

## Chapter 63

Moon Pearl Performs an Act of Deception  
Norbu Seeks the Consolations of Religion

The rest of that week was an astonishing dream. In the center of the city, normal life ceased and the Movement took over. Nobody worked; nobody attended classes. There was a demonstration every day, and each day's seemed larger than the one before. Norbu's involvement, which (it seemed to Margaret) up to then had been hedged with doubt and irony now became intense. He would disappear to meetings in the early morning, returning to the apartment to wake her for the trip to the Square. They no longer had to rely on buses—which were now anyway quite unreliable; somehow Norbu had struck a deal with the Nationalities Institute for the share of a truck, and the three of them—Baoyu's family lived less than a mile away, and they detoured to pick him up—rode to the Square with the botanists and some odds and ends of Tibetans, Mongolians and Turks, all standing in the back of the truck with their school pennants streaming above them.

The Square itself was now full night and day, and it seemed that each time they arrived there was a new group in evidence under a new banner: cadres from the Foreign Ministry, Buddhist monks, workers from this factory or that, a delegation from China Central TV, the national volleyball team! Those inhabitants of Beijing who were not demonstrating had all turned themselves into food vendors, sometimes giving away their goods for nothing to anyone who looked like a student. You could never

find these kind souls when you wanted them, however, and Margaret took to preparing the day's food in advance and stowing it in an army-surplus backpack she had bought. Peanut Wang's placards advanced day by day, from DOWN WITH OFFICIAL CORRUPTION to THE PEOPLE DEMAND REFORM to WE WANT FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY! and culminating in DOWN WITH LI PENG!, which Margaret thought very bold, Li Peng being the Prime Minister.

Rumors were thick in the air. Hunger strikers had died; the government had resigned; the General Secretary had resigned; no, he had been dismissed; he had been arrested; the workers were going to have a general strike; Deng Xiaoping, the leader "behind the curtain", had resigned; he had suffered a stroke; he had died; he had taken over the government.

On Saturday the government declared martial law, and convoys of troops appeared in the suburbs. The Nationalities truck brought the news with it late that morning. Norbu shook Margaret awake and told her to prepare the backpack. She was up and taking apples from the refrigerator before the words really registered.

"Troops? With guns?"

"No. But they'll have weapons with them, in supply trucks, I suppose."

"Norbu, it's dangerous."

"Nonsense." He was sitting on the edge of the Xings' sofa, hunched forward, reading a pamphlet. "They just want to scare us."

"How can you know that?" Margaret came to sit beside him on the sofa, and looked at the pamphlet he was holding. She had supposed it to be something put out by the students and distributed at his meeting. In fact it was a government publication, neatly printed, not mimeographed like the student news-sheets.

In accordance with the order of the State Council signed by Prime Minister Li Peng concerning the enforcement of martial law in Beijing, the Government of the City of Beijing issues this Proclamation with a view to halting the spread of social turmoil and safeguarding the normal work, production, teaching, scientific research and social life of the capital . . .

The neat ranks and files of printed characters cut through the elation of the previous days, their very blackness and squareness asserting reality, order, power. Margaret felt a shiver of fear.

“Norbu, I don’t think we should go out.”

He looked up. “Of course we must go out. My students will all go out. How can I not join them? The truck’s waiting outside.” He set aside the pamphlet and stood up.

Still seated, Margaret grabbed his hand. “Please, Norbu.” She had a sudden inspiration. “I don’t feel well. You know . . .” She let her head droop. Taking one hand from his, she put it over her womb. “I think my period’s starting.”

This was sheer deceit. Her period was, in fact, several days overdue; and in any case she suffered very little from her periods. Norbu, however, knew neither of these things.

He hesitated, then sat down again and put his arms round her. She relaxed against him and concentrated on trying to *feel* ill. “Please, Norbu, let’s stay at home today.”

It took her a full fifteen minutes to wear him down. His students would lose faith in him, Norbu said. His friends at Nationalities would consider him a coward. The soldiers would, at worst, round up the students and send them back to their colleges. What was the use of participating in a Movement if you backed out at the sight of a few peasant boys in uniform? And his father! His father had fought and died for freedom, for his country. How could he do less than his father?

