, Tebaldi, Di Stefano, Corelli, music had made no claims on William's attention. It had ignored him, and he had returned the favor.

As soon as the Teaneck deal had been put to bed, early in December, he spoke to Theo about the opera, judging correctly that Theo would be the person most likely to know of such things.

"Why," said Theo, "you just call up the Met and get a subscription. There are different levels of subscription—depends how much of your money you want to give 'em. Sponsor, patron, benefactor, guarantor. Be a benefactor, that's the best thing. Guarantor's kind of over the top. Corporations, mostly, looking to put a shine on their name, and get a tax break of course. But benefactor's fine. You get to go to all the parties."

"Is that what you are, a benefactor?"

"Right. Fifty grand." Theo shrugged, a little embarrassed at himself for having been so vulgar as to mention the price. "It's a great institution, great for the city, great for the country. I'm glad to do it."

"Is there anything I need to know before I go to the opera?"

"Well, whatever opera it is you're going to see, get a libretto and read it through. They sell librettos in the bookstore right there. Then you'll know what's happening. You can't tell from the singing, even if you know the language. City Opera, they show a running translation on a screen over the stage, you could try that if you like. But it's a barn of a place and they don't get the big international stars. The Met's the thing."

"What. . . what's the *point* of opera? I mean, what am I looking for?"

Theo laughed. “Depends what kind. Easiest is Italian. You’ve got a tenor in love with the soprano. She’s involved somehow with the bass who tries to get her away from the tenor. There’s a mezzo who helps her—a friend, a maid or something, or possibly a rival; and a baritone who helps make the plot work. If the tenor gets the soprano it’s a comedy and ends with a marriage. If not it’s a tragedy and everybody dies. There you go. The Germans are more complicated though. You know Germans. The Italians want to make you laugh or cry. The Germans want to make you think.”

“Sounds like I should start with Italian. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Well, the Met’s doing *I Capuleti*. You could try that. It’s the Romeo and Juliet story, which I guess you probably know. Pretty straightforward. Not a long opera. Classic stand-up arias. Oh, and the soprano is a fellow-countryman of yours. Countrywoman, I should say. Came in at the last minute out of left field. Been getting good reviews.”

“Have you seen it yourself?”

“Nineteenth we’re going. If you call ’em they’ll get you in.” Theo laughed. “If you sign up as a benefactor they’ll get you in for sure. On the stage if necessary. They love those big checks.”

It was not on the stage but in Theo’s box that William was sitting when the orchestra struck up the overture to *I Capuleti* that December 19th. He had thought that before making any large commitment he should sample both the art form and the theater, and Theo made the necessary arrangements. The box was at stage right on the third level, and it was from there, with the occasional aid of Theo’s wife’s antique mother-of-pearl opera glasses, that he saw the assembly of the Capulets, the rejection of Romeo’s peace offer, and Juliet—Giulietta, she was named in the program—in wedding dress, pacing her apartment alone.

Giulietta’s appearance made no particular impression on William. She was Chinese, clearly, as Theo had told him. Somewhat smaller than the other singers, he thought, though since there was no-one else on stage it was difficult to be sure.

The first two minutes of the scene was a horn solo, Giulietta pacing to and fro in silence. She moved with much grace—the grace of a dancer.

Then she sang some recitative, to no particular melody. William could make nothing of the words, but could appreciate the contrast between the girl's distressful state of mind and the joyous finery of her wedding dress. Still it was only a fellow-countrywoman in heavy stage makeup, singing sad words in a strong, restrained voice. William was trying—trying consciously, and therefore failing—to recreate the sensation of long before, sitting in the apartment with Gordon listening to the voice of the goddess. It was the *romanza* that revealed the astonishing truth to him.

The *romanza* was introduced by harp, then harp and woodwinds, then solo harp again bringing in the voice. The voice! William knew at once, though it was the lower, closing notes that convinced him of what he knew but could not at first credit. By that time he had the opera glasses fixed on *Giulietta's* face and yes, it was certain.

The *romanza* was very well received. Several calls of *Brava!* rang out as the music closed and *Giulietta* sank on to her couch, head lowered, hand covering brow in an attitude of great despair. There was a long spell of applause, dying down then rising up again. As the applause went on, William thought she might rise and come down to stage front to make a curtsy; but she did not. By this time he had located the printed insert in the program notes.

