

Chapter 72

News from a Place Far Away

Three Calls on the Thatched Hut

In April Margaret moved to the house in Southampton. She sent Mr Mo out as the advance party, to arrange everything with the security service, the lawn service, the hedge service, the pool service. He spent a week there, organizing, cleaning, airing the beds, stocking the refrigerator. Then he came back and drove them all out to Southampton. Margaret fell in love with the house all over again when she saw it. She walked through to the den and out on to the patio by the pool. Everything was spotless, the air warm and fresh, the grass perfect.

Old Shi came to visit her at the Southampton house. Old Shi's business ventures had developed and spread in surprising directions—he owned a music publishing company, he had mentioned casually at the baby's *manyue*—and he was now quite wealthy. Wealthier than Margaret herself, she thought, her only income being Jake's alimony payments and royalties from her CDs (which, she had been pleased to discover when turning to her business affairs the previous fall, had been selling steadily and well all over the world).

The pool was not yet filled and the weather anyway not warm enough for sitting out. Margaret took Old Shi for a walk along the beach, perfectly empty but for the two of them.

“Three months now since the baby was born,” said Old Shi. “Your

metabolism is back to normal, yin and yang in balance again. You must begin again to build up that wall of muscle around the diaphragm.”

“I really have no urge to sing any more,” said Margaret.

“Then what? Are you just going to be a lady of leisure, waiting for another rich guy to come along and marry you?”

“Mm, yes,” said Margaret. “That doesn’t sound bad at all.”

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Old Shi turned up again the week after Memorial Day, this time with his boyfriend in tow. He had liked the look of the East End, and was thinking of buying some property. Thus he excused himself: but no sooner were they seated by the pool—in which Eustace, the boyfriend, was already doing graceful, leisurely laps—than he was trying to persuade Margaret to take up her exercises again.

“He’s right,” said Mrs Mo, who was sitting out with them. “It’s time now to go back into the world. After all, why does Heaven allow human beings to exist? Is it just to be idle? To sit by a swimming pool reading romances?” [Margaret had been engrossed in a novel by the Taiwanese writer Qiong Yao when the visitors arrived.] “I don’t think so. We are here for the same reason donkeys and oxen are here—to work!”

“Everybody would be lazy if he could,” said Margaret. “It’s a universal instinct. Where does that instinct come from, if not from Heaven? So you can’t say Heaven means us to work. Look at all those old Hollywood stars. Jimmy Stewart, Cary Grant. What do they do all day but sit around their pools? But they live to be ninety, every one of them. Because it does them good. So how can you say it’s not Heaven’s way?”

Old Shi clicked his tongue. “You are concocting excuses,” he said. “Such a beautiful voice going to waste here!”

“I am living in remote seclusion, like the Taoist hermits of old times. Everybody admired them for their wisdom. Why is everybody nagging me for my sloth?”

“Because wisdom is wisdom and sloth is sloth,” said Old Shi, laughing his high-pitched laugh, his eyes following the boy up and down the pool.

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It was a few days after this that Margaret came home from shopping in Southampton town to find Mrs Mo standing in the doorway waving a letter at her. “Just came this morning,” said Mrs Mo, as Margaret, seizing it, saw the Hong Kong stamp. She tore at it with her fingernail, standing there on her driveway, Mr Mo just emerged from the driver’s side. Inside the envelope was a strip of treated paper like the receipt from a cash register, but wider. It seemed to have been torn from a computer or teletype printout, sprocket holes along both sides. The Chinese characters were bluish and faint—perhaps it was a carbon or pressure copy—but clearly legible.

Kunzang Norbu, 10711-8945. Resident Geluo County, Qinghai Province. Tibetan minority. Botanical Institute of Peking, 1988 entrant.

Beijing District Special Court No. 14, 89.6.21, counterrevolutionary sabotage, 15 years reform through labor. To Iron Hill Facility, Gansu Province 89.7.31. Stubborn counterrevolutionary, special disciplinary measures requested 89.9.15, 89.12.5, 90.2.21. Difficult prisoner. Transferred Willow Bridge Facility, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 90.3.27 by administrative request ref. 90-1011.

The names of the facilities had been circled roughly with ball-point pen. From each circle was thrown out a line to some handwritten Chinese characters. For Iron Hill Facility the characters said “strict regime”. For Willow Bridge: “light regime”.

“Somebody is trying to help,” said Mrs Mo, reading over Margaret’s shoulder, working it out.

“He’s alive,” breathed Margaret. “He’s alive.”

Oddly enough, she did not want to weep. Perhaps the relief was too great. Indeed, she felt like laughing. *Difficult prisoner*. Oh, yes, Norbu would be a difficult prisoner! *Special disciplinary measures* did not bear thinking about . . . but he had survived them, whatever they were. Now

someone—someone with authority, though not enough to get Norbu out—had got him transferred to an easier camp. One, perhaps, where instead of being beaten daily the prisoners were only beaten weekly. Never mind; he was alive and he would survive. He would survive anything, until some way could be found, some door opened, some official bribed. In China, there was always a way. Margaret's heart felt light, and she embraced Mrs Mo smiling.

"It will be all right. I know it will. My half brother is doing his best, I can see. It will be all right."

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The third time Old Shi came calling he brought Vinnie Cinelli with him, and an Iron Bride. He and Vinnie unloaded the Iron Bride from the back of the station wagon and carried it indoors.

"So that you can resume your exercises," said Old Shi pointedly.

"You must begin, Perlinetta," said Vinnie sternly. "You 'ave missed a 'ole season. Do not let the world forget you. They will, you know, if you permit them. The world forgets very easily."

"Sometimes I think there's nothing I'd like better than for the world to forget me," said Margaret.

"Foolish talk!" said Mrs Mo, who had now veered decisively from being Margaret's isolator and protector to her principal nag. "Who doesn't want to be famous?"

"It brought me more trouble than joy," replied Margaret.

They all worked on her. Over dinner in the cool dining-room beside the pool patio, Vinnie spoke of an open-air concert he was going to do in Central Park.

"So different from performing in a theater," he said. "The hacoustics so forgiving! The crowd so *henthusiastic!* I enjoy very much these informal concerts. I am sorry, Perlina, you cannot join me."

"My voice," said Margaret. "Quite out of condition . . ."

"Ah, but all you exercises now can do," said Old Shi in his appalling English. "Final no have excuse! Have piano here, have not?"

"