

Chapter 71

A New Year Brings New Life

Tasting the Air in a Famous Park

It was late November when Vinnie appeared. He had an engagement at the Met, singing *Aida* with Katie Folescu—the very same diva Colman had exercised his Hibernian wit upon. Vinnie called the apartment as soon as he arrived in the city, and was walking through the door twenty minutes later. Same Vinnie: twice as large as life, huge grin bringing out the laughter lines round his eyes, striding into the apartment, filling all with his sunny spirit, his vitality, his sheer stupendous bulk.

“PERLINA! PERLINETTA!” he roared, and advanced on Margaret with arms outspread. “I THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD! OH, MA BELLA!”

Margaret had struggled to her feet, which she could do now, and held her arms out for a hug. But Vinnie, entirely disregarding her condition, lifted her bodily in his arms and spun her round. Setting her down at last, he stepped back, drawing out her arms till he was at fingertip distance, gazing at her with something like reverence.

“Dear Vinnie. Thank you for coming.”

“Eh, my little pearl, I should ’ave come before! But I ’ad engagements—Vienna, Milan, Leningrad. I ’ave been singing Giordano, I ’ave been singing Pietri, I ’ave been singing *Mozart*—can you believe it? But thinking of you, always thinking of you, my little pearl. Eh, gran Dio, I

thought you were dead, they told me you were dead. Then Colman called me. Oh! A miracle!”

Releasing her, he set his hands palm together in prayer, and raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Grazi, Signore, grazi, grazi.”

Mrs Mo was out shopping, but that huge voice had woken Mr Mo from his meditations, and he had materialized in a far corner of the room. Margaret introduced him and they all sat down, Mr Mo somewhat awe-struck at this brush with greatness.

“You must sing,” said Vinnie as soon as they were seated. “*You must sing*, Perlina. It’s what you were born for. When will you sing?”

“Oh, Vinnie, I don’t know. Certainly I can’t sing in this condition.” She patted her belly.

Vinnie put a hand over his mouth, and shook his head slowly from side to side. “My Perlina! It was a fellow revolutionary, I suppose?”

“Yes. But . . .”

“Eh! So romantic! I cannot . . . Eh, scusi.” Vinnie took out a white handkerchief the size of a tablecloth and blew his nose operatically. “Tanto romantico! But you must sing, Perlina. Of course, after the baby is born. But you must, you must. It is your destiny. First the child. Then, training through the summer. And then—*vesti la giubba!*”

Vinnie threw back his head and laughed a laugh that rattled the crockery in the kitchen closets—as well he might, knowing as he surely did that every middle-class household on the planet owned a recording of Vinnie Cinelli singing “*Vesti la giubba*”.

* * *

There were other callers that last trimester. Mrs Mo kept the newspapers away, but the New York opera season had opened and singers dropped in from time to time, always urging Margaret to get back in training as soon as the baby was born. Dorothy Blaine came three times, full of advice—she was mother of four—and encouragement.

“Don’t let them rope you in to those dumb Lamaze classes,” said Dorothy, referring to a faddy program of breath-control exercises the

hospitals were all promoting at that time. “It’s nothing you didn’t learn in Vocalization 101.”

And: “Childbirth is the greatest thing that can happen to a soprano, honey. Once you get that diaphragm back in shape it’ll be twice as big and twice as strong. You could throw rocks with it.”

Jennifer turned up too, full of concern, pressing for details of the movement and the massacre, details Margaret was still unable to summon up on request. She filled in as best she could with things she had read in the Hong Kong newspapers.

“This country’s no better,” Jennifer maintained. She told Margaret about an incident twenty years before at a college in Ohio, when soldiers had fired on students.

“It’s a worldwide struggle,” she continued “the people against the military-industrial complex.”

Margaret did not really understand this, but nodded in agreement, accustomed by now to foreigners’ fathomless ignorance of Chinese affairs, or even of the difference between freedom and tyranny.

From Jennifer she got news of Jake, for the first time since she returned. He had indeed gone off to Dharamsala in northern India, and one of his kids had received a photograph of him in a brown monk’s robe, grinning idiotically, surrounded by other monks, having his head shaven. There had been nothing since.

“I can’t see it,” said Jennifer, shaking her head. “Not our Jakey. Richard, yes, even Joel perhaps. But Jake? Sitting on top of a mountain with a bunch of smelly Tibetans, chanting? I just can’t see it. He’ll be back before Christmas.”

* * *

By December Margaret could walk with a stick; but her belly was very big, and Mrs Mo went everywhere with her, watching intently lest she stumble and fall. They were going out regularly now, Margaret hobbling from the elevator to a taxi with Mrs Mo at one elbow and Joe the doorman at the other. They went to Rockefeller Center to watch the skaters; they

went to Chinatown to see movies; they went to the park, where the trees now were bare.

