

Chapter 61

An Ancient Philosopher Teaches Us All a Lesson
The Flowers of May Bloom in the Wild

The next Thursday they marched again. This was May Fourth, the anniversary of another student movement seventy years before, when students had protested against the Treaty of Versailles assigning Chinese territory to Japan.

Norbu roused Margaret very early that day and dragged her along to People's University. The walkways and open spaces of the campus were full of students; this was the assembly point for several colleges. The rest of the contingent from the Botanical Institute were already waiting in a loose group by the perimeter wall—fifteen strong, including the entire committee. Margaret remembered most of them from the previous week, but Norbu went round making reintroductions anyway. It was a very young crowd, Norbu the oldest by some years. They were well-dressed for the most part in summer shirts and blouses. Some of the girls had got themselves wide-brimmed summer hats, two or three of the boys sported sunglasses.

The Institute's main banner was the one that had caught Margaret's eye on the previous march: a strip of white cloth ten feet long and three deep with the name of the Institute on it and the words GIVE US DEMOCRACY! It was the work of two girls Norbu called "the twins". Both were short and dumpy, both had straight shoulder-length hair parted in the middle, both wore glasses with dark plastic rims. They were always to-

gether, and even had a tendency to speak in unison. Yet in fact they were quite unrelated, and even came from different provinces. They had been twins in a previous life, explained Norbu with an absolutely straight face.

Two of the others had made individual placards of their own: OUR PARTY IS A VERY GOOD PARTY and THE PEOPLE ARE WITH US. The first of these belonged to a bony girl with pale skin, wearing a neat but shapeless navy-blue suit and plastic open-toed sandals, her hair cut short and plain. The other was the work of a boy who looked hardly old enough to be out of middle school. He was, in fact, wearing something like a middle-school uniform, a khaki jacket buttoned up to the neck, and baggy khaki pants. His face was bright pink, as if someone had just gone over it with a coarse scrubbing-brush, and he had a very short crew-cut. When nothing in particular was going on he kept his eyes on Norbu with awed attention, flicking them occasionally, momentarily, to Margaret, who apparently awed him too, by association.

Norbu tackled the bony girl. “Xiaohong, what’s the point of your placard? ‘OUR PARTY IS A VERY GOOD PARTY’? We’re trying to reform the Party. If it’s very good, why would we need to reform it?”

The bony girl squared up to him, small knobby knuckles on her hips. “We must show that we are not anti-Party, Comrade Norbu. We must show that we love the Party. That we are patriotic and not counter-revolutionary.”

“But that’s just going against the general theme of the march. We’re marching for *democracy*. Democracy means having several different parties, so the people can choose. We’re trying to break this idea that one Party represents the whole country.”

“All right. But when we have our democracy, I will support our Communist Party. I think it’s a very good Party.”

“Then what are you marching for?”

“To reform the Party, of course.”

“Ai! But didn’t I just ask you: If the Party’s so good, what’s the need for reform?”

The bony girl raised her voice a little. “Don’t be so dense, Comrade Norbu! Of course there should be reform! That’s what we’re marching for! But there will be plenty of banners putting that point of view. I want the leaders to know that we are patriotic and love our Party. Anyway,” she

glanced at Margaret, who was standing alone a few paces behind Norbu, “we are the representatives of the Botanical Institute. I don’t know that we should let non-classmates participate.”

“I’ve known Han Yuezhu for many years,” said Norbu firmly. “She has no connection with the authorities.”

The bony girl sniffed, and turned away. “That’s not the point. She doesn’t belong to our Institute.”

Norbu turned and grinned at Margaret, as if to say *there’s one on every committee*. “All right, Xiaohong, we’ll take a vote on it if you like.”

“No. Doesn’t matter. You always win the votes, anyway.”

Norbu turned aside. “She’s very difficult,” he remarked to Margaret when they had stepped away. “Wants to be a Party member! Loves to brown-nose the leaders at the Institute. I really don’t know what she’s doing in the Movement.”

“Perhaps she’s a stool-pigeon,” observed Margaret.

“I don’t care about that. Everything we’re doing is in the open. What is there to spy on? Anyway, she’s too stupid for that. If she were a stool-pigeon she’d just keep quiet and listen. In fact she’s quite active. Always challenges me at meetings, but always gets voted down.” He chuckled. “Actually, what she is, is, she’s a Red Guard. She believes To Rebel Is Justified! Make Revolution To The End!” Norbu laughed out loud. “Poor Xiaohong! Born twenty years too late! There are a lot of them in the Movement.”