Margaret soothed and pleaded, wincing and clutching at her belly at strategic intervals. She was on the point of simulating a full swoon when he yielded. The Nationalities were hammering on the door for them by this point, but Norbu went out to them and told them to go on ahead to the Botanical Institute without him.

Margaret lay on the bed with him at last, actually beginning to feel somewhat out of sorts from the concentrated effort of simulating it. In mid-afternoon, by way of compensation, she feigned a rally and allowed him a special favor, something Jake had taught her to do. He slept soundly

after that, and by the time he woke she had prepared a sumptuous meal with three different dishes: finely cut beef pieces with tomatoes in a rich sauce, crisp green beans with garlic, and spicy bean-curd. After the meal she lay down again, pleading exhaustion, and he read to her aloud from a book of short stories he had picked up somewhere. They slept early. At any rate, Margaret lay hugging his side pretending to sleep, while Norbu lay on his back with his eyes open for a long time.

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Norbu rose early next morning and went to see Thupten Rongda. Margaret was asleep, and he took care not to wake her.

It was much too early for the Nationalities truck, which Norbu thought would not come anyway after he had let them down the day before; so his first idea was just to walk to Thupten's house. Then, as he was going down College Road, a different truck full of students from Beijing University came by and he hitched a ride with them as far as the Fine Arts Museum.

The students in the truck gave him the news about the previous day's events. The troops moving in through the suburbs had stayed in their vehicles, their way blocked by crowds of citizens. Some of them had spent the whole day marooned in their trucks; some had retreated. None had reached the center of the city.

"It was glorious," said the student who told him this. "The people are solidly behind us. The leaders will have to make concessions now."

The news put Norbu in an even blacker mood. His idea had been to go to Thupten Rongda to hear some sutras and calm his mind. He bitterly regretted having given in to Margaret the day before, letting her persuade him to stay at home, to leave his classmates facing danger without him. So what if she was suffering her pains? It was a thing all women had to put up with. His being there made no difference. He was too weak with her, too weak. What was it about this woman, that she could control him like that? He had never let anybody control him. He was a Khamba, from the fighting race of northeast Tibet—mountain people, fierce and un-

conquerable, not to be tamed by women, like the sissies of Lhasa. By the time he reached Thupten Rongda's door, Norbu was fuming.

Thupten had a room in an old gentry house along one of those ancient, narrow lanes that in Beijing are called *hutongs*. The room was one of two in what had once been a pavilion, off at one side separate from the main buildings. The other room of the pavilion was used only for storage, so Thupten had an unusual degree of privacy. Norbu crossed the courtyard and tapped on the door. After a moment or two he could hear Thupten moving to the other side of the door.

“Sharcho riwo tsena . . .”

“ . . . Karsah dawa sharchung.”

This was a simple password system Thupten had them use, the first couplet from a poem written by the sixth Dalai Lama three hundred years before:

From the eastern peak

A bright white moon is rising . . .

Norbu thought the password business a bit silly. The other residents of the compound certainly knew that Thupten was a Tibetan and that he hosted fellow-Tibetans. They probably knew that religion went on in his room; the pavilion, never intended as a permanent dwelling, had only thin plaster walls and paper windows, and anyone passing by would be able to hear chanting when Thupten was giving a service. Thupten was left alone because the authorities did not feel he was worth bothering with. If they changed their minds he would be pulled in soon enough, passwords or no passwords. But anyone who had endured seventeen years in the camps had a right to be a little eccentric, so all Thupten's Tibetan visitors used the passwords from deference to him and his past suffering.

The room was dim, with a cloth curtain over the single window. Thupten's *kang* took up a third of the floor space. Hanging on the wall above it was a spirit trap: a framework of sticks densely woven with

threads of wool, to catch any evil spirits that might flutter into the room. On the floor beside the bed was an enamel wash-basin and jug, and a glass tumbler with a set of false teeth in it. Further along, in the corner, were a kerosene stove and small galvanized-metal meat safe behind whose mesh could be seen bowls of grain and dried vegetables. Next to the meat safe stood a stack of empty bowls, some knives and chopsticks in a jar, and an electric rice cooker plugged into a socket on the wall.

