

FIRE FROM THE SUN

Book 3

JOHN DERBYSHIRE

COPYRIGHT © 2000 BY JOHN DERBYSHIRE.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS NUMBER: 00-110797

ISBN #: HARDCOVER 0-7388-4722-4

SOFTCOVER 0-7388-4723-2

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book was printed in the United States of America.

To order additional copies of this book, contact:

Xlibris Corporation

1-888-7-XLIBRIS

www.Xlibris.com

Orders@Xlibris.com

Chapter 59

Teacher Zou Makes an Attractive Offer
The Students of Beijing Petition the Emperor

Mother had moved back to the southwest after Father died—to Chengdu, her hometown. At first she had lived with her brother, Uncle Fish. Eventually, as the widow of a senior serving officer, and stepmother of another, and with a daughter abroad, she had been given a decent apartment in the inner suburbs, with a separate bedroom and kitchen.

“It’s you being married to an American that counts for most,” she said to Margaret. “It’s government policy now. People who have close relatives married to foreigners are given extra accommodation points so that foreign visitors get a good impression. Different from twenty years ago!” she chuckled. “Then, if you had any connection with foreigners they called you a spy and put you in jail . . .” Mother stopped herself and dropped her eyes awkwardly, flustered, remembering Margaret’s earlier disgrace.

Mother believed, Margaret knew, that the fuss over Mr Powell had hastened Father’s end. Perhaps it was true. Certainly Mother did not trust herself near the topic; and when she strayed into it accidentally, she showed more distress than the subsequent outcome really justified. Whether that distress was simply because of Father’s death, or from her inability directly to express her blame of Margaret, or through the guilt she felt for nursing that blame, Margaret could not tell.

Mother was more forthright on Margaret’s current situation, when it

was explained to her. She strongly disapproved of Margaret's divorcing Jake.

"Never mind that he likes to play with other women," she said. "You're his wife, those other women are not. You have a special position and special responsibilities. In olden times a Chinese gentleman could have several wives. Nobody thought anything of it. To be the main wife was an honor. This chasing after other women—it's nothing. It's men's nature, that's all. So far as the private thing is concerned, they are like wild beasts, they just can't control themselves. This American, he's kept you well provided, hasn't he? Well, then. 'Marry a chicken, follow the chicken; marry a dog, follow the dog.'" [Quoting an old saw.]

But it was Mother's frank way of talking about public things that was most striking to Margaret. *They called you a spy and put you in jail.* Mother would never have passed such a remark before. She might have thought it, but a lifetime of self-discipline would have told her to keep it well concealed, even from her family. Everybody else was just as loose-tongued. It must (Margaret thought) be something in the air. She had brought a refrigerator for Mother, an American model. She had had to spend half a day at air freight customs in Shanghai, checking it in. When it arrived at Mother's apartment in Chengdu they called in an electrician to connect it up. The electrician walked slowly round the refrigerator, stroking the gleaming white surface, tapping at the exposed pipes in the back.

"Wa! A real American model! Beautiful! It'll last you all your lives—not like our Chinese junk!"

And this was said among perfect strangers!

It was the same with the Fish family. No sooner were they together round a table, it seemed, than everyone was grumbling about the country's problems: the housing problem, the inflation problem, and corruption, corruption, corruption.

"We're going back to the Old Society," said Uncle Fish. "The officials can't live on their salaries, so they're all taking bribes."

This was at the banquet. As a well-off foreign relative, Margaret was obliged to stand them all a banquet at Fragrant From Afar, Chengdu's best restaurant. Margaret had supposed there would be only Mother and Aunt

and Uncle Fish and their twin daughters, presumably with husbands. In fact more than twenty adults turned up, with half-a-dozen children of various ages. Margaret was introduced to all of them, but could not keep the relationships in mind. The Fish daughters' husbands had brought their own siblings and parents; and there seemed to be a collateral branch of the family she had not been aware of, descended from Mother's father's brother and on friendly terms with the Fishes. Margaret did not mind. It was good to see so many enjoying themselves, good so easily to give so much pleasure.