The very young-looking boy in middle-school uniform was standing by himself a few yards away, holding his placard, watching them with innocent fascination. Margaret remembered him from the previous march. His surname was Wang, and she could not remember, or had not been told, his given name. His classmates all called him Peanut because when classes started the previous fall his hair had been shaven so close it could hardly be seen.

“Do you like my placard, Elder Brother Norbu?” Peanut Wang thrust it forward.

“It’s fine. Very well written. THE PEOPLE ARE WITH US. Do you really think so? How about the peasants? Do you think they support us?”

“Oh, yes. My father supports us, I know.”

Norbu laughed. “I’m not sure your father really counts.”

Someone, an organizer from one of the other colleges, was calling him. “Talk with Han Yuezhu,” said Norbu, turning away. “You remember her from last week? I have to go and attend to something.”

Norbu went off, leaving Margaret with Peanut Wang, who seemed dumbstruck. “What did Norbu mean, about your father?” asked Margaret, to break the ice.

“Oh. Miss Han. Ah, my father. You see, it’s like this. My father was a teacher, here in Beijing. Then the Cultural Revolution came. Do you know about the Cultural Revolution?”

Margaret laughed. “Of course. Who doesn’t know about it?”

“Oh.” Peanut looked at his shoes. They were peasant-style green sneakers. “I’m sorry. But . . . Elder Brother Norbu said you were Overseas Chinese. I didn’t know if Overseas Chinese people knew these things.”

Margaret smiled to encourage him. He was not much taller than herself. “I’m not really Overseas Chinese,” she explained. “I’m a Chinese citizen, the same as you. I just live in America, that’s all. But go on, about your father.”

“Ah. Well, in the Cultural Revolution my father was sent to the countryside to learn from the poor and lower-middle peasants. You know about that?”

“Yes,” said Margaret, laughing again at this little nugget of Mao-speak. “I know all about it.”

“Ah. Well, you see, my father learned very well. Very well!” Peanut Wang’s face suddenly broke into a wide toothy grin of filial pride. “Became a successful peasant! Followed the example of the philosopher Tailési. Do you know the philosopher Tailési?”

Margaret shook her head. “Never heard of him.”

“Tailési was a philosopher in ancient Greece. My father often mentions him. Someone criticized Tailési, saying philosophy was no use. So Tailési went down to the countryside and became a peasant. Very successful! Became rich! Well, my father followed the example of Tailési. Got rich. Now he shares two hundred acres with four other families. They have market gardens. Fruits, vegetables, flowers—they sell to Beijing.

They are all rich!” The proud grin broke out again. “So my father proved an intellectual can become a peasant!”

“Indeed,” said Margaret. “It’s very unusual. To change your lifestyle like that is very difficult, I guess. But now you’re studying at college. So I guess *you* don’t want to be a peasant.”

The boy looked down again and shrugged. “I don’t mind. But when I was a little boy I spent all my time in those nurseries. They are covered, you know?” He spread his hands above his head to indicate the translucent plastic roofing used to protect the nurseries. “Inside is very warm, always. And so many plants! All different kinds! I liked to help the workers, to watch the plants, help them grow. Oh, so interesting! Even when I was very small, I liked to do that. So”—he looked down again and shrugged modestly—“now I know all about plants. And when they started this Institute my father found out. He still has friends in Beijing. Teachers, college professors. They told him about this Institute. So he brought me to sit the exam. And do you know what?”—At this point Peanut Wang couldn’t restrain his pride. The grin was quite out of control.—“I placed first in the exam! Elder Brother Norbu calls me ‘Botanical Genius!’”

While he had been telling this tale, the other botanists had drifted over. Several wanted to practice their English, and Margaret obliged them. They were a gay party in their clean, colorful clothes and summer hats; smarter and more cheerful than her own classmates of ten years previously, Margaret thought, though dismally gauche by American standards. The English-speakers had all given themselves preposterous names: Happy Zhang, Rainbow Chen, Einstein Lü. Their English was terrible, but they chattered away gamely, all keen to improve their command of the language, and Margaret had not the heart to correct them. None of them knew about her career or her marriage. She was an Overseas Chinese, and Elder Brother Norbu’s girlfriend, and these things were quite sufficiently interesting to them. The boys offered her artless compliments.

“You’re very beautiful,” said one mop-haired lad, peering at her through thick lenses. “Like Xi Shi!” [A famous beauty of ancient times.]

“Thank you,” said Margaret, blushing slightly, no longer accustomed to fellow-countrymen’s rather direct way with personal observations.

“Do you think Xiaohong is pretty?” He indicated the bony girl, talking with another group some yards away.