It seemed to Margaret that she was perched like a passenger above her huge belly, hardly able to breathe. A singer is always conscious of her diaphragm, as a pianist of his fingers, as a dancer of his feet. Margaret felt hers being pushed up into her rib cage, stretched and deformed. By way of experimentation she tried some chest exercises, but could do nothing. Alarmed, she did some vocalization, working from as low down as she could. This was not so bad, but bad enough to leave her discouraged. Perhaps she could not sing now, perhaps she would never sing again. After she had dwelt on this a while it did not seem to matter very much.

The baby was due precisely at Spring Festival, so it might be either a snake or a horse. Without at all wishing to second-guess the dictates of Heaven, Margaret much preferred it be born a horse, and perhaps because she willed it so, so it happened: the baby was two weeks late, and born in the year of the horse.

The birth itself was worse than anything she had prepared for, much worse than being shot by the Chinese army. Her labor lasted six hours and the baby emerged at last only after vigorous fundal pressure from the obstetrician and two muscular nurses. Throughout the whole ordeal Margaret would take no medication, not even Demerol. Twice the pain was so intense she blacked out, losing all sense of her surroundings. At the moment of delivery she blacked out again. She endured it all without a sound, offering up her pain to Heaven, to Norbu, to their love, to their child, as red agony clouded her eyes and howled in her ears.

“Strange thing, culture,” remarked senior nurse to junior—a rookie—as they cleaned up afterwards. “Whites curse and blacks holler. Hispanics I’ve known to actually sing. But the Chinese—not a whisper.”

The child was a boy, a fine healthy baby boy nearly ten pounds in weight. At once Margaret named him Chunxiao—Spring Dawn. The hospital asked her if there would be an English name, too. She thought of Colman, who had done so much for her, but the Chinese transliteration—*Ke-er-man*—did not sound very auspicious, with connotations of surgery and inhospitality. Then she thought of Vinnie, dear Vinnie to whom after all she owed everything, including indeed Colman; and of a senti-

mental song Jake had liked, associated in some way she could not remember with a picture in the Metropolitan Museum. Finally her thoughts settled on Bellini—that young dreamer, a century and a half dead, who somehow had written beautiful music for her voice, so precisely for her voice. And so Vincent Chunxiao Han was recorded in the billionfold archives of the New York State Department of Health as a human being of the male gender, mother Margaret Yuezhu Han, father not registered.

* * *

For Chunxiao's *manyue* party, traditionally held to celebrate completion of the first month of life, Margaret invited Johnny, Maisie and Old Shi to the Fifth Avenue apartment for a dinner prepared by the Mos. By Mr Mo mainly, Margaret suspected, but she had left the Mos to do the shopping and preparation as they saw fit.

They feasted on fish and spicy bean-curd, southwestern-style chicken and duck, pork strips in a vinegary sauce, garlic king prawns with snow peas, "long life" eggs (hard-boiled and dyed red) and shark's fin soup.

There was the inevitable talk about China. Johnny's dissident group was still involved in trying to get student leaders out. It was very difficult now, he said. Most of those who escaped had, like Margaret, taken advantage of the chaos immediately following the crackdown. A few had gone into hiding and made their way out in the weeks that followed—Erkin had appeared in Paris in October, and Wang Jun turned up in Singapore shortly after, her face altered by cosmetic surgery. It was thought that there were still a handful of the student leaders on the loose in China, but the authorities were hunting them down with great concentration. Those factions in Chinese politics and the army who had been willing to help at first could no longer do so, and chances were slim. Most of those not already out were known to be in camps.

Johnny stopped there, from consideration for Margaret. Everyone at the table knew her story now. Johnny Liu's group had even made some inquiries on her behalf, but had been able to discover nothing of Norbu's fate, nor of Peanut Wang. Margaret had had only one communication from Old Soldier, telling her that nothing was yet known, that nothing

could be done that was not being done, and that she must be patient. In all this blankness, Margaret yet allowed herself to hope. She deliberately did not cherish her hope, nor cultivate it, nor build anything upon it; she only hoped, in patience and resignation.

The talk turned to immigration. Johnny and Maisie, like the Mos, had been beneficiaries of the Presidential directive, and were now legal residents of the United States at last, under a special certificate issued by the Immigration Bureau. Johnny had got a job, a real job with a credit card company in Long Island.