Midway through the appetizers, Half Brother walked in. He was stationed in the far northeast, at the other end of the country. Mother had written to tell him of Margaret's visit, but it had not been clear whether or when he would be able to come to Chengdu. He had never cared for Mother's side of the family—never truly, in his heart, reconciled himself to Father's remarriage. Mother grumbled that he did not do as much for her as he undoubtedly could, with his rank and connections. It was therefore doubly surprising, and doubly wonderful, that he should suddenly appear at a gathering of Mother's clan. The timing was chance, he insisted as the introductions were being made. He had just flown in, gone to Mother's apartment, been told by a neighbor where they were. Margaret got up and went to embrace him, tears in her eyes. She had not seen Half Brother in over six years, since Father's funeral. Though well into his thirties then, his appearance had been of a continuum with all her previous awareness of him: a handsome, fine-looking young man in a military uniform without insignia of rank, his hair cropped as it had been when he was a recruit. Now, at forty, he was quite changed. Middle age showed clearly now, in a thickening at the neck and waist, a fullness of face. His hair was longer, though not of course long, very neatly cut and smoothed down with oil. There had been some change in the uniform regulations; Half Brother was actually wearing a shirt of a very pale military color and neatly-knotted khaki tie with his exceptionally well-cut Soviet-style jacket. The greatest change of all was in his manner—a still sobriety far beyond his youthful bumptiousness or the breezy self-confidence of his early career. Half Brother had acquired *gravitas*.

Half Brother had brought his wife with him, along with even clearer

evidence of middle age: his son, whom Margaret had not met before. The wife, now in her mid thirties, was still a fine-looking woman, with an elegant figure and hair pinned up in a most attractive style. Her outfit—a coral-pink trouser suit with patent-leather black sling-backs and a silk scarf loose at the neck—might have come from Lord and Taylor. Indeed (Margaret thought, taking her cool, narrow hand) she would not have looked out of place at one of Jake's Southampton parties. Here in provincial China, even at the best restaurant in the capital of the Province, she was a sensation. In the screened-off area where Margaret's party were sitting at three big circular tables, all conversation stopped. Everyone stared at Half Brother's wife.

Margaret had retained a slight negative impression of Half Brother's wife from their previous meeting at Father's funeral. At that time Margaret had been an exile in disgrace. Such slender hopes as she dared have were pinned to Half Brother's powers of intercession. There is, of course, nothing more irksome to the wife of a man of consequence than the endless demands made on him by less fortunate relatives; and in that spirit, Half Brother's wife's attitude to Margaret (so it seemed to Margaret) had been one of reserve, lightly frosted with suspicion. Now the situation was quite different. Margaret was known all over the world, and was married to a rich man. Sister-in-Law's manner was adjusted accordingly.

"Dear sister!" She actually embraced Margaret, like a westerner. "We have both your CDs. Such a wonderful voice! And your brother tells me you are friends with Xineili."

"Xineili has been very kind to me," said Margaret. "Without him I would have no career." Thinking, though of course not saying: If I still *do* have a career.

Half Brother and his wife were seated at the main table with Mother and the main contingent of Fishes. The boy, seven years old, went to the kids' table, where he was greeted with the same silent awe accorded to his parents.

Uncle Fish did not seem inclined to pursue his complaints of corruption in the presence of a military officer, but it did not matter—there was no shortage of conversation. Half Brother was entirely at ease, beaming across at Margaret.

“My little sister! Famous across the world!”

No-one here seemed to have heard anything of her recent professional troubles. Mother would certainly have said something if she knew. Half Brother’s manner showed no reservation or unease. What had loomed so large to Margaret was unknown here, even among those most likely to have been paying attention. So small are our troubles in the busyness of the world; so little space do we occupy in the minds of others.

“Are you in China for a singing engagement?” asked Half Brother’s wife. “We should very much like to get tickets.”

“No. I am taking a break from singing.”

“Your husband is not here with you?”

“I am taking a break from him, too.”

The wife laughed easily, but flicking a glance at Half Brother. Half Brother glanced at Mother, and Aunt and Uncle Fish at each other, and everybody at everybody else. No-one but Mother knew her plans, and Margaret didn’t feel this was the place to broadcast them.

