

## Chapter 55

Johnny Liu Mates Expedience with Sincerity

A Chivalrous Gentleman Performs a Second Rescue

The first person Margaret told was Vinnie, the second was Old Shi, and the third was Johnny Liu.

She told Vinnie in his dressing-room before the final *Sonnambula*. In opera, as in all the performing arts, and also in war, a very great deal of time is spent standing (or sitting) around waiting for things to happen. Opera singers in general like to be at a house early to practice vocalizing, in case there is any peculiarity of the indoor air their voices need to get used to. This is particularly true at the New York Met, which makes extensive use of humidifiers to settle the dust raised by moving huge stage sets around twice a day. Humid air is better for singers than dry air; but it still needs adjusting to. The stage manager of the Met at this time was in any case rather stern about performers being in costume and made up in good time; and so Margaret and Vinnie were sitting in Vinnie's dressing room twenty minutes before curtain, for an opera which in any case did not require either of them until the third scene.

Vinnie's expression of surprise and delight was exaggerated by the heavy makeup he was wearing. "So, my Perlinetta? Who is the *fortunato*?"

Margaret told him. Vinnie's forehead puckered for a moment, then he recalled.

"The one who is giving us *Norma*, yes?"

"*San ju bu li ben hang*," said Margaret, laughing.

“Ohimè, my little pearl, I cannot understand Chinese.”

“It’s an idiom. Means your thoughts never stray far from your profession.”

“But is that one, yes? Very ’andsome fellow, was ’ere the first performance.”

“Yes. That one.”

Vinnie raised himself from his dressing chair and came over to hers. He kneeled down beside her, took her hand and kissed it.

“My blessings, sweet Perlina.” Vinnie raised his face and hands to Heaven. “Dio vi benedica! Voi e lui! Dio vi felicitì!” He stood, beaming down at her. “’E is very rich, is ’e not?”

“Yes, very.” She laughed gaily. “Perhaps we shall buy a house next to yours in Pesaro.”

Vinnie laughed too, loud and happy. “Yes, Perlina, I ’ope you will. We shall feast together on the beach and sing duetti to the seagulls.”

The five minute buzzer sounded. Vinnie was still standing by her, beaming down at her.

“Tonight you will sing ‘Ah! non giunge’ with true feeling,” he said, referring to a famous aria at the end of the opera, in which the heroine, going off to the church to be wed after many tribulations and misunderstandings, sings “human thought cannot conceive the happiness that fills me . . .”

“I think our path to this marriage has been even more difficult than Amina’s,” said Margaret, naming that heroine.

“But now all will be smooth, ‘sempre uniti in una speme’,” [united for ever in one hope] “sweet Margherita.” Taking her hands, Vinnie lifted her to her feet and embraced her, folding her against his huge bulk and yet, with the instinct of a professional, keeping her makeup away from his costume, and his from hers.

“I will kiss the bride,” he said, “*hafter* the opera, when we are abito civile” [in plain clothes] “again. Now let us go and do our work!”

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She told Old Shi two days later, calling on him to discuss some minor weaknesses in her chest register that he felt had been revealed by the *Sonnambula* performances—two of which he had attended.

Old Shi took the news in perfect silence, just sitting and blinking at her for thirty seconds.

“You don’t seem very happy for me,” said Margaret.

“What is the necessity for it?” asked Old Shi.

“Necessity? What an odd thing to say! There’s no necessity. He’s rich and handsome and we’ve known each other since childhood. He’s asked me several times and each time I’ve come closer to accepting. He just wore me down, I guess.”

“You told me he was going to sponsor a *Norma* for you to sing. Was this a condition?”

“No, of course not. I must say, Old Shi, you might offer me some congratulations.”

“What about all that bitterness between you?”

“Oh, those are things in the past. What’s the use of fretting over them? Human beings have to cope with the present and the future. We shouldn’t be trapped by our past.”