Everybody giggled. Peanut pushed the other boy with the heel of his hand. “That’s not very polite, Yuehan.”

The mop-haired boy was not deterred. “Xiaohong wanted to be Norbu’s girlfriend, but he wouldn’t let her. Just made fun of her. I’m really glad you’re his girlfriend, not Xiaohong. She’s a pain in the neck.”

They all laughed together, Margaret with the others, just as Norbu arrived.

“What’s funny?”

“I’ve been getting all the gossip from your classmates.”

Norbu flashed his teeth. “They’re idlers, the lot of them. Peanut and I are the only good students—right, Peanut?”

Peanut nodded, beaming with delight.

Norbu turned away and made a megaphone with his hands. “Botanical Institute! Let’s get ready!”

The twins hoisted their banner, one twin at each pole. Xiaohong and one or two other stragglers came over, and the group closed up.

When they were together, Norbu addressed them.

“Classmates! The main demonstration has already started out from Beijing University. They’ll be here soon. All the groups here will let them go past, then join onto the end. It’s a long march, so take turns carrying the banner and the placards.”

“I don’t want to carry *her* placard!” called out one of the boys with sunglasses, pointing at Xiaohong’s OUR PARTY IS A VERY GOOD PARTY. Everybody laughed.

“Huh! I’m quite capable of carrying my own placard,” retorted Xiaohong. “Who asked you anyway?”

“I did,” said Norbu firmly. “And I meant it. It’s very bad to squabble among ourselves. Democracy means before a decision is made, everybody with an opinion should be heard. So everybody has the right to his own opinion, and the others should support his right even if they don’t agree with the opinion. So you should help to carry Xiaohong’s placard. In that way, you’re supporting her right to express her opinion.”

Several people clapped at this. Norbu held up his hands to silence them.

“The main thing we have to remember is to keep good order. Don’t let anybody provoke you. Don’t let anybody join the march. There might be citizens who want to join. Don’t let them. This is a students’ march. If you see someone marching who doesn’t look like a student, ask to see his i.d. card.”

Similar groups from other colleges were being mustered all around them. Now, above the chatter, laughter and giving of orders, another sound could be heard. It was coming from beyond the gates of the University, from the northwest; and it was coming towards them.

The flowers of May bloom in the wild.
 Their fields nourished with martyrs’ blood.
 Cry out! Cry out! Let your voices be heard.
 Fight! Fight! In Freedom’s cause . . .

It was a student marching song from that earlier Movement, their grandfathers’ Movement. The marchers from Beijing University were approaching. Everybody heard it at the same moment, and a cheer went up. There was a general movement toward the gate, but the marshals moved to keep the students inside until the right moment.

Soon the singing was directly outside the walls. There were a lot of citizens out there too, it seemed: cheering and clapping could be heard. At last the order came to move out. The marchers outside were singing the *Internationale* now. The groups at People’s University raised the song, and began streaming out through the gate. Each group carried a school flag; most had slogan banners too. As one of the smaller contingents, the Botanical Institute was near the back, and it was a full ten minutes before they were in the street. There were hundreds of citizens at the roadside, smiling and applauding. A few yards down, on the other side of the road, a truck full of workers had pulled over to watch the parade. The workers in the back of the truck were all standing and clapping, grinning at the students, at each other, and back at the students. As Norbu’s group came level with them, one of the workers put a thumb and finger in his mouth, whistled very loud, and called out: “Hey, sweetie, let

me come and march with you!” Margaret smiled at them and waved, and they all applauded her, holding their hands high over their heads to clap.

They sang: the *Internationale*, the National Anthem, marching songs from the twenties and thirties. When these began to pall—it is a four-hour march from Beijing University to the Square—some of the livelier spirits at the front began to make up ditties and pass them back through the ranks. One that Margaret caught was a commentary on the anti-student faction in the country’s leadership, to the tune of *Frère Jacques*:

Down with Li Peng! Down with Li Peng!
Deng Xiaoping, Deng Xiaoping.
And another villain, and another villain:
Yang Shangkun, Yang Shangkun!

[Li Peng was the Prime Minister, a fishy little nerd of a man nobody liked. Yang Shangkun was the head of a powerful blood clan that controlled the Army.] There was much laughter at these little doggerels. The citizens by the roadside hooted and cheered. As the marchers came into the city center, these crowds of spectators became denser. People had climbed into the trees; workers leaned out of office windows; high up on the scaffolding of a construction site, men shouted and waved.

