

Chapter 65

Half Brother Offers His Opinion
Our Nation's Leaders Fuss and Fret

It was a week before they went to the Square again. Margaret made no objection to this. She had seen, and smelled, enough of the Square to last her a lifetime. Her own concerns seemed anyway much larger and more pressing to her in those few days than did the slow rumble of History around her. Margaret knew that she should go back to New York to arrange her divorce, and that the sooner this was begun the better. Still she knew she would not leave until Teacher Zou returned to the capital. She even developed small transient fantasies about staying longer: staying until the college summer vacation, then taking Norbu on a trip around China, to Hangzhou, Guilin, Taishan, Huangshan . . . Surely the green card business could be squared with the U.S. embassy somehow. Margaret paid little attention to the larger events all around. She thought the student movement had become boring. She suspected that Norbu thought so, too, though he attended two meetings in that week.

The first watermelons appeared in the private markets. Norbu brought one home in triumph from the second of his meetings. They sat in bed with great wedges of it, trying to spit the seeds into the Xings' guest spittoon.

When they ventured to the Square again it was to see the Goddess. Norbu had heard about it at a meeting. Some students from the Art Institute had erected it that Monday. When Margaret saw it she laughed.

“Why, it’s just *Lady Liberty*,” she said.

It turned out that Norbu had never heard of the Statue of Liberty. Margaret explained.

“In that case, the leaders will take it as a big insult,” said Norbu. “You know how they feel about foreign influences. Now our movement is just taunting them.”

On Thursday they took a trip to the Wall. It was a warm, cloudless day. Margaret wore a simple minidress with white moccasins. The minidress showed off her bare legs, of which she was rather proud, and which she knew Norbu especially liked. The American girls—the ordinary ones, the Jones Beach ones, not the Southampton crowd with their live-in dieticians and personal trainers—all developed a peculiar doughy quality about the thighs once they had passed a certain age; not much more than twenty-five, she thought. At thirty-one her own legs were as smooth, firm and slender as a schoolgirl’s. Tibetan women, the ones she had seen in Nakri, tended to be stocky and muscular. At first Margaret wondered if that was what Norbu really hankered for; but later, in their bed games, he had dwelt long and tenderly on her naked legs, kissing and caressing them slowly, slowly on his way north, so it was clear he really did like them.

They took the train up from Qinghua to Badaling on the Wall. The Wall was thronged with people, practically all of them Chinese. Everyone was in great good humor. Margaret mounted the steps alongside a fine strong fellow, a worker from the northeast, who grinned at her in delight and bellowed out a line from one of Chairman Mao’s poems:

If you haven’t climbed the Great Wall you’re not a true man!

The people around all laughed. Some echoed the line, singing it out to each other as they climbed. The hillsides were green here, the sun warm.

Hand in hand they shuffled along in the crowd to the end of the restored section. Beyond that point the Wall was supposed to be unsafe, and had actually fallen down in places. There was a rope barrier to keep people on the restored part. Norbu ducked under the rope, pulling Mar-

garet with him. For a mile or more they scrambled over Wall and fragments of Wall, up and down hills, until they were well out of sight of the crowds and had the whole Wall to themselves. At last, sweating and breathless, they came to a little fortress on a high hilltop. Here they sat to savor the view. The line of a much older Wall could be made out branching off at this point, heavily overgrown and rounded with age.

Margaret looked back the way they had come. There was no-one to be seen: only Wall, and green hillsides, and blue sky. A goat was grazing a hundred yards away, on the Chinese side.

“I’m not sure I have the strength to get back,” she said.

“Don’t worry, little nightingale. I’ll give you strength.”

He had that rather goofy look in his eyes that Margaret knew very well by this time. She let him have his way, kneeling against the parapet, gazing out over the lands of the barbarians.

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On Saturday morning Norbu left early to go to a meeting. Margaret had no plan for the day but to lie in late and wait for him to come home. She had in any case been suffering from an occasional mild nausea for some days past, perhaps (she thought) from the watermelons, some of which were not fully ripe. Thus she was dozing in bed at nine, when Half Brother arrived.