“But knowledge of a person’s past behavior can show us his character.”

“There’s nothing seriously wrong with his character. What he did to me was the kind of thing anybody might do if they had the money to do it.”

“Qin Shi Huang murdered a thousand scholars,” said Old Shi, referring to an evil emperor in ancient times. “But probably anybody might have done that if they’d been emperor.”

“Really,” said Margaret, somewhat irritated by her teacher’s perfect lack of enthusiasm, “I’m quite old enough to know what I’m doing.”

Old Shi shook his head suddenly several times, as if to clear it after receiving a blow. Then he laughed his odd high laugh and came up from his piano stool to shake her hand.

“Of course, my dear Yuezhu, of course. Forgive me. . . I’ve had some business matters on my mind. I wish you happiness! Ha ha ha! And since you are to be the wife of a rich man, I am now going to start charging you full rate for your lessons. A hundred dollars an hour! He he he he he!”

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It was as a matter of principle—the feeling that it would have been wrong for him to find out in any other way—that she sought out Johnny Liu and told him. She called him that Saturday evening and they met for dim sum the next morning, at a restaurant in Flushing. It was some months since she had seen him, so that half an hour was spent catching up on each other's doings. Johnny had developed an entirely new strategy for getting a Green Card. He had joined a little nest of Chinese dissidents in Flushing. They put out a Chinese-language magazine called *Bitter Herbs*, arguing for democracy and freedom in China. There were many small groups of that sort (Johnny told her) all over the western world. It was a movement.

Margaret laughed. "Haven't the Chinese people had enough of movements?"

"This is a movement *against* movements, Little Sister, a movement to end movements. This is a movement for freedom and democracy in China, so that China can be a normal country, a peaceful country like the countries of the West, with no more upheavals, no more movements."

Johnny Liu was quite in earnest. His plan was that when his activities in the movement were sufficiently well known and documented, he could claim political asylum. Since the authorities in China would certainly torture and kill anyone involved in one of these organizations, should the person be foolish enough to go back to China, the claim would be a true one. Yet still, though he had embarked on this course from expediency, Johnny really seemed to have found a kind of home in the group he had joined. He had always hated the communists, Margaret knew; now he had the opportunity to express his hatred in a way that was advantageous to himself. The perfect marriage of expedience and sincerity—entirely suitable to Johnny's character, she could not help but reflect.

Margaret understood all this very well, yet she could not resist poking fun at him. "What a stinking opportunist!" she mocked, using one of the propaganda phrases from their childhood. "Advancing your own interests under cover of patriotism!"

"Why not, Little Sister? There's no dishonesty about it. I'd really like to see democracy in our motherland. Wouldn't you?"

“I suppose so. I don’t know. I really don’t care about those things. I have my own life, which I try to live as best I can. Why get mixed up in ‘large matters under Heaven’? It’s only making trouble for yourself and your family.”

Margaret told him about her engagement. Johnny knew the name Liang Weilin, of course—every Chinese person in New York knew it—but Margaret had never spoken to Johnny of her ties with William. He was, therefore, perfectly astounded. He sat there frozen for a full half minute, his mouth open loose like an idiot’s, hand poised above the table with a morsel of *siu mai* in his chopsticks. “Wa!” was all he could say, when he was able to speak. “Wa! Little Sister! One of the richest men in America! How ever did you. . . Wa!” He laughed. “Oh, I can’t believe it. Is it true?”

“It’s true. We’ve known each other since childhood, actually. I never told you.”

“That’s right, you both come from the same district. I never thought of that. And you’ve been seeing him?”

“Yes.”

“Wa! *Waaaaa!* Oh, Little Sister, I’m so happy for you!”

This was clearly true. Setting down the *siu mai* at last, Johnny Liu rose from his seat and reached over to shake her hand, grinning wildly. “Such a rich guy! Oh!—think what it means for your career! You can sing just what you like now.”