“I just want to have a break,” she repeated. “Do some sightseeing. I hardly know my own country. I’ve never been to Xi’an, for example.”

Half Brother nodded. “There’s a lot to see now. We’re developing very fast. We shall soon be the first power in the world.”

“Do you think so, Half Brother? Ahead even of Russia and America?”

“Russia? *Tsei!* They’re all washed up. The people are starving. The Party is completely degenerate. The armed forces have lost all discipline, except in a few elite units. America?” He laughed. “If Vietnam defeated them, who can’t defeat them? No, these were the twentieth-century powers. We shall be the power of the next century.”

“I hope it’s true,” said Margaret. “We’ve been poor and backward too long.”

The banquet was a great success, though the collaterals were perhaps overawed by the combined grandeur of a relative from abroad, another who dressed as if she were, and a full colonel in walking-out uniform. Margaret found herself liking Half Brother’s wife, whose name was Huang Li. She was bright and charming, and laughed easily. They were planning to send the boys to college in America, and hoped to go on a visit themselves.

“We would have gone sooner,” said Half Brother. “But you never seemed to stay in one place for long. Now you’re married, we’re hoping you’ll settle.”

* * *

Half Brother and his family stayed in one of the new hotels—there was no room for them all in Mother’s apartment. They were in Chengdu only three days, then flew back to the northeast, after extracting a promise from Margaret that she would call on them before going back to the States.

The day after Half Brother left Margaret went shopping with Mother in the city center. She had never known Chengdu well. In her childhood it had been a place they went to once or twice a year, to visit with Mother’s relatives. Outside those three or four loci, the city had been unknown to her until this trip. Now she could see that it had been transformed. The market, in her childhood confined to some narrow alleys in the oldest part of the town, seemed to have taken over the entire central district. There were stores with big plate-glass windows now, displaying all kinds of household goods, TV sets and cassette players, colored fabrics, dresses and men’s suits, jewelry. There were restaurants everywhere, some with tables set out on the sidewalk, as if this were Rome or Paris, or Greenwich Village.

It was from one of these alfresco restaurants that Margaret was hailed as she walked with Mother back towards one of the grand new hotels to get a taxi home. Turning she saw a man at one of the tables waving to her. As she looked, he rose from his seat, still waving. A dark-skinned man about her own age.

“Little Sister! Little Sister Han Yuezhu! Don’t you remember me?”

Something about the voice, the line of the hair and the rough, good-natured smile stirred a remote memory.

“Is it you, Mustache?”

Mustache laughed with delight, coming up to her now. He seemed not at all embarrassed, seemed to bear no ill-will for their tearful last parting over seventeen years before, and her subsequent failure to write

to him even once. He made a *bai* in the old-fashioned style, then reached out to shake her hand.

Margaret stifled her own embarrassment, smiled, and shook the offered hand.

“Mother, it’s Mustache, do you remember? From high school in Seven Kill Stele. Before we went to Beijing.”

“I remember.” Mother nodded, somewhat guardedly. She had never liked Mustache, Margaret remembered now. Over and above her belief that Margaret had been too young, or too old, to be making friends with boys, she just hadn’t liked him, had thought him coarse and low-class, a hooligan. Still, she smiled and showed courtesy while Mustache introduced them to his wife, a plump, round-faced woman who had been sitting at the table with him. Mustache, wife and Margaret sat down, but Mother would not join them. She excused herself, insisting she could find her way to the taxi rank at the hotel, and cover the fare.

“My father died in ’82,” said Margaret by way of explanation, when Mother had left and they were all seated again. “She’s alone now, getting a little eccentric.”

Mustache nodded sympathy. “It’s not easy for these older ones. Inflation’s eating up their savings, and they can’t adjust to the new economy.”

Margaret sat back for another session of grumbling about the state of affairs, and the impossibility of living on one’s income; but Mustache wanted to hear about her life. He had had no idea what happened to her after the family left for Beijing. Hearing of Margaret’s career abroad, he was incredulous.

“Foreign opera? I didn’t even know foreigners *had* opera!”

“Wa!” said the wife. “You mean you are famous in the west? *Waaaa!*” A hand over her mouth in awe.