Margaret Han, *soprano*

Born in southwest China and trained as a mezzo-soprano at the Music Conservatory of Beijing, Miss Han was a founder member of the Royal Youth International Opera Company of London, England, under the patronage of the Prince of Wales. Her roles included Cherubino and *Mélisande*. Following her success as *Isoletta* in Bellini's *La straniera* at the 1984 Wexford Festival she decided to pursue an independent career based in New York, and at the same time began working to lift her range so that she might take on soprano roles. Recent engagements include *Lola* with Philadelphia Opera, Verdi's *Maddalena* at Kansas City Opera, *Dorabella* at New Jersey Opera Festival, the title role in *La Cenerentola* at Boston's Willis Center, and

Amneris as a guest singer with Cleveland Opera Orchestra.
Giulietta is her first major soprano role and her Met debut.

“Is there any way to meet the singers?” William asked Theo in the interval, walking the corridor behind to the bar.

“Any singer in particular?”

“The soprano. My countrywoman. It’s possible—it’s a long shot, but possible—I might know her.”

Theo laughed. “I would never have taken you for a stage-door Johnny, William.” He had to explain this, it was an idiom William did not know.

“I’m just interested to meet her. We both come from the same part of China. Seem to be similar ages. And here we are, both in New York. Like to compare notes.”

“I don’t know. You could have flowers sent to her dressing room, I suppose. Or perhaps you really could hang around the stage door. I’m not at all sure how these things work. You need a top hat and a cloak, I think, and a silver-topped cane.”

“I think the management rather frown on that sort of thing, actually,” said Theo’s wife. William thought she herself was mentally frowning at it. “These singers really are high-strung, you know. They don’t like any kind of harassment.”

“There’s the Christmas party, of course,” said Theo. “They always have a bash for the benefactors at Christmas. This coming Sunday, in fact. I can probably get you in. Pony up the fifty thou, they’ll send a coach and four to fetch you.”

“Do the singers go?”

“If they can get ‘em to. Anything to pull in the punters. But the big names, you know, they often have to be somewhere else for an engagement. And some hate to use their voices too much, specially in rooms where people are smoking. And some just don’t like partying with a bunch of Manhattan socialites.” Theo laughed, not at all self-consciously. “It’s not everybody’s cup of tea. If you’re not au courant with who’s boinking whom on Fifth and Fifty-seventh you don’t have a lot to tell them.”

“Theo! *Really.*” Now Theo’s wife actually was frowning.

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The party was held in a hotel called The Marque up on the West Side, on the Sunday evening before Christmas. Coming down the half-dozen steps into the main room, William saw her at once. Her face, now without stage makeup, was smooth and round, rounder than he remembered. She had a good figure, he noted; full now of course, yet not the barrel-chested bulkiness one might have thought if one had only heard her singing, but the wiry equine strength he remembered from the very first, from the pool in Seven Kill Stele, her clavicles smooth and perfect emerging from the flowered bathing costume, her hand gripping his arm. Now those clavicles were in plain sight above the top of a low-cut sheath dress in some shiny black material enhanced with gold. She—Margaret, that was what she called herself in English—was standing in a group of five, herself and two couples, just to the side of the inevitable ice sculpture, and was explaining something, something about the voice, placing her hand horizontal and palm up level with her chin, then raising it slowly, as if by an effort. Meanwhile the large, mobile eyes (how many years? twenty? nineteen!) were flicking here and there, unable to stay long on her listeners. By the instinct we have of being watched, the eyes picked out his, and held them for a moment, then went back to her companions. No recognition.

William walked away to Theo's group, a Wall Street crowd who, when William arrived, were all talking about Talmadge Tucker. It had been announced that Friday that TT was giving up the ghost. Overstone Bruys had been forced to engineer a sale to Freeholders, a big insurance company. "Poor Overstone," someone was saying. "Arrived at the banquet just as they were serving coffee." Everybody laughed. Theo introduced the only person William did not know, an old dry woman of great elegance with an ancient name and a fortune in real estate. All the time William was checking on Margaret, waiting for her to be alone, until for a moment she was. He excused himself abruptly to Theo's people and walked over.