There was a brief commotion outside Zhongnanhai, the high-walled compound where the country’s leaders lived. Here several hundred police had blocked the road, and the lead groups of students had to push through them. This was soon done, great cheers rolling back through the ranks of marchers. When the Botanical Institute came level with Zhongnanhai Margaret saw that the policemen were all smiling and applauding with everyone else. A few hundred yards further on, the road opened out into the Square.

It was some time before Norbu’s group could get into the Square. There had actually been two marches: one from the colleges in the east of the city, one from those in the west. The organizers had so planned the thing that both marches would arrive at the north end of the Square together. A short ceremony was then held, with the purpose of displaying patriotism and good order. The National Anthem was sung, the flag was

raised. Only after this could the groups at the rear of the parade shuffle slowly into the Square.

The thought at the front of Margaret's mind on attaining the Square was to find somewhere to sit. Ten miles is a long way to walk on a hot day. She voiced her wish to the others.

"I don't think we have to keep order any more," said Norbu, looking round at the milling thousands. "Let's go to Front Gate and get a snack." (Front Gate was the district to the south of the Square, with a lot of small eateries and street vendors.)

The Botanical Institute contingent crossed the Square from north to south. At the Martyrs' Monument in the middle of the Square loudspeakers had been set up. Some students were standing by a microphone on the upper level. One of them, a tousle-headed youngster, was making a speech. "That's Erkin," indicated Norbu as they pushed past. "The Turkish boy. Probably telling the students to storm Zhongnanhai. He takes a strong line."

The streets behind Front Gate were even more crowded than the Square. Some tens of thousands of students had had the same thought as Norbu. For an hour the little group—it had left most of its members in the Square—shuffled along, until at last, on the northeast side of Chongwen Park, they found a table in a corner of a noisy, packed little restaurant. It felt wonderful to sit down. Wonderful, too, to have been one of the marchers, to be sitting here in the afterglow of the event—pride at having played one's part, mingled with regret that it was over—feasting on noodles and cold beer.

"This place looks old," Margaret said. "Perhaps the original May Fourth demonstrators sat here eating noodles. Our ancestors." [Referring to the 1919 demonstrations.]

"My ancestors were in Tibet, minding their own business," said Norbu.

"Norbu is a splittist," said Xiaohong, frowning at the impropriety of it. "Did you know that, Comrade Han?"

"I don't want to split anything," said Norbu mildly, aerating his noodles. "Chinese people should govern China. Tibetan people should govern Tibet. What's wrong with that? We don't have anything in com-

mon with you, not even an alphabet. It's silly to say we're two parts of the same country."

"There are fifty-four national minorities in our country," pointed out Xiaohong. "Do you want to give them all their own country? What would happen to China then?"

"Don't put my countrymen together with illiterate hill tribes wearing grass skirts," countered Norbu. "We were a nation. We had our own language and literature, our own colleges and hospitals, our own government, our own religion, our own styles of food and dress and architecture."

"It's no use arguing with him about it," said Margaret. "He's incorrigible. I must say," (changing the subject—the current one, to her way of thinking, leading nowhere) "I think we made a very good show today. Personally I felt very proud, marching along in good order under our banners, singing patriotic songs. And it's clear the people are with us. How can the government put down such a movement?"

"By sending in the army," said the mop-haired boy.

"I can't believe they would ever do that," said Margaret. "The People's Liberation Army wouldn't open fire on the people."

"If they did, we'd all be martyrs," said the mop-haired boy, in a tone of eager anticipation.

"Yuehan is a Christian," explained Xiaohong. "He comes from Tianjin. They have a lot of Christians there." She shook her head disapprovingly. "The Christians think if you get killed by the government you become a bodhisattva. So they are all counter-revolutionary, hoping to get shot and go to the Pure Land."

Norbu sputtered into his noodles. "Xiaohong, don't talk about things you don't understand. Nobody wants to get killed. Wanting to get killed is a kind of suicide. That's a sin in every religion, I think, isn't it, Yuehan?"

Yuehan shrugged. "I don't think you're supposed to want it. But to leave this filthy life and be raised up to Heaven to sit with Yesu—well, I don't seek it, but I won't complain if it happens."

"Miss Han, you mustn't pay any attention to Yuehan," said Peanut Wang earnestly. "We all think he's crazy."

Everybody laughed, even Yuehan himself. "Aren't we all crazy?" he

said, waving his chopsticks. “Taking on the Party and the government with no weapons? No guns or tanks, no planes or bombs? Isn’t our Movement crazy?”

“I’m sure the government will listen to the voice of the people,” said Margaret. “With so many citizens peacefully demonstrating, how can they not listen?”