Mustache himself (he told her) was a schoolteacher. Graduating from high school, he had been assigned to a clerical job in the sugar-cane processing plant. Then he had sat the college entrance examinations when the province had started them up again in ’77, and got into Chengdu Teachers’ College. Now he was teaching middle school in the city, he and his wife both.

“But looking for some opportunity to start a business,” he said. “You can’t live on a teacher’s salary nowadays.”

“It seems that everybody complains about conditions now,” observed Margaret.

“Of course they do! Nothing gets any better, prices have gone through the roof and the leaders are all fat on corruption. It’s going back to the Old Society.”

Margaret giggled. “I never used to hear Chinese people talking like that.”

“Because Chinese people were stupid,” said Mustache’s wife. “The leaders told us we were living in paradise, and we believed it. Then we got a glimpse of how people live in other countries. Now everybody knows we’ve been taken for a ride. Naturally they feel angry about it.”

“I suppose it’s worse for people like you. Intellectuals, I mean.”

Mustache nodded. “Yes. Our lives are very hard. The teachers all complain. But it’s not just us. The workers are complaining, too. Last year there was a big strike at the steel factory in Doushan.”

“A strike? Wa! Isn’t it against the law?”

“Yes. The authorities were furious. They arrested all the leading agitators and put them in prison. But then they gave the workers a pay increase. That shows they were also scared. You won’t read anything about it in your American papers. Even here, nothing was published. But everybody at the factory knows, everyone in the whole province knows.”

“When everybody’s so dissatisfied, what do you think will happen?”

Mustache laughed. “Who knows? Perhaps we need another revolution.”

His wife nodded. “To tell you the truth, Miss Han, we feel everything is hopeless. All the other countries of the world are moving forward. Only China is sliding backwards. I really think we Chinese are a stupid race. We just don’t know how to organize our society in a reasonable way. Other countries can do it, but we can’t. I sometimes think we’re barbarians, actually—not really civilized at all. If you ask me, what will happen is that China will get poorer and poorer and dirtier and dirtier, until at last a big plague will come up and wipe us all out. Or else the leaders will

fall into civil war, and destroy the nation fighting each other with nuclear weapons.”

Margaret could not help but smile at these melancholy prognostications. Mustache’s wife had a round, pink face somewhat like a baby, with dimples on each side of her mouth—a most unlikely messenger for the Angel of Death. It was a warm day in mid-April, and many of the people passing to and fro in the street were in bright summer clothes. Indeed, Margaret thought the standards of dress were much better than she remembered.

“I think we are an ingenious people,” she said. “We invented just about everything, didn’t we? I’m sure we’ll find a way out of these problems.”

Mustache shrugged. “Perhaps. But you did the right thing going to America. I only wish I had the chance.”

They talked of their classmates. Everybody was married. Everybody had had one child, according to the law. Teacher Bai at Elementary School Number Three, for whom Margaret had read the *Song of Endless Sorrow*, had returned to the school in ’72, but soon after had gone mad and had to be locked up in an asylum. Teacher Zou, the gym instructress who had shown such sympathy to Margaret in her changes, had gone to Chengdu Teachers’ College as a mature student, and married one of the lecturers, a very brilliant man named Xing who published articles in professional journals. Soon afterwards this Xing had gone to Beijing Normal University and got an M.Ed. Then Beijing Normal had asked him to stay as a lecturer. The leaders at Chengdu Teachers’ College weren’t willing to let him go, but Xing had just told them: “Okay, you can keep my file. Keep it as long as you like. I’ll stay here, and ask them to start a new file for me.” Apparently he’d developed some good connections at Beijing Normal, through his translations and articles. They’d given him a nice apartment right in the center of Beijing. The leaders at Chengdu were furious, but there was nothing they could do. Now Teacher Xing had gone to New Zealand for a year on some sort of exchange program. His wife was in Chengdu: her mother was dying of cancer, and Teacher Zou—now Mrs Xing—was nursing her.

“You should go to visit her. I know the address. Teacher Zou was such a good teacher to us, you know. And she especially liked you.”