“Better than that. He’s going to pay the Met to do an opera for me. Bellini’s *Norma*.”

“Oh, Heaven, Little Sister, you are the luckiest person alive. I am really happy for you. Hey!—will your husband give some money to our movement? We are very hard up, you know. He could be the next Song Yaoru.” [Referring to a Chinese businessman who had bankrolled Sun Yatsen’s revolution at the beginning of the century, and whose family had then risen to great power and wealth.]

“I don’t think he wants to be a Song Yaoru. But I could make the suggestion.”

Johnny Liu called over the manager and ordered two cups of white liquor. When they arrived, he raised a solemn toast, looking into Margaret’s eyes as he spoke the words.

“To the union of art and wealth, of beauty and enterprise, for the happiness of all and the glory of our motherland, which will one day be prosperous and free, through the efforts and sacrifices of our generation. *Ganbei!*” [Drain your cup!]

“What a complicated toast!” laughed Margaret. “I’d prefer just to say: To my future happiness, and also to yours, dear Johnny, wherever you may find it. *Ganbei!*”

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After *Sonnambula* Margaret had two back-to-back engagements on the West Coast: a Mozart recital in Los Angeles and a Violetta with San Francisco City Opera. She called William at the Pierre suite when she got back to New York. She assumed he was making some preparations for their wedding, and wanted to ask him; but his voice on the phone sounded small and hesitant, oddly reserved. He asked her to come over that evening, and hung up rather abruptly, without mentioning any arrangement to send a car for her, as she expected. Margaret put it down to his odd, solitary habit of life, and took a radio cab to the Pierre.

When she saw his face she knew something was wrong. He had the look of a man who has not been sleeping much. Margaret had had a vague plan, developed on the plane from San Francisco, to embrace and kiss him when they met. There had never been any physical intimacy between them at all, and if they were to be married the ice must be broken somehow. When she saw him, however, something deterred her. She sat on the sofa in the main room with a glass of tea he brought her; but William seemed not to want to look at her. He sat for a moment and seemed about to say something, then got up and paced across the room.

“Weilin, is something the matter?” Watching him, Margaret felt a shiver of apprehension. Had he changed his mind? But the approaches had all been his, and over a long period. Surely it could not be. But then what?

William sat down again at last in the chair opposite her. “Yuezhu, Yuezhu . . .” he began—then burst into tears.

Margaret jumped up and went to him. She knelt on the carpet in front of him and put her hand on his arm. “Weilin . . .”

“No, no.” William stood up and walked away, shaking his head. He took a white handkerchief from his pocket and stood there with his back to her, dabbing at his face and snuffling. Margaret had gone from apprehension to alarm. She did not know what to do. She stood up, watching him.

William blew his nose, then turned to face her.

“Yuezhu, you don’t really know me very well. There’s something. . . Oh, Heaven.” He raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“It’s all right, Weilin. Just tell me. What is it? What *is* it?”

“I wanted. . . I want so much to marry you, Yuezhu. You know that.”

“Yes. Of course I know.”

“And I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you. Put you in danger. I’m sure you know that, too.”

“Yes. Yes, I know.”

“Well. . . There was something. Something in my life. I didn’t tell you about. Something I hoped I would never have to tell you about. But. . . Well, there is a guy I know. Knew. He was. . . I don’t know, I don’t know how to tell you.”

Margaret had not a clue what he was talking about, but was experiencing rising horror just from the sheer force of his own distress, as if a black chasm had opened in the floor between them.

“While you were on the west coast,” William continued, “I saw this guy by chance. I went downtown on business, and I saw him there by the World Trade Center. He looked terrible. Oh! terrible—like a dead man. And when I knew him he was so. . . healthy and strong. When I saw him I was scared. Scared for me, scared for you.”