At first she did not answer Half Brother’s knock on the door, supposing it to be one of the busybodies from the block committee; but after knocking three or four times with no result he called to her through the door, very loud.

“Little Sister, are you there? It’s your half brother come to see you from the northeast! Little Sister! It’s Half Brother! Is anyone at home?”

Half Brother was dressed in expensive-looking casual clothes: polo shirt, light khaki slacks, brown leather loafers. He had the ill-at-ease look of a man unaccustomed to wearing anything but uniform. Margaret put her arms round his neck and kissed his cheek in the American way—catching him off-guard so that he did not know what to do with his own arms, one hand vaguely patting her kidneys. She sat him in one of the

Xings' big stuffed armchairs, and went to the kitchen to make tea. He had got the address from Mother, he explained, calling through into the kitchen. Margaret had left it with her in case anything needed forwarding.

"Is your wife in Beijing too?" she called back.

"No. I took special leave."

"Special leave, just to see your little sister?"

"Exactly."

She heard him use a cigarette lighter. Yes, Half Brother had taken up smoking, she recalled, and looked around the kitchen for an ashtray. She thought probably Mr Xing did not smoke—few intellectuals did. Half Brother had come to see her? What would she do with him? How would he react to Norbu?

"You look to be in good health," said Half Brother, when they were seated together in the living-room. He had located an ashtray himself somehow, and had it on the broad arm of his chair, together with his cigarettes and lighter. The cigarettes were *Musician*, a Chinese brand she had never heard of. Half Brother's lighter was gold, expensive-looking. The fragrant smoke drifted and trembled in the early morning sunlight, as in Mr Powell's office eight years before.

"Your face is glowing," Half Brother went on. "Eyes bright. Some change in you since Chengdu, I think."

Margaret felt herself blush. "Nonsense. It's just the difference of air."

"Your voice, too. Very clear and strong. I heard you singing in the Square."

Margaret was nonplused. "In the Square? Oh, was it on TV? They showed *me*, on TV?"

Half Brother laughed. "Not exactly. Military Intelligence is filming everything that happens. They use cameras hidden in bags."

Margaret stared at him. "Is it true?"

"Of course. Else how did I know you were singing? My chief has copies of all the tapes. He's encouraged us to watch them. Almost the first thing I saw was my little sister singing at the Monument. I've seen you in the crowd once or twice, too."

"I don't know why you have to do everything so secretively," said

Margaret, remembering Norbu's argument. "Our movement is an open movement. There's nothing secret about it."

Half Brother drew on his cigarette, then tapped it into the ashtray, looking at it thoughtfully as he did so.

"*Our* movement? What's it got to do with you?"

"I'm Chinese, aren't I? It's a movement for all the Chinese people. For democracy, for everybody."

Half Brother looked at her levelly. "So they say?"

"Don't you think so?"

"No. I think it's a misguided movement. Misguided, and it will end in tears. And I think you should get out of it before things go bad."

"Go bad? What do you mean? Is the government planning an attack on the students? Oh, Half Brother, if they are you must tell me. I must warn my friends."

"Planning an attack? Ha! I wish our leaders had that much resolution. No, I don't know of any plans. Or to be precise: I know of several, but I have no idea which will be adopted. These are national matters. They will be decided at the national leadership level; not the divisional level, which is all I have access to, and certainly not the regimental level, which is the scope of my command."

"Do you think they will decide to attack?"

Half Brother took another long draw on his cigarette. "Probably."

Margaret got up and went to the kitchen, where the water for tea was boiling.

"Is this what you came to tell me?"

"Yes." Half Brother got up and came to the kitchen entrance. "How could I not come? I don't want to see my little sister in jail."

"Is that how it will end, do you think? With the students all in jail?"

"In jail or dead, Heaven forbid."

"The soldiers will fire on the students?"

"The soldiers will follow their orders. That's what soldiers do. If they are ordered to fire, they will fire. But so far as the students are concerned, I don't think it will come to that. My impression is that our leaders don't really care about the students. They regard them as just misguided idealists, that's all. Besides, all their own kids are in the movement. They won't

give orders to shoot their own kids. No, it's the riff-raff and low-class elements that have been drawn to the movement—they are the real enemy. These so-called workers' groups and citizens' groups. We'll open fire on them, all right!"