* * *

After three weeks at home Margaret felt restless. There was nothing much to do. It had been fun, the first few days, to walk out in the street in her New York outfits and feel the eyes of the people following her, but this was a pleasure that soon palled. The TV programs were awful. There were one or two good movies, but the noise and stink in the movie theaters disgusted her. The local opera had started up again when the Cultural Revolution ended, and Margaret had been twice with Uncle Fish. It was interesting, from her perspective as a seasoned performer, to see this other genre, stirring memories from her childhood, but the stagings seemed very amateurish after the Met and La Scala, the jokes coarse, the acting absurdly mannered.

It had been good to see Mother again, and even more so Half Brother; but now Half Brother had gone back to the northeast, and the narrowness and pettiness of Mother's life was becoming more and more oppressive. Margaret turned her thoughts to traveling. She had been telling everyone she planned to go sightseeing. Well, then, she might as well do something about it. And it was true, as she had told Half Brother: she knew too little of her own country, and now had the time and the money to remedy these omissions. She thought she would like to see the clay army at Xi'an, the caves of Dunhuang, the West Lake at Hangzhou. Beijing, too—yes, she would like to be in Beijing for the spring blossoms. There was no resentment left now, no reason not to visit the capital, especially in springtime, when Beijing was at her best, neither too hot nor too cold, if you could stand the *chunfeng*—the spring wind—blowing dust in from the Gobi desert. Margaret procrastinated a few days, even going to the airline office once to pick up a timetable.

At last it was Teacher Zou who made up her mind for her. Margaret went to see Teacher Zou one afternoon, taking a taxi to the address Mustache had given her. It was an apartment in one of the newer blocks, by a

little creek that discharged into the river a quarter mile on. There were piles of garbage rotting in the courtyard outside, washing hanging out from the windows. The creek itself was a dull purple color. A strong acid vapor rose up from it, stinging the membranes at the back of the nose. Teacher Zou came down to greet her. They climbed two flights of unlit stairs through a vile fecal stink.

“I’m sorry I can’t offer you better hospitality than this,” said Teacher Zou. “Xing and I are big fans of yours. Have both your CDs. I tell everyone you were a pupil of mine. Shining in reflected glory!”

The apartment was only one room. Teacher Zou was living there with her mother. The Xings’ little boy was staying with friends in Beijing, so as not to miss school.

“My mother’s close to death now,” explained Teacher Zou. “The hospital operated on her last year, but I think they screwed it up. Took out the wrong piece, or left some instrument inside. You know what the doctors are like, those bastards. She’s been getting worse ever since. They give me pain-killers for her and she’s pretty much comatose.”

There was an unpleasant, unfamiliar smell in the room—a sweetish smell, something like rotting pork, that made Margaret gag. The smell of cancer, she supposed. Teacher Zou’s mother was quite unconscious, lying on the lower of a pair of bunk beds against one wall. Her skin looked as though you could poke your finger through it.

“Talk softly so as not to disturb her. When she’s awake, she suffers. It’s better for her just to sleep.”

“How old is your mother?”

“Sixty-six.” Teacher Zou gazed at the sleeping figure with sad tenderness. “But she had a very hard life. She was born to a merchant family in Jiangxi, but her father lost everything in the twenties. Lived through the Japanese occupation, of course. Then all the fighting. My own father died in an industrial accident when I was a little girl, so we were very poor. Poor workers—oh, I have very good ‘origins’!” She used the expression current in the Cultural Revolution to define a person’s class background. People often spoke like this now, Margaret had noticed, making bitter little allusions to the mass campaigns of the past. Everybody seemed so cynical.

“I’m surprised at how dissatisfied everybody’s become,” she remarked. “Against the leaders, I mean. People never used to talk like that.”

“That’s because we have opened our eyes. We know the leaders aren’t selfless revolutionaries striving to improve the lives of the common people. They’re corrupt mandarins, who look on the common people with contempt. Xing told me of an English saying: ‘Cheat me once, shame on you. Cheat me twice, shame on me.’ That’s how people feel. They won’t cheat us again. We can see through them now.”

“But what will happen?”