The only other furniture was a chest of drawers in chipped white paint. The top surface of the chest was made up as a shrine. At the left was a brass figure of Chenrezi, the patron bodhisattva of Tibet. On the right was a sealed brass pot containing some scrapings of soil from the courtyard of the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa—the most holy cathedral of Tibetan Buddhism, beneath which there was said to be a tunnel with a door leading down into the Underworld. At center, leaning against the wall, was a gilt-framed portrait of the Dalai Lama with, draped over the top and sides, a red protection cord His Holiness had blessed personally. There was an unlit candle in a holder on each side of the portrait, and a print of a *thangka* painting pinned to the wall above, showing the Wheel of Life. On the floor next to the chest was a stack of books in Tibetan and Chinese. The room and its furnishings were neat but not particularly clean, except for the shrine, which was spotless, the brass- and gilt-work polished to iridescence.

Thupten was wearing baggy pajama pants with a drawstring at the waist and a stained old T-shirt much too big for his scrawny frame. He was gaunt, toothless and perfectly bald. His physical health had been destroyed in the camps, and he limped badly from some injury he had received there. The limp gave his body a lopsided appearance, and the voluminous T-shirt hung down loose at one side.

In spite of his disability, and of the insecurity of practicing his religion at the sufferance of those who had blighted his life and sacked his country, Thupten Rongda was unfailingly cheerful and took a lively interest in the world. Recognizing Norbu now, he made a *bai* in the Tibetan style, palms together, fingers spread, grinning toothlessly and chuckling *dogpo, dogpo*—friend, friend. While he went to fasten the

door, Norbu prostrated himself full length before the shrine, as best he could in the little available floor space.

He had not called on Thupten since before the demonstrations started, and Thupten's first question, once Norbu was squatting upright on the floor, was about the movement. He spoke the dialect of Lhasa, with that veneer of archaism favored by the clergy.

"Art thou marching, young friend? Art thou marching?"

"Yes, *genyen*. Everybody's marching. Even the *sangha*" [Buddhist clergy] "is marching. At any rate, there were monks in Tiananmen Square last week. I thought I might see you among them."

Thupten had gone over to sit on the kang and put in his false teeth. "Too lame," he said when he could speak. "I cannot walk any distance, else I should be there. Truly, it is a wonderful thing. I hear from the people whensoever I go forth. All support the students." He shook his head, chuckling. "The communists must be trembling in their wrath! How they yearn to kill you all with machine-guns and flame-throwers, as they did in Tibet! But this is not Tibet. Here the whole world watcheth, and they durst not act according to their hearts' desire."

"Can you see the future, *genyen*? Can you see what will happen?"

"No." Thupten giggled. "Alas, this poor vessel hath no such powers. Were it otherwise, I should have spared myself many troubles in this existence."

Norbu gave him the morning's news, as he had heard it in the truck. Thupten listened intently; then, when Norbu had finished, got up and went to the chest of drawers.

"We shall discuss these worldly things in due course," he said. "Religion first."

From the bottom drawer he took a brown monk's robe. He began putting it on right over his pajama pants and T-shirt. His head hidden somewhere in the folds of the robe, he added: "But before we read the sutras, I think thee should tell me why thou art so angry."

"How do you know I'm angry?"

Thupten laughed, his head emerging from the robe. "Easy to see. No supernatural powers required. Thy face, thy voice, thine eyes. Very angry."

Norbu hesitated. He had never spoken to Thupten about anything personal, though in his culture it was quite all right to do so with the clergy—or semi-clergy, in Thupten’s case.

“It’s my woman,” he said at last. “When she saw the martial law proclamation yesterday she was scared and persuaded me not to march. So I stayed home with her doing *gyo-gyap* when I should have been marching with my comrades. I feel badly about it. I feel I let my comrades down, I guess I blame her.”