William stopped, his mouth too dry for talk. He gathered his thoughts in silence, Margaret looking at him with widening eyes. Millstones; soon to be like the Round Tower. He wished he were dead. Perhaps he soon would be. He remembered Lionel’s ravaged face and taunting words. *Yeah, I’ve got it, faggot. Chances are you’ve got it, too, and we’re going to die. Bummer, hey?* And walking to his next meeting, walking to try to clear his head, across town through St Paul’s churchyard, that headstone with its artless rhyme:

In Memory of Adam Vandenburg  
 Who Departed this Life  
 October 15th 1798  
 in the 45th Year of His Age

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Oh mortal man as you pass by,  
 As you are now so once was I.  
 As I am now soon you will be.  
 Prepare for death and follow me.

“Of course, I had to find out. So I went to see a doctor. A specialist doctor, a hematologist.”

“Hematologist? Have you got a problem with your blood, Weilin?”

“Yes, I. . . Yes. Yes, I have. Yuezhu, I’m in what they call a high-risk group. That’s why I wanted the test. And Yuezhu”—he turned away from her again, looking away and up, speaking with difficulty—“it was positive.”

“What? What are you talking about? What was positive?”

“The test. The blood test. It was positive. I hadn’t really thought it would be, hadn’t thought it possible. I wasn’t that. . . I wasn’t as active. . . But, yes, it was positive.”

The penny dropped. Margaret stepped back involuntarily, stunned. “You. . . you’ve got. . . that disease?”

“I was very foolish. All those years you thought I was living alone, like a hermit. Well, I wasn’t always alone.”

Margaret stared at him. She knew about the disease, of course—had read about it in the Chinese newspapers. It was contagious and fatal. Most of the people who got it were same-sexers, and they got it by doing filthy, unnatural things with each other. You could catch it from a same-sexer, though, by *tongfang* or even just kissing. That was pretty much the extent of her knowledge. Margaret had never known anyone with the disease, nor had any direct experience of it at all. Now, seeing William in front of her, eyes wild and voice cracking, the thought of the disease in him, of its deadliness and proximity, filled her with terror. Smooth, handsome, well-shaped William; and beneath his clear golden skin this ter-

rible sickness, creeping and growing, destroying him from within. Margaret's senses, her very reason, were flooded with shock and fear.

"You. . . you're like *that*? And yet you asked me to. . . Oh! Oh!"

She ran across the room, snatched her coat and bag from the little lobby. While she was fumbling with the door locks, William approached her.

"Yuezhu! Yuezhu! You don't understand! Don't leave me, Yuezhu! You're the only one. . . Only you know me! Only you can help me! Oh, don't go, don't go!"

Margaret got the door open and ran to the private elevator. The security man stepped forward, but she had pressed the button before he could reach it. While she stood waiting for the elevator William came out into the corridor. He did not approach her closely, stopping a few feet away. He spoke in English, presumably so that the bodyguard wouldn't understand.

"Margaret, you must help me. Now I need you. You're the only person in the world who knows me well. The only person I feel close to. Please, Margaret, please."

The elevator would not come. At one end of the short corridor was a fire door. Margaret ran to it and pushed it open. Beyond were stairs—she ran down them. The stairs were endless: down and down, round and round, making her dizzy. She stumbled, falling against the wall, twisting her knee; but the unreasoning fear still had her in its grip, and she righted herself and staggered down, down, down, her calves beginning to ache, blood roaring in her ears.

There was another fire door where the stairs came to an end, and beyond it a corridor that turned and branched. Now there were kitchen noises ahead, and people talking in Spanish. Margaret backtracked, but got lost in a maze of corridors.

Suddenly she was in a large hall where some kind of party or reception was underway. It was a very grand affair, gowns and tuxedos, the glitter of jewelry, seventy or eighty people. Peals of laughter came from a group nearby: a short, fat, white-haired man with a florid Irish face telling something to three slender, beautiful young women. The women lifted

their heads up, up at the glittering crystal chandeliers, to laugh, showing all their perfect dentition.