"I enjoyed your performance last Thursday very much," he said in Mandarin.

She smiled up at him, a little warily—a pretty woman too often approached by strange men bearing flattery. Still no recognition at all. “Thank you,” she said. “I can’t place your accent. Cantonese?”

“Not so far south,” said William. “Tell me: have you ever sung *Madame Butterfly*?”

He said the name of the opera in Chinese—*Hudie Furen*—which would not normally be done among English-speaking fellow-countrymen, and which puzzled her for a second or two.

“*Hudie Furen*? What? Oh, I see.” A nervous laugh, with something in it from deep in the chest, just as he remembered. That ancient thrill again. “No, I never have. It’s a soprano role, and I’ve only just established myself as a soprano. Also it’s considered rather a heavy role, for mature singers, and I’m still a youngster by opera standards.” The eyes moving from side to side more than on him now, looking to escape from this odd boor who would not introduce himself.

“But you have *danced* the part of a butterfly. That I know.”

She furrowed her brows. He had her full attention now. “Yes,” she said, “I used to be a dancer, it’s true. But a butterfly? I don’t think . . .”

“The part of Zhu Yingtai. In the story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, the butterfly lovers. In the hollow behind the bamboo thicket on the Chengdu road.”

Now there was something he could savor! The large, beautiful eyes widening, widening, like the eyes of the dogs in the Andersen story—like saucers, like mill wheels, like the Round Tower. Behind them, slow recognition, recovery of things long buried. The fevered daytime dreams of pubescence—an iridescent butterfly, golden and naked; a mossy plinth; blood dripping to the floor from a bench; all connected somehow. Shouting voices on the basketball court under artificial light: DENOUNCE! DENOUNCE! Scattered loquats on dry brown earth. And further back, something long forgotten—yes, she had reached it—dancing Zhu Yingtai in the hollow among the bamboo. Margaret blinked very fast twice, and a hand flew up to cover her mouth with the tips of its fingers.

“Oh! So long ago! Liang. . . Liang. . . I can’t remember the given name.”

William laughed. "Then perhaps you had better call me Liang Shanbo."

"Don't be silly."

The rebuke was pleasing to William. It was just as she had been in ancient times: somewhat sharp, bossy, always ready with a reproof. One of Nature's schoolmistresses. It was oddly satisfying that after so many years, so very many years, things should be just as they were. An affirmation of the fundamental stability of the universe, perhaps—like the sun rising every day. But now that she had remembered the hollow behind the bamboo grove, all the initial wariness came back in triple force. She looked as if she were ready to bolt.

"In this place I am called William Leung," said William, switching into English to complete the topic. "L-E-U-N-G. After I left . . ." (he could not bring himself to name the town) ". . .the southwest, I went to Hong Kong. I had to speak Cantonese, and my name went into Cantonese too, and I guess my accent got corrupted."

"Weilin. Now I remember. I guess that's where you got 'William' from."

"Yes. How about 'Margaret'?"

"One of the foreign teachers at Beijing Conservatory. It means 'pearl', you see."

"Ah-ha." Quite deliberately William said nothing more, just waited her out. He could not be quite sure, watching her, that she recalled what she had done; but clearly she knew there was something unpleasant separating them. She was very uncomfortable, turning her head this way and that in desperation, anything not to meet his eyes now.

While William was still waiting, Margaret's prayers were answered. A person William did not know, a Jewish guy of fifty or so, close-cropped gray hair and beard framing a tanned face, joined them. He made a small bow to Margaret, shook her offered hand, and said: "Your voice is very beautiful, Miss Han. I hope we shall hear much more of it." Margaret thanked him, relieved but still distracted, her eyes not knowing where to go. The Jew turned to William, who of course he recognized, and shook hands, saying some words of congratulation about the Teaneck deal, which he seemed to know all about. William nodded, making to step

away; then, in the moment when the Jew turned his attention back to Margaret, said loudly and clearly in Mandarin: “You killed my father.”

Margaret looked as if she had been shot in the back. Eyes, yes, like mill-wheels, staring right at him now.