"Some of them are very sincere. After all, if we're to have democracy, we should have it for low-class people, too."

"Democracy! Have you really swallowed all that guff, Little Sister?"

Half Brother took the two glasses Margaret handed him and set them on the low table between the armchairs. Margaret poured tea, and they sat again. Half Brother took out another cigarette; but instead of lighting it, tapped it a few times on the edge of the ashtray, then let it hang unlit between his fingers.

"It's nothing to do with democracy," he said. "It's hedonism, that's all. This movement, these students—they just want to be able to do as they please, without restraints."

"What's wrong with that, so long as they don't break the law?"

"What's wrong is that it weakens the nation, that's what. You've lived in America, you know that. Look at America! The men make *tongfang* with the men and the women with the women, and they're all dying from AIDS. The blacks hate the whites, and will do everything they can to undermine the country that enslaved their ancestors. The southern parts are being colonized by Mexico, the Americans don't even have enough patriotic spirit to guard their borders. The Jews are milking the system for all they can get, and sending the wealth to Israel. The young people know in their bones that the country is finished, and they just want to smoke opium and forget everything. Do you really want China to be like that?"

"That's very unfair. America's not all like that. Plenty of Americans have patriotic spirit. And you're not fair to our movement either. If the students are so hedonistic, why are they ready to starve themselves to death? They are idealists, you said it yourself. They want reforms, that's all. Who doesn't want reforms, with the leadership so old and corrupt? Don't *you* want reforms?"

Half Brother had lit the cigarette while she was speaking, and now exhaled smoke.

“Of course I do. But reforms will come soon enough. The thing about old men is, they soon die.”

“So you’re just going to wait for the leaders to die off, then make reform? What kind of policy is that? That’s just *wuwei*.” [Nothingness in action.] “At least our program is an active program, a positive program.”

Half Brother was smiling at her, in a rather superior way she found somewhat irritating. “Little Sister, Little Sister. You don’t know what’s possible and what’s not possible. Listen. These current leaders. They all grew up in the Old Society, you know. Sure, they are great revolutionaries; but at the same time they can’t shake off those old attitudes. Struggle to attain an official position, then get rich dispensing favors. You know. You have to wait till that generation has passed away. Let them have their few years of glory, we owe them that. Meanwhile, we can build up the nation’s wealth. When the time is right, our generation will move into position. Then China will really be a world power. The *one* world power! Nobody will be able to resist us! America? Let them try! Russia? They are trembling for fear of us even now! India? Just a big Tibet!”

“Meanwhile, the injustices and corruption go on.”

Half Brother waved this away. “Oh, injustices, corruption! People will forget about that soon enough when the nation is strong. Even your students. They talk about democracy and freedom; but when they see our armies marching to reclaim our lost territories, their hearts will be filled with patriotic joy and they will forget all this dull hedonism. Of course I agree with you. I agree with the students. There must be reforms. But this is not the right way, nor the right time. I’m not unsympathetic to the students. We’re all getting impatient, waiting for these old men to die. But once we’ve got the country on the right track, nobody will have any more reason to complain. Everybody will be filled with pride in our great Han race. Everybody will be glad to see the country strong, united and prosperous. There’ll be no need for demonstrations then. Then we shall have a strong central government, that people will be glad to follow. Then we shall make it clear to other countries that the period of our humiliations is over. All the unequal treaties will be overturned. We shall recover our lost lands in Siberia, Mongolia, Central Asia and the

Himalayas. We are a quarter of the world's population. How can we be expected to live on one twentieth of the world's land?"

"It sounds like a very aggressive policy."

"Yes! We have been passive and inward-looking for five thousand years. Until Father's generation, Chinese people didn't even play sports. You were supposed to just float around in your robe, letting your fingernails grow long. 'You don't use good iron to make nails; a good son does not become a soldier.'" [Quoting an old proverb.] "No more of that! Those five thousand years were just a waiting period! Now China's hour is coming!"