“No more problems now, I’m sure,” said Johnny. “I believe I will have my Green Card this year. Whatever happens my company will support me. They’re very pleased with my work. They told me: Johnny, don’t worry about anything. If Immigration gives you problems, we’ve got lawyers that can sort it out for you. No, I consider myself American now.”

“We can all say the same, I suppose,” said Mrs Mo. “I mean, none of us has any intention of going back to live in China. Now my own kids have told us they want to come out. I suppose we shall have to sponsor them as soon as we have our Green Cards.”

“China is hopeless,” agreed Old Shi. “Even if they had reform now, it would be a hundred years before China would be worth living in.”

“And there will be no reform,” said Mr Mo. “It’s just like the last dynasty. The rulers think they can come into the modern world on their own terms. They think they can hold on to their ideological purity, when in fact nobody believes in the ideology any more.”

“Well, it’s not our problem,” said Maisie. “As Johnny said, we are all Americans now.”

“No,” said Margaret. “I’m not American.”

They all looked at her. Maisie flushed slightly from embarrassment, perhaps thinking she had spoken tactlessly. China was still very much Margaret’s problem. They all knew that—could have figured it out even if she had not told them. They were a little in awe of her, Margaret knew. Because she had been in the Square. Because she had been shot. Because, with a group of confused, ill-organized young patriots, she had made an Incident: the June Fourth Incident, *Liu Si Shibian*. History, she had made History. For them, that gave her an aura. Americans, they called

themselves? No, they were Chinese in their bones, in their very bones! She might have been as rich as she pleased, or beautiful, or talented: then they would have flattered her to her face and laughed at her behind her back. But History—they wouldn't laugh at History. Not Chinese people.

"I am Chinese," she went on. "Black hair, black eyes, yellow skin. A descendant of the Yellow Emperor. I can't forget that. Little Chunxiao will be American, perhaps. He will laugh at me for my bad English. We ourselves can only ever be half American."

She let the topic go there, and nobody else seemed to want to follow up. Old Shi told an anecdote about one of his business ventures, and the talk went on to other subjects.

When the time came to make toasts, the first was of course to Chunxiao. After that Margaret, thinking that perhaps she had cast a wet blanket over the proceedings earlier, stood up. They were drinking white Fenjiu Chinese liquor from traditional thimble-sized cups. She raised her cup.

"I'll offer a toast to America," she said. "And to all you Americans!"

Johnny Liu frowned at this. "We should drink a toast we can all agree on," he said. "Let's drink to freedom."

"Too abstract," said Maisie, filling her own cup from the porcelain jar.

Margaret put her cup down. "Then what shall we drink to? It's too selfish just to drink to ourselves."

Old Shi pushed back his chair and stood up, very solemn. He raised his cup. "Let's drink to the martyrs," he said. "Never mind what country, never mind what period. Let's drink to them. The ones who aren't selfish. The ones who sacrifice. Let's drink to the martyrs!"

The others all stood and lifted their cups. Beyond the windows, through the darkness and a thin March drizzle, the lights of the west side could be seen across the park. "To the martyrs!" They drank.

* * *

At last, on a blustery day later in March, Margaret went cycling in the park. She walked from her apartment down to the 72nd Street entrance

with Mrs Mo, leaving Mr Mo to attend to the baby. Johnny Liu and Maisie were waiting—Margaret had told Johnny Liu of her goal, and he had insisted on being there with her to fulfill it, taking a vacation day from his job for the purpose.

They met on the terrace overlooking the fountain. It was a weekday and there were few people around. Other than the occasional jogger and some kids playing hooky (skateboarders, cigarette smokers), most were the older types who frequent the park when the active part of humanity is at its business: retirees from rent-controlled apartments in the seventies and eighties, the kids in North Carolina (or no kids at all—this subspecies of New Yorker did not breed much), nothing to do all day long but the *Times* crossword puzzle, write a letter to the editor, then over to the park to feed the pigeons. The kind of people who listened to the Saturday afternoon broadcast from the Met, or the *Opera Alive* program on Public Radio, trying one last time before they died to grasp the difference between *legato* and *portamento*. The air was crisp and filled with sunshine, no longer cold but not yet warm, the oldsters in their caution still scarfed and hatted.

The little party walked round to the bicycle shed behind the boat-house and rented four machines, three female and one male. Johnny held Margaret's bicycle for her while she mounted.

"For Heaven's sake be careful," fussed Mrs Mo, already astride her own machine. "If you fall you can break your bones."

"Never mind that," laughed Johnny Liu. "Just go. It's been your goal, remember? Well, here you are. Now fulfill your goal. Go!"