“I’m sorry?” The Jew did not seem to grasp that William had been speaking Chinese. He looked at William, then at Margaret. Seeing Margaret’s face, all his cocktail-party affability dropped away. By instinct he reached out a hand to take her elbow. “Are you all right, Miss Han?” And glanced back to William—something accusing in his bafflement, knight riding to a lady’s rescue.

Again in Chinese: “You and your accursed half brother, you killed my father.”

This time the guy grasped that it was not English. He frowned at the display of bad manners. William turned and walked away, not looking back. He stood with Theo’s group a while, taking in nothing. When he looked around Margaret had gone. He did a comprehensive scan: definitely gone, the Jewish guy too. However had she got out of Qinghai Province?

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The man who took her home was called Jake Robbins. He was a producer; though a producer of what, Margaret could not have said. He had told her about himself in great detail on the drive to Flushing, and asked her questions about herself to which she gave answers; but so distracted was she by the encounter at the party that very few of their words stayed in her mind.

Jake thought she had been insulted somehow, by those words in her language he had not understood. Chivalrously he offered to seek some satisfaction for her: to go back and tell the guy off, extract some kind of apology from him. But Margaret said no, it wasn’t important, she had gone to the party against her better judgment anyway, having suffered all day from a migraine headache, and there had been a small disagreement about a business matter, and she had begun to feel faint. She thanked

the man called Jake and firmly declined his offer to see her into the house.

Johnny Liu was out visiting some Shanghai people who had recently arrived in New York. The room was empty. Margaret went back downstairs to the kitchen to make tea. She brought the tea back up to the room, together with some dried jujubes in a cellophane packet. So his father had died. She honestly had not known that, didn't remember hearing it. She remembered him being beaten—yes, they had beaten him, and in the melee someone had stepped on her and scraped the skin from her leg. That was all she could recall. But his father had died; and he remembered; and he still bore the resentment.

Margaret changed into pajamas, taking out her earrings, carefully hanging up the dress, which had cost four hundred dollars. A bargain at that; it was the kind of dress you might pay twelve hundred dollars for in Lord and Taylor or Saks. But Johnny Liu knew rag trade middlemen in Chinatown, and had got it for her on a deal. Soon he would be home.

She took off her makeup, then lay down on the bed, thinking of the strange incident, and of Liang Weilin. Yes, they had been friends, though how it had come about she could not recall. He had liked her a lot, she knew. Perhaps he had been in love with her, in a juvenile way. She had liked him, too. He had been very handsome, she remembered thinking. Athletic, too—a good swimmer. And with a kind of wry thoughtfulness she had liked very much. He had used to walk home along the road past the barracks, and she would make a point of playing there just at the time he came by, and they would walk together up to the college, then buy loquats at the little store set in the college wall. After that they would walk along the Chengdu Road to a bamboo grove. In the grove they sat and talked, or sometimes played; though what they talked about, or what games were played, were lost to her. Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, he had mentioned that. Perhaps he had told her that story; or perhaps she had told it to him. What did it matter, really? Childish things, so long ago. Yet she could not stop thinking about it. The more she thought about it, the more details emerged from the fog.

This guy—William, he called himself—was he an enemy? Margaret had never thought of herself as having enemies. Secretary Ma, perhaps—

but he had disliked her on general and unjustified grounds, and not from any personal grievance. The man called Jake, who had taken her home in his car, had said something about William being immensely rich. “Big player on Wall Street”, or words to that effect. If he was really her enemy—if he considered himself as such—could he harm her career? Now that her career had turned for the better?

Anna Argoletto, the soprano who should have been singing *Giulietta*, had advanced from influenza to pleurisy and was out of action for the rest of the New York season. Her original cover had got her voice back within the week; but by that time Margaret had had her little triumph, and Colman had parlayed it into a full engagement, and she had sung *Giulietta* twice more, the last time *flying* through the *romanza* in that same peculiar abstracted state of being, or non-being, she had experienced at Wexford, and she was to sing it twice more again in January. The reviews had been good, if not ecstatic. Much better than the reviews—which (Colman said) would soon be forgotten—was the way she had stepped in to save the production. With one stroke Margaret had established a solid reputation as a trouper, a pro—the kind of reputation that could take years to build, and that would stand her in very good stead with managers and conductors everywhere. The people who ran the world’s opera houses lived on their nerves (Colman had further explained), and next to a great voice they most loved a reliable singer who could walk out and take a role with minimal preparation, who could get them out of the holes they so often found themselves in. Yes, Margaret could feel that her career had taken off at last.