“Heaven only knows. Another revolution, if you ask me. Xing’s an optimist. He says the Party can reform itself, but I don’t believe it. Look at our history. When has there been reform? Nothing ever changes in China except by violent revolution. If they try to reform the Party from inside, it will be the Hundred Days all over again. I tell you, Little Han, you did the right thing going to America. You’re well out of it.” [The Hundred Days was a reform movement at the end of the last Imperial dynasty. It had been crushed by reactionary forces.]

She talked of Chengdu Teachers’ College, where Mr Xing had worked. The leaders at the place all hated Xing (she said) because he’d been a worker-peasant-soldier student, admitted without examination in the Cultural Revolution period. They wanted to keep him there, make him wear the tight shoe all his life. But Xing was too smart for them. They couldn’t stop him writing. They couldn’t stop him translating and publishing. When he was applying to go to New Zealand he had to make out a list of his publications. Three pages! Three pages it covered! Sooner or later his abilities were bound to be noticed. They couldn’t keep him trapped in that jail-house for ever. He was ‘a big talent in a small job’.

“Well, now he’s free,” Teacher Zou continued. “Beijing Normal have been very good to him. We have a lovely apartment in Haidian—you know, the academic district in Beijing. We take our boy to the Summer Palace at weekends! How many kids can just get on a bus and go to the Summer Palace? I love Beijing. Especially now. This is the best time of year in Beijing, you know—April and May—if you don’t mind the dust. Summer is too hot. Little Han, why don’t you go up to Beijing for a few days? Our apartment’s sitting there empty, you’re welcome to use it. You’d

be doing us a favor, actually. You know, when people get to know an apartment's empty there's a chance it'll get burgled. Go on, be our guest for a while. Xing won't be back till August. I'll have to stay here to see my mother off to the Yellow Spring."

Margaret needed no persuading. One of the deterrents to travel had been the bother of booking hotel rooms. Here was a room ready-made for her—in Haidian, which she knew so well! And if she was to make a tour, Beijing was the best place to start from, with all the airline and travel offices to arrange everything. Teacher Zou gave her keys, and instructions on how to use the stove and washing machine.

"You'd better make yourself known to the block committee," she said, "but there's no need to formally register. They're very easy-going about that sort of thing in Beijing nowadays."

* * *

Her first morning in Beijing Margaret woke early and went out to find some breakfast. At once she was glad she had come. The day was already warm and sunny—a perfect Beijing spring morning. Blossoms were showing in the trees shading the roadside, and a chorus of cicadas was tuning up in the foliage. Street vendors were moving into position, stacking bottles of soda on big blocks of ice, wheeling ice cream carts along the pavements. Margaret went into a little food shop on a corner. The proprietor—a pot-bellied man with a bald head—was dropping batter into the deep fryer. There was a scattering of customers at the tables, workers by their appearance. Pot Belly addressed her in broad Beijing dialect.

"'Allo, Little Sister! If you ain't the prettiest girl I've 'ad in my shop this twelve month past! 'Ere, stand by the door and you'll pull some more business in for me! Go on—I'll give yer breakfast for free!" He gave Margaret a huge sweaty grin, and some of the nearer customers laughed.

"Don't pay no attention to Old Feng," warned one, a coarse-looking type with an unshaven upper lip. "'E's a 'orny old bugger, that one. Wore out two wives, 'e 'as!" There was general laughter.

"*Tsei!* Wore 'em out? Wore meself out, keepin' 'em! Now then, Little Sister, what'll it be? On yer way to join the students, are yer?"

“A bowl of white rice gruel and a batter-stick. Oh, and a plain dumpling. Students? I don’t know. I’m just visiting Beijing.”

“From the sarf-west, is it?”

“Yes, the southwest. Chengdu.”

“I noo it. I can tell any accent, I can. Anywhere under ’Eaven, I can tell it. ’Ad a bloke in ’ere day ’fore yesterday from Gansu, way out west. I nailed ’im right off. Gansu, I said. ’E near fell orf ’is seat. ’E was ’ere to join the students, too. They’re comin’ from all over now.”

“D’you really think they’ll march?” asked one of the customers, apparently addressing the proprietor.