Margaret laughed, a little uneasily. "It seems that you want to conquer the world."

"No, certainly not. We have no aggressive intentions toward any other country. We only want to get back what was taken from us in the past, that's all. What's wrong with that? Who could object to that? If any nation tries to stop us we'll make an example of them."

"Does everybody in the army think like that?"

Half Brother shrugged. "The chiefs, the older ones—well, they're like the national leadership. They've paid their dues, now they want to sit back and get the rewards. That's all right. But the officers beneath them, at my level—yes, most of us want to see the country strong, the lost territories restored. Once we take power, there'll be no more humiliations. But we need a strong, disciplined country. We can't tolerate all this disorder. These demonstrations—making us look fools before the world."

"When the leadership tries to stifle the voice of the people, when they pretend that everyone is happy when in fact everyone is complaining, when they try to cover up with stale slogans what is plain for everyone to see—that's when we look like fools before the world."

Half Brother laughed. "You were always difficult and argumentative, Little Sister. But now you are taking it too far. Putting yourself in danger . . ."

"Han Yuezhu! Han Yuezhu!" There was a voice calling outside, and a knocking on the door. "Yuezhu, it's me, Baoyu!"

Margaret got up and let Baoyu in. Half Brother stood up for the introduction.

"This is my friend Cao Gang," said Margaret, using Baoyu's real

name. “You met him before, at my birthday party when we lived at West Wall, do you remember?”

“Yes,” said Half Brother. “A dancer. I remember.” He shook hands with Baoyu. “I’m Yuezhu’s half brother.”

“Yes,” said Baoyu. “I remember too. You were in the army.”

“He still is,” said Margaret—and at once wondered if this was something she ought not have said. Half Brother didn’t seem to mind, though. He just laughed and said: “Out of uniform today.”

“Cao Gang’s father is a Division Head in Public Security,” said Margaret, to dilute the offense, if there had been an offense.

“Really? Does he have any idea what’s happening?” asked Half Brother, and laughed again.

“No,” said Baoyu. “If anybody knows, it’s only the senior leaders in Zhongnanhai. Is the army being kept in the dark, too?”

“Yes, and we’re all grumbling about it.”

They were all still standing. Now Half Brother moved to the door. “I hope you’ll pay attention to my words, Little Sister,” he said.

Margaret let him out. In the corridor, out of Baoyu’s line of sight, he grinned at her and said: “Now I understand you, Little Sister!”

“What do you mean?”

“Such a handsome guy! And with a father in Public Security, I suppose you won’t be in jail for very long even if they do make arrests.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong,” said Margaret. “He’s not my lover.”

Half Brother laughed again, turning away now. “You can’t fool me,” he called back. “He’s the one I saw with you on the videotape, by the Monument. I saw you embrace him. Oh, I don’t blame you, mind. Such a handsome guy!”

“Am I the handsome guy?” asked Baoyu, when she was back in the room.

“Yes. I’m sorry. My half brother’s not very tactful. He thinks you’re my lover.”

Baoyu hooted with laughter, and Margaret couldn’t help joining in. They laughed so much they both had to sit down.

“Is it true that even your father doesn’t know what decisions are being taken?” asked Margaret, when they were calmer.

“Yes, it’s true. He says there’s a big split in the leadership. There are some who want to give concessions to the students. There are some who want to arrest them all. Neither faction has the upper hand.

Our nation’s leaders fuss and fret;
We’ll get concessions from them yet!

What did your half brother say about the army’s plans?”

“The same. He thinks the army may fire on the workers’ groups, but not on the students.”

“Oh, I hope they won’t fire on anybody. The workers are only asking to meet with the leaders. Are our leaders really too grand to meet with the common people?”

“I don’t believe the People’s Liberation Army will open fire on the people,” said Margaret. “I just don’t believe it. Two weeks ago we went out to the eastern suburbs to talk with the soldiers. They just seemed embarrassed to be confronted by people urging them to return to their barracks. No, I don’t think they will use their guns. My father was an army man all his life. I can’t imagine him doing such a thing.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Baoyu, as the door banged open and Norbu strode in, beaming all over his face.