Margaret had come in from some kind of service corridor. The main entrance, big double doors standing open to a wide upward staircase, was at the other end of the room. She began making her way through the elegant crowd, feeling conspicuous in her slacks and sweater even through the fog of fear and confusion.

“Miss Han! Margaret!”

Startled, she stopped. It was an American voice, not William. Someone smiling at her; an oldish man with close-trimmed gray hair and beard and a big hooked nose. She thought he was familiar, but could not place him. Now he was in front of her, and his smile of recognition had turned to a frown of solicitude.

“Miss Han. It is Miss Han, isn’t it?”

“I . . . I’m sorry . . . I’m in a big hurry. . . I don’t know . . .”

“Jake Robbins. I took you home from the Met Christmas party two years ago. Remember?”

Yes, she remembered; but the remembrance—William’s accusing face, his bitter words, and all that had gone after, down to this very moment—were too much for Margaret. The room tilted, and she fell.

Her swoon lasted only a few seconds. Now she could see a circle of faces above her. People were murmuring concern: “Who is she?” “Give her air!” “Are you all right, honey?”

The man called Jake Robbins was very close, bending over her. He lifted her up in his arms. The smell of him was very pleasant: an attractive aftershave, slight harmonics of gin and sweat. He was surprisingly strong for one she had thought old, carrying her without apparent effort.

“The lady needs a glass of water!” he was calling out, as the cream stuccoed ceiling passed from left to right across Margaret’s field of vision. “Señorita necessidar de un, un what, for Christ’s sake? un vaso di agua, por favor. It’s all right Gerry, I’ll take care of it. I know her. Here, young lady, just lie down here.”

She was lying on a couch, Jake sitting beside her holding her hand and rubbing it steadily. “It’s all right,” he kept saying, “it’s all right.”

Partygoers were all around, old men and young women, holding glasses and cigarettes, murmuring.

“Do you need a doctor?” asked Jake.

“No, no. I’m. . . I’ve had a shock, that’s all. Then I got lost. . . No, I’m all right, really.”

Margaret struggled up, sitting upright on the couch now, her head still dizzy. She wanted to stand, but did not dare try it.

“Seems I shall have to escort you home again,” said Jake, smiling.

“No. It’s all right. I. . . I’ll be. . . Oh!” Margaret covered her face with her hands, suddenly overwhelmed by the embarrassment of her position, all the eyes watching her.

“Joe, gimme a hand here, would you? You take that side, I’ll take this. Better put her coat on first.”

Once in the car Margaret was clear-headed. “I don’t want to go home,” she said to Jake. “Don’t want to be alone. I want to be with people.”

“No problem.” Jake said something to the driver, then sat back in the seat. “Place I know,” he said. “There’ll be people around, but it’s quiet.”

“Thank you. Mr. . . Jake. Thank you.”

“No problem.” Jake’s face looked younger in the random lights of the city coming in through the limo windows. His skin was quite smooth. Not much more than fifty, perhaps.

“It seems my mission in life is to rescue you from distressing situations. Is it something you want to talk about?”

“No. Forgive me, but no. I really don’t. It’s a very private thing.”

“Enough said. I saw your *Sonnambula*. You were terrific. That lovely aria at the end—oh! so beautiful. And you played your part to perfection. An innocent country girl—you were the heart and soul of injured innocence.”

“It’s not so difficult. You just have to study the music, try to see what was in the composer’s mind. That’s what a good librettist does, and Bellini had the greatest of all librettists. Well, as a singer you do the same. Then everything comes naturally.”

“Yes, I know. The music carries everything.”

Margaret was struggling to remember what Jake did for a living. He had told her, she recalled, on their previous drive together, but whatever

he had said was lost to her, if she had ever grasped it at all. Hazarding a guess from his last remark, she said: “You’re in show business, aren’t you?”