And now, this William person, coming out of nowhere to be her enemy. Was this the counter-blow she always half-expected? The demon’s revenge, the rock that came tied to every piece of good fortune she had ever had? perhaps she would talk to Johnny Liu about it. Perhaps he would have some idea about how to proceed.

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It was not to Johnny Liu that she spoke, however. She fell asleep before he came home, and next day, reflecting on the matter over breakfast while

Johnny slept, she thought he might not be the right person to go to for advice. His own family had suffered badly in the Cultural Revolution, and Margaret did not feel she wanted to reveal herself as having been among the persecutors of that time. Then Colman called her before Johnny woke, and she went to Manhattan to see him about some engagements he was setting up for her. He was very busy on her behalf now, and spoke of San Francisco, Sydney, Vienna, Milan.

“La Scala, Milan?” [Naming the oldest and most famous of all opera houses.]

“Perhaps. It’s not certain. Fingers crossed, young lady, fingers crossed. You have to sing the European houses, you know. Rite of passage. And now we’re in a position to set up a really good tour for you. It’ll be hard work, several new roles to learn, but a wonderful boost for your career.”

Margaret had half-thought she might ask Colman’s advice about this enemy, but the thought of singing at La Scala put it out of her mind. It was to Professor Shi that she unburdened herself at last, that same afternoon.

“The name is familiar to me,” said Professor Shi, when she had explained about William. “He is often mentioned in the local Chinese press. I had the impression he was Cantonese, perhaps from seeing his name in its American spelling somewhere. Or perhaps I have heard it spoken in some context. I never thought you might be acquainted with him.”

“It was a childhood friendship,” said Margaret. “I had forgotten all about it.”

“But *he* had not.” Professor Shi chuckled. “What different things we can mean to each other! A chance acquaintance, forgotten in an instance. A glance across a room—a face seen, a voice heard, then lost in the chaos of life. Yet the other party, all unknown to us, is pierced to the soul, his life changed utterly. Is there no balance, no reciprocity in life? Of course, there is, there always is; only sometimes it is too deep for us to fathom. Ah! ‘The Way that can be spoken of is not the true Way’.” [Quoting the *Morality Classic*.]

“That’s all very well.” Margaret had not much patience with her teacher’s philosophizing. “In the meantime, what am I to do? I don’t need enemies at this point in my career. Not an enemy who is one of the richest

men in America. Who knows what he might do? Perhaps he will pay the houses not to engage me.”

“He he he he he!” Professor Shi laughed his odd, effeminate laugh. “That is how it would be done in China, to be sure. But I don’t think that kind of thing happens much here. Americans have strong principles. Still, you should try to make peace with this person. Other considerations aside, this is, as you have said, a critical point in your career. Based on your recent success, you will soon have a full schedule of engagements all over the world. You will need all your strength and all your concentration to acquire new roles and keep your voice at its best. You do not need worries and distractions of this sort.”

“Then what do you think I should do?”

“Why, explain yourself to him. Persuade him to see your point of view. You were only a child. A child is not culpable in law.”

Margaret put a hand to her mouth. “Oh! I should be afraid to meet him again. He scares me. You should have heard the way he said it. *You killed my father*. Such feeling! It pierced me like an ice-cold sword! If I could pack that much feeling into my voice I should be another Callas.”

“Then write him a letter. You have a good education, you know how to express yourself in writing.”

“Even that. . . I’m really afraid of this guy.”

Professor Shi leaned forward and patted her knee. “Were you not afraid when you first stepped out in front of an audience, every one of them ready to judge and condemn your merest error? Were you not afraid last month when you stood on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House to perform a role you had never rehearsed? Nothing can be accomplished if we are inhibited by fear, Yuezhu.”

“Yes,” said Margaret. “Yes, of course. I must write to him. But where does he live? How can I find out?”

“I shall make some inquiries. Please, Little Han, leave it to me.”