Thupten nodded thoughtfully, pulling at the robe to seat it securely on his emaciated frame. “Methought it was some such thing. Hast thou taken nourishment since rising? Broken thy fast?”

“No.”

“Very well. Let us show our respect to Lord Buddha and the incarnations. Then we shall have some *thugpa* and thou canst speak to me of thine anger. The sutras will calm thee. Dost thou remember the ‘Heart’ Sutra?”

“I think so.”

Thupten squatted on the kang, arranging his robe around him, and began to chant while still fiddling with his robe.

With the brilliance of thy wisdom, O compassionate one,  
Illuminate the dark ignorance enclosing my mind.  
Enlighten my understanding, strengthen my courage,  
For the truth of Lord Buddha’s teaching.

They prayed, read the sutra, said more prayers, and practiced silent meditation. When that was done Thupten got off the kang and went to the rice cooker. It was filled with *thugpa*, the sticky barley-soup of Tibet. Thupten went to some trouble to maintain the atmosphere of his homeland in physical as well as spiritual matters. He always had a supply of barley for making *thugpa* and its companion *tsampa*—roast barley-flour meal. He drank the sweet red tea of his homeland, laced with butter in the Lhasa style when he could get fresh butter from Mongolia. Norbu privately thought it effeminate to drink butter in tea—in Amdo they used milk—but drank the tea whenever Thupten offered it, out of respect for

the monk's learning and suffering. Today, however, there was no tea, only *thugpa*. Thupten took two bowls and spoons from the stack next to the cooker, and they sat together on the kang drinking the *thugpa*.

"This woman of thine," said Thupten after three or four mouthfuls. "Is she a heart-love?"

"Yes, *genyen*. I love her."

"And is she *nangpa*?" ['Within'—i.e. a practicing Buddhist.]

"No. She's Chinese."

"So?" Thupten raised his eyebrows. "Does that make the anger worse for thee?"

"I don't know. Perhaps."

Thupten nodded, slurping in another mouthful of *thugpa*.

"Thou art from the east, by thy speech. From Amdo, I surmise."

"Yes, *genyen*."

"Khamba?"

"Yes."

"A proud people. Oftimes too proud."

"Not me, *genyen*. I treat my woman with respect. How could I not? She's famous in the west. She's a singer in America, famous and wealthy. She sings opera for all the millionaires in New York."

"So? Overseas Chinese."

"Yes. But her father was an officer in the communist army."

"That is not her fault. Thou shouldst not permit the fact of her being Chinese to distress thee. Ai, so many of our countrymen feel hatred toward the Chinese! Even if thou wilt it not, even in the case of a heart-love, thou art bound to nurse some hatred. It is natural, after what our country has suffered. Natural, but wrong. Let me tell thee a story from the camps."

### Thupten Rongda's Story of the Great Famine

I was at a camp in Gansu Province in '61, during the great famine. It was a Chinese district; the peasants were all Chinese. One day some among us prisoners were sent out of the camp on a work detail. We were walking to the place appointed

when I beheld a Chinese peasant woman by the side of the road. She was starving—all the peasants in that district were starving. She had two little babies with her, and they were starving, too. Now, I had sojourned three years in the camps and I had learned how to survive. I had morsels of food hidden in my clothes—we had always to secrete away food thus, to see us through in case a mealtime was canceled, as often happened. Seeing this poor woman in her suffering, naturally I felt compassion. I gave her my food when the guards were looking elsewhere.

Next day all the peasants of that district stormed the camp. The woman had told them we prisoners had food. There were hundreds of them! They were pulling on the wire, the barbed wire, with their bare hands, howling to be let in. We Tibetans were shocked. We thought we had been treated badly in the camps; but life outside for these Chinese people was so bad they were trying to break *in* to the camp! The camp guards were all stricken with fear. They shot at the peasants with their guns. They killed a few, and the rest ran away. Or crawled away, I should say—they were too weak to run. Another work detail of stronger prisoners was sent out to bury the ones that had been shot. They told us the bodies were so wasted with hunger they could be picked up with one hand.