Jake laughed easily. “I don’t know about ‘are’. Unless you count royalties from student productions in Juneau, Alaska. I made my name as a songwriter thirty years ago. Broadway shows. I was the Robbins in Robbins and Schimmer—Harry Schimmer mostly did the music, rest his soul, I mostly did the words. Broadway shows—we had some big hits. *Buffalo Bound*, did you ever hear of that? *Cold Feet*?”

“No. I’m sorry. I’ve only been in America three years. I really don’t know anything about popular culture.”

“Oh, it’s all right. I’d be lucky to get a better answer from the average American girl your age. Every dog has his day, and I had mine. The older generation has to step aside and make way for the younger, I believe that. Here, the Carlyle. They have a nice lounge we can sit and talk. Do a little celebrity-spotting, if you like that.”

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It took Margaret some time to grasp that Jake was courting her. He took her home to Rego Park that first evening, walking her from the car to the door with his hand on her elbow for support and many expressions of concern and encouragement. Next morning a colossal display of flowers was delivered, with a card attached. The card said only: Peace of mind—J.R.

Three days later he appeared in her dressing room after a recital at Brooklyn Academy of Music. The bunch of flowers was much smaller this time; but each one was a perfect, peeping red rose. He chatted with her a few minutes, then, perceiving her exhaustion and discomfort, he left gracefully, though not before he had learned her schedule for the following weeks. At Chicago Opera, where she had a *Don Carlo*, he appeared before the performance while she was vocalizing in a rehearsal room, and invited her to dinner with him the following evening. Caught unawares, and with no alternative at hand but the four walls and TV set of a room at Ramada Inn, Margaret accepted. They dined at the Everest, overlooking

the city, and he told her show business jokes till she laughed too much to go on eating. Still she did not grasp his strategy. He was fifty-four years old, she had learned—he had told her frankly—and it seemed impossible to her that a serious attachment could develop between a man of fifty-four and a woman of twenty-nine. Because she thought it so obviously impossible, she supposed that the rest of the world, including Jake Robbins, saw it the same way.

Jake charmed and soothed her. He was the most worldly person she had ever met. He knew everybody, and was a bottomless well of gossip. He had had dinner with the Kennedys in the White House, and spoke of them as close acquaintances. He knew movie stars and tycoons, writers and artists.

Jake seemed to have no secrets. He had been married, he told her, four times. The second wife had died in a freak accident—decapitated by a boat while water-skiing off one of the Greek islands—but the other three marriages had ended in divorce. Jake expressed great regret over this. Marriage, he averred, was absolutely the best and happiest state for people in general, and everyone ought to be married. He himself had been unmarried now for some years, feeling that after having failed three times he did not want to go into the married state again lightly. He was aware (he explained) that the three failures had been much more his fault than the other parties', and he was striving to improve himself, to attain a higher level of self-knowledge, in order to live better and be a better husband.

He had divine assistance in this effort at self-redemption. Margaret discovered this at her first visit to his apartment on Fifth.

Jake seemed to have houses and apartments all over. He was very rich, having made a considerable pile from his shows thirty years ago and invested it wisely. There were two apartments just in Manhattan: the big one on Fifth, and what he called the "cozy" one—it had only two bedrooms—in Gramercy Park. This latter was currently occupied by one of his sons, a teenager preparing for college. Jake had stern views on child-raising, often declaring that he would leave nothing to his children and do nothing for them once they had graduated college—that they should fend for themselves, as he had had to, and make their own ways in the world.

“To be born poor and then get rich—that’s the greatest thing that can happen to a person,” said Jake. “To be born rich and never have to struggle—that’s one of the worst.”

The apartment on Fifth was spacious and airy, with a grand piano in the largest room at which Jake sat and played numbers from his shows to her, singing the libretto—the *lyrics*—himself in a creaky baritone. He asked her to sing for him; but Margaret had acquired the instinctive reluctance many professional singers share, for performing impromptu and unpaid. By way of compensation, and with her reluctance in mind, she told him one of the few opera anecdotes she knew.