"Be careful!" Called out Mrs Mo. "Go *slowly!*"

Margaret coasted out of the yard onto the loop road. Faced at once with a gentle upward gradient of a quarter-mile or so to the Museum, she pressed down cautiously on the pedals, trying to feel for the strength in the knitted bone the way you feel for your top notes after a throat infection—wanting them to be there yet fearful to cause damage in attaining them. Her leg was stiff and her ankles weak, and it took some experimentation to find a seat position that did not press on her episiotomy scar; but there was no pain. Gradually she set more and more weight on the leg; and there was still no pain. Filled with satisfaction at her recovery, she pushed down harder on the pedals, working her way up the incline, until

the grand glass rear of the Museum came into view and the road leveled out. Here she stopped to let the others come up.

Johnny Liu and Maisie had been following her, cycling easily, just in order to keep an eye on her, but Mrs Mo was laboring badly, out of breath by the time she reached them.

“This machine’s too big for me,” she declared. “And I haven’t ridden a bicycle for years. You youngsters go on ahead, I’ll wait for you back at the sheds.”

“Go and sit by the lake,” said Margaret, impatient to start off again. “It’s beautiful there, just down from the boat house. We’ll come and fetch you.”

Without waiting for agreement she set off again, building up speed along the straight stretch by the reservoir, then toiling up to North Meadow. On the meadow a girl’s soccer game was in progress, one team all in brilliant red outfits, eleven cardinal birds darting to and fro on the bright lawn, squeals of encouragement and desperation punctuated by the definitive shrill of the referee’s whistle. The trees did not yet have their leaves, but they were dense enough, and the sun low enough, to mottle the roadway with light and shadow. Margaret flew on, in and out of the shadows, down the marvelous long looping stretch to Harlem Meer. Here, champagne-intoxicated with the air and the light and the simple exercise, her head back and her hair filled with the cleansing wind, Margaret opened her mouth wide and sang out pure vowels to the occasional astonished jogger or cyclist, tasting the crisp clear air in the membranes of her mouth and throat, light-headed with pleasure, flying effortlessly through the spring-dappled air. The surface of the Meer was streaked and glossy like thick wet paint, like the thick wet paint the workmen had brushed onto the woodwork in the nursery, the nursery where her child now slept dreaming of glory in a new millennium. In the middle of the roadway, a squirrel was minding his business. Slowing a little after the Meer, Margaret crossed the north end of the park to the gate looking down Seventh Avenue, grand old tenement blocks dwindling away on perspective lines under the bright sky, a Renaissance townscape with automobiles and fire escapes.

Now came the long hard uphill pull back to the reservoir. Margaret geared down and stood on the pedals for more leverage, and to spare her scar. Here she did feel a twinge in her lower shin, a sudden admonitory jab; and, duly chastened, she dismounted and walked the machine up to the traffic light. Past the reservoir, heading back home to the lake, everything was easy—a succession of gentle uphill pulls followed each by a delicious slow glide through the flickering variation of light and shade, alongside the Great Lawn where Vinnie had performed once in an open-air concert, past the Swedish cottage and the Natural History Museum, back at last to the lake beside which, presumably, Mrs Mo was communing with nature, up to the terrace where they had all met an hour before.

Johnny and Maisie were some way behind her. They came up laughing, their cheeks glowing from the exercise and the wind on their faces.

“Couldn’t keep up,” called out Johnny. “Wa, Little Sister! You are as good as new!” He pulled up next to her. “You get shot; you give birth; and still you’re as fit as a fiddle! You’ve really been blessed with a strong constitution!”

“Constitution of a singer,” said Margaret. . . . *who has not done her voice exercises for a year*, added her conscience; but silently.

They took back the bicycles and located Mrs Mo sitting on a bench by the lakeside talking with a fellow-countrywoman she had happened to meet. It was a girl from Hefei, studying piano at the Juilliard. Naturally she knew of Margaret, and was breathless with awe at being introduced.

“I saw a tape of you singing in Tiananmen Square,” she whispered. “Verdi, wasn’t it? ‘Coraggio, su coraggio’. Oh! it made me cry.”

On an impulse Margaret took them all, including the Juilliard girl, to Tavern on the Green. She herself had been there half a dozen times with Jake, but to the others it was a great treat, the most stylish place they had ever been in. It was near-empty now, early on a weekday afternoon, and they got a good table by one of the picture windows looking out across the patio to the topiary. In the soil under the topiary crocuses were out, and some small early daffodils.

“I don’t care what you say,” said Johnny Liu, grinning across the table at Margaret. “I’m American, accent or not. I’ll never go back to

China. To me, China is just a bad dream. What's more, I don't believe you'll ever go back, either. After all, your career is here in the West."

"Was," said Margaret, shaking her head. "I'm not sure I have a career any more."