“So you see, the communists are just as cruel to their own people as they were to us Tibetans. Not only is it against the teachings of Lord Buddha to hate the Chinese, it is also unfair to them. All this cruelty and suffering, all the destruction in our country—it is wrong to blame the Chinese people in general for that. They have suffered too. The cause of all this suffering is the desire for power, for material domination, which this communist philosophy validates and concentrates.”

“I know that, *genyen*, I guess. No, I don’t hold her government’s crimes against her. Politics isn’t personal between us. But still, a woman is a woman. They have a way of getting inside you, weakening your will.”

“Thy will is *thine*. It is as weak or as strong as thou allowest. Do not

blame thy neighbor for that. The first step in enlightenment is to purify *thyself*. Right thought, right action. A jewel should be flawless, clear all the way through.” [“Norbu” means “jewel” in Tibetan.] “Do not bear resentment against this girl, and do not be angry with thyself. These are fruitless emotions. They can have no good result. Calm thy mind and concentrate on thy work. Which is, to help our country, our poor broken Tibet. This students’ movement—truly it is a good thing for us. It will open up China a little, and relax this terrible system of theirs. That can only help our cause.”

Norbu sighed. “Easy to say, *genyen*. But her attachment to the student movement is less than mine. She is only involved at all, I think, because I am. And yet I can’t bear to leave her alone and go on with these things myself. Her hold on me is too strong.”

“Here thou seest the conflicts that arise from desire,” said Thupten, nodding. “Thou desirest this woman. Thou also desirest to help thy country. Desire plus desire equals anger. Now, the first desire is more base than the second, and ideally of course thou shouldst purge thyself of that base desire; but I cannot in reason ask thee to do that. Men and women must needs make *gyo-gyap* together, or the race will come to an end and the Great Nothingness will prevail throughout the universe. To be hoped for in theory, but preferably postponed until all sentient beings have attained enlightenment.” Thupten went into a long fit of giggling, bobbing his head up and down in mirth.

“What do you think will happen, *genyen*? To our movement, I mean. Shall we succeed? Shall we get some concessions?”

The monk shrugged. “*Lho gyal lo*.” [The gods will prevail.] “My best guess is that the communists will make a show of concessions, in order to weaken thy movement. Then, when the demonstrations have stopped and the foreigners have all gone back to their home nations, the agents of the government will quietly come to thy houses and arrest thee one by one. When thy leaders are all safely away in the camps, the authorities will withdraw all their concessions. That is how they proceed. The main thing is not to trust them, not to believe anything they tell thee. They are captives of the Prince of Lies. They make promises only to lull thee. Nothing they say is true, nothing. Do not imagine for a moment

thou art dealing with reasonable human beings. The communists will do anything, say anything to preserve their power. These are people with no religion, remember. No religion, no morality, no principles whatsoever. As tigers are they, living only to kill and eat.”

When the time came to leave, Norbu tried to give the holy man some money, as was customary; but Thupten Rongda would not take it, though these gifts were his only means of support, and the giving of them the chief way for lay persons to gain merit in this existence.

“Keep the money for thy movement. Let the world take care of worldly things. I lack nothing. Do what you can for our country.”

“I’ll come to see you more often, *genyen*.”

The monk laughed. “Not important. Keep me in thy heart, that is all. Remember the prayers I have taught thee, and repeat them when thy mind is still. Press forward with thy work in this movement. Do not be afraid! And try to teach thy woman also, to fear nothing. All is illusion. There is nothing to fear. ‘To die is only to go to another village’.”

The monk bowed, hands templed in front of him. “*Tashidelek*.” [Good luck.] “Pray for our country.”

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The news Norbu had heard in the truck on the way to Thupten Rongda’s house, Margaret heard that same morning from Baoyu, who called at the Xings’ apartment with the idea of waiting together with Margaret and Norbu for the truck. He found Margaret alone, looking a little distracted. Norbu, she said, had gone to a meeting.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” exulted Baoyu, dropping into the armchair. “The People’s Liberation Army won’t fire on the people, after all. How could anyone have thought so?”

The People’s Army knows what’s right.

It’s foreign foes they’re trained to fight.”