“Course they’ll march! They ain’t afraid of Old Deng! What’s ’e goin’ to do? Tell the police to shoot ’em? They won’t. I know. I get the patrolmen in ’ere. They’re just as fed up as everybody else. They can’t live orf their wages any more than the workers can. No, they won’t shoot our students. It’ll be like las’ Friday all over again. There you go, Little Sister. It’s forty, an’ don’t blame me, it’s what I ’ave to pay for oil nowadays.”

“The students have a march?” asked Margaret.

“Why, yes. Been marching this seven days past. Didn’t you ’ear about it down in the sarf-west?”

“I’m afraid I don’t pay much attention to public affairs.”

“Why, they had a funeral for the old General Secretary last Sat’day, the one they give the elbow to year ’fore last. The students come out from all the universities an’ demonstrated in the Square. Thousands, there was. Best thing was, they sent three students up the steps of the Great ’All wiv a petition. The leaders were all there in the ’All for the ceremony, see. Well, when they come up the steps, the students kneeled down an’ lifted the petition over their ’eads. Petitionin’ the Emperor, see? Just like in the old times! They knew how to do it, from watchin’ the movies I suppose. You can be sure Old Deng got the message! Emperor Deng!”

“An’ Li Ximing ’is pet eunuch,” said one of the customers, making everybody laugh. Li was the Party Secretary for Beijing.

“Never mind Li Ximing,” someone else put in. “That Li Peng’s the one to watch. ’E’d fuck his grandmother for a piece of silver, that one.”

“Eh, eh, eh.” The proprietor waved his spatula in the air, perhaps feeling things were going a little too far. “Let’s show some respect to the people’s government. We’re all good citizens ’ere.”

Margaret hadn’t followed much of this. “You mean the students will march through Beijing?”

“Last I ’eard was, they’ll march.” This was the coarse-looking man. He glanced at his watch. “If it’s like last week, they’re prob’ly startin’ about now.”

“Where do they march?”

“Why, right out of Qinghua and Beijing U. Down White Stone Bridge Road to People’s U., ’ere. Then the Nationalities Institute, an’ then they turn off through West Straight Gate and down to the Square. If you go over to White Stone Bridge Road you’ll see ’em go past.”

“Is it dangerous to go and watch?”

“Nah. Lot of people go an’ show support. The people are wiv the students. We’re all fed up wiv this fuckin’ government.”

When she had finished her breakfast Margaret strolled over to White Stone Bridge Road. When the intersection came in sight she saw that the march was, in fact, already in progress. In the distance she could see the figures crossing the intersection, carrying banners and placards. She could hear them, too. At first they were chanting something she couldn’t catch; then, as she came closer, she heard them singing the National Anthem.

Arise! All ye who will not be slaves!
With our own flesh and blood
Build a new Great Wall! . . .

White Stone Bridge Road itself was lined with onlookers. They spilled off the pavement into the roadway, many holding on to bicycles, some applauding and cheering. Some teenagers had climbed up into the trees along the roadside to watch. It was all very good-natured, not at all what Margaret had expected. One of the teenagers in a nearby tree was accompanying the National Anthem on a tin flute.

The students themselves were all in cheerful high spirits. The boys were wearing open-necked shirts and slacks, the girls loose blouses and

skirts. Some of the girls had wide-brimmed hats to shade them from the warm sun. The banners seemed quite innocuous: DOWN WITH CORRUPTION! said one. Another: THE PEOPLE SUPPORT US.

There seemed no end to the marchers. Margaret watched for half an hour in the shade of the trees, then began to think of her original plan, which had been to go up to the Summer Palace. The only problem was, the buses didn't seem to be running. Perhaps the best thing would be to walk to Friendship Hotel. It was a foreigners' hotel, and there would be a taxi rank there.

As she was thinking of this, a little group of students came by carrying a banner saying BEIJING BOTANICAL INSTITUTE. Margaret had never heard of a Botanical Institute. It must be attached to Qinghua, the main science university, she supposed. One student stood out from the others: a tall, broad-shouldered man, a mature student from the look of him, with dark skin and startling white teeth.

A red silk thread snapped taut. The great Galaxy wheeled through a trillionth of a degree, and Norbu was looking right back at her, his mouth hanging open in wonder.