### The Kidnapped Diva

Once a famous soprano was traveling around Italy when she was captured by bandits while crossing the Appenines. The bandits took her to their cave deep in the mountains, where she revealed to them that she was an opera singer. Being Italian, the bandits were of course opera lovers, so there was a general feeling that they should let her go.

Then one of the bandit captains protested: “How do we know she’s an opera singer? We only have her word. Perhaps she’s just playing on our feelings.” Some of the other bandits murmured agreement.

“All right,” said the leader of the bandits, “she will sing for us. Then we shall know whether she’s really a Diva.” Turning to the lady, he ordered her to sing.

The Diva went purple with rage. “Sing *here?*” she exploded. “In this filthy damp cave? With these terrible acoustics? To a gang of smelly bandits, none of whom has shaved for a month, by all appearances! With no orchestra or conductor or prompt, no costumes or wigs, no makeup? *With no box office?* I’d rather die! Go ahead, kill me!” Flinging her arms wide in a dramatic gesture, raising her face to Heaven and closing her eyes, she prepared to die.

“Oh, let her go,” said the bandit chief. “Anyone can see she’s an opera singer.”

Jake laughed long and loud at this, and was still chuckling when they sat down to dinner. There was a small bowl of white flowers on the dinner table, and four or five odd little medallions set around. The medallions were all identical. They seemed to be made of wood, and each had impressed on it somehow a colored, varnished photographic image of a bald man in saffron robes. When she saw this, something stirred deep inside Margaret, something she was unwilling to allow into her thoughts. “Who is it?” she inquired.

“That’s the Rinpoche,” said Jake quietly. “My spiritual guide.”

“I thought you were Jewish.”

“By origin, yes. But I haven’t been to temple since Lindy’s wedding.” (Lindy being a daughter from his second marriage.) “This is the man who speaks to my soul.”

The Rinpoche Thigpen (Jake explained) was a holy man with a monastery in the mountains of northern India. He had a small following in the West, and occasionally traveled abroad. Shortly after his last marriage fell apart, Jake had endured a series of painful operations on his throat to remove what might well have been malignancies but turned out not to be. In the despair and depression ensuing from his double misfortune, one of his friends had taken him to hear a talk given by this Rinpoche.

“At first” (Jake continued) “I was bored. Then I got more bored. Here was this middle-aged fat guy in a robe, rumbling on in bad English about the unity of all sentient beings. I was ready to walk out from sheer boredom. Then he said something that caught me. He said—I can still recall the words—he said: ‘We the living are only dead souls on vacation. We are tourists here on earth. We should show courtesy to each other, and respect the monuments and wildlife.’ Well, I thought: Hey, that’s good. I mean, the guy was saying something. After that I started listening. The more I listened, the more I felt that this guy had a message for me, for *me*—almost as if (though he’d scold me for saying it) he was speaking to me alone. That was in L.A., as it happened, when I was convalescing at the Malibu place. Well, the Rinpoche was just starting out on a cross-country

trip, ending in New York, and I followed him all the way across country. By the time he got to New York I was ready to follow him back to India. But he said instead of bringing my life to him, I should bring him into my life, my ordinary American life. He taught me how to meditate, how to still my mind, how to concentrate my spirit on the Good. He turned my life around, Margaret. So I honor him any way I can.” Jake indicated the little wooden medallions.

Margaret listened in silence to this. Still something was tugging at her from deep, deep inside, something premonitory and terrifying, something she would not acknowledge.

“Is he Indian, then, this Rin. . . Rin-what?”

“Rinpoche. No, he’s Tibetan. He came out from Tibet as a young monk with the Dalai Lama.”

“Yes, the Dalai is their religious leader.”

“The Dalai Lama is the leader of their biggest sect. But they have a lot of sects. Rinpoche Thigpen leads a very small sect, one he established himself, with a message to the whole world. It’s less exclusive, less Tibetan than the others. He teaches in English, and his prayers and sutras are all in English.”

An astute businessman, thought Margaret. Not many rich Americans would go to the trouble of learning Tibetan in order to gain access to spiritual truth. It occurred to her to ask Jake how much money he had given this philosopher, but she thought better of it.

Jake, with the worldly man’s sensitivity to the signals given out by others, must have seen her disdain, though Margaret tried her best to hide it. He never, then or afterwards, tried to proselytize her or teach her anything about his newly-acquired faith. He performed his own devotions in private. When there was a meeting of the Rinpoche’s disciples, as happened every couple of months somewhere in the U.S.A., he slipped away to it almost apologetically, and on returning said nothing of what had transpired unless she asked him. When she did ask him he spoke of the proceedings slowly and carefully, frowning with concentration to try to make clear to her what meant so much to him. Mostly, it seemed, they listened to a lecture and then sat around chanting. For all Jake’s efforts at

explanation, Margaret thought the Rinpoche's teachings banal, and could never participate in Jake's enthusiasm.

At first Margaret made a poor return to Jake's frankness about himself, saying nothing to him about William, or for that matter Johnny Liu. So far as Johnny was concerned (she reasoned), there had been nothing but an arrangement of convenience, which could be of no interest to anyone else. The case of William was more difficult. Jake knew there was something between them, because of the incident at the party two years previously. He also knew—everybody knew—that William lived alone in the Pierre, where Margaret had appeared so suddenly in a state of such distress. Whether he had put the two things together in his mind, Margaret was not sure.

Three weeks after their meeting at the Pierre, while they were dining at a vegetarian restaurant Jake liked in Greenwich Village, William came up in conversation. Jake alluded to their first meeting, at the Met Christmas party, and said: "I guess you know who that was talking to you that time."

"Yes. It was William Leung."

"Seems he went out of his way to upset you. I can still see the expression on your face."

"We. . . knew each other. We come from the same part of China. Our families. . . were enemies."

"*Enemies?* What, some kind of vendetta thing?"

"Vendetta" Margaret knew from the opera librettos. "Mm, yes, something like that. There's a lot of bitterness. It goes back a long way. Hard to explain."

Jake put up both his hands to signal the end of his inquiries. "Deep waters for an American boy. I advise you just to stay clear of him."

"I intend to do exactly that."

"Rumor has it he's a fruit."

"What?" Margaret had not encountered this expression before.

"A fruit. A faggot, a fairy, a pansy, a queen, a queer, a poof, a feygeleh, a mo. Shirt lifter, pillow pounder, fudge tamper, brown hatter. A person of the homosexualist persuasion. A boy that likes boys, sweet Maggie."

"Oh. I don't know. I couldn't say."

“With his money, I guess he can boff the Statue of Liberty if he feels like it.”

“I really don’t feel comfortable talking about him, Jake.”

“No problem, honey. Hey, look at this—crêpes flambé. The guy’s going to set fire to them, honey. Watch!”

*Boff* was Jake’s habitual term for the act of coition. Margaret thought it the cutest of the several English words she had heard used in reference to this activity. She supposed that Jake wanted to boff her; and since she liked him more the more she saw him, and since he was always a perfect gentleman to her, and since he seemed to be honest and had no bad habits she could discover, she decided she would let him boff her as soon as he made the approach, which he was obviously going to do at some point not very distant in time. Jake, whose instincts in such matters were infallible, boffed her the weekend after she had arrived at her decision, a month into their new acquaintance. Margaret thought of it as an act of generosity on her part, recompense to this kind and witty old songsmith for his many courtesies. She was surprised to find him an imaginative and indefatigable boffer, possessed of a supple and well-proportioned body, and as much a gentleman to her after the event as before. They were married on her thirtieth birthday in April.