“Yes,” said Margaret, “it’s wonderful. But you’d best not wait. I don’t know what time Norbu will be back.”

“Is there something wrong between you two?”

“Mm. No. He’s at a meeting. Just like I told you.”

“Oh, dear. He hasn’t left you, has he?”

Margaret laughed. “I don’t think so. No, that would be out of character.” She told Baoyu frankly about her deceit the day before.

“And when I woke up, he’d gone out. I really don’t know where. I think he’s upset at not being with his classmates yesterday. When there was real danger.”

“Perhaps he’s gone to the Square by himself,” suggested Baoyu.

“I doubt it. I don’t know. Perhaps he’s just gone off for a long walk. I really have no idea.”

“Let’s go to the Square and see if we can find him. He’ll be with his botanists, won’t he?”

“I don’t know. No, you go, Baoyu. I’ll stay here. I don’t think he’d go to the Square without me.”

“I’ll stay here with you if you like.”

“No, thanks. Too embarrassing if he comes back.”

The apartment’s supplies of food had been exhausted by the previous night’s banquet. When Baoyu had left, Margaret went out to do some food shopping, leaving a brief note for Norbu. In the streets she heard the news all over again. The broad middle-aged woman who sold vegetables at the small private store round the corner from the Xings’ was full of the previous days’ events.

“One lot wuz comin’ along Fuxing, by the Jinyuan crossroads there. All the people come out an’ surrounded ’em. Even patients come out from the ’orspital, wearin’ pajamas, an’ started arguin’ wiv the sodjers! Poor bloody kids! They didn’t ’ardly know where they was. They just sat there in their lorries lookin’ sorry for themselves, while the people told ’em to get back to their barracks. Only kids, most of ’em. An’ another lot come down by the Summer Palace, an’ they got the same treatment. They couldn’t move for the people around ’em, an’ I suppose their orders were not to ’urt anybody. So there they were—stuck fast! Feel sorry for ’em, I do. ’Eaven knows wot their orficers ’ad told ’em to expect.”

Hearing it all again made Margaret feel even glummer, and even guiltier for her deceit. She saw clearly now how important the Move-

ment—or at least, his leadership of his own little band—had become to Norbu. He justified his work in the Movement, when he spoke about it, in terms of its advantage to his own country. If China gets democracy (he would say) then Tibet will be free. Yet mixed in with these entirely theoretical concerns was an immediate and personal satisfaction in being the leader of the botanists, conducting their debates, working out their positions on this or that. It really was a kind of *work* for him, Margaret realized; and she recalled something Jake had once said, about a man and his work. She had pulled Norbu from his work, by trickery. She had unmanned him.

Back at the apartment, there was still no sign of Norbu. It was past noon now, and Margaret began to think that perhaps Baoyu had been right—perhaps Norbu had gone to the Square alone. She fretted about this for a while, and had made up her mind to go to the Square herself when he walked in.

From sheer relief Margaret went to him at once, put her arms around him, pressed her cheek to his jacket.

“I lied to you, Norbu. I’m sorry, I lied to you. I wasn’t ill, I was just scared. For you, for both of us. I was scared.”

“It’s all right, little nightingale. I know. It’s all right.” Norbu had folded his arms around her.

“Where have you been?”

“I went to see a fellow-countryman. A *genyen*, holy man. I was angry. I wanted to calm my mind before I saw you again.”

“Did it work?”

Norbu laughed—an easy laugh, with no edge to it. “Yes, little nightingale. I guess it worked. I don’t feel angry now.”

“We’ll go to the Square any time you like. We’ll go this afternoon, if you like.”

“I don’t know that I dare,” said Norbu. “I have no face with my classmates now, after I let them down yesterday.”

“But we should go. We shouldn’t be afraid. It’s for my country. And yours, your country. I won’t be scared any more. I promise you I won’t.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of. To tell the truth, I was a little scared too. But no, we won’t be scared any more. This whole movement is too important. If we’re scared, the authorities have won, don’t you see?”

“Yes, I do. No more scared.” Margaret looked up at his face. “We’ll go to the Square this afternoon. We’ll go right now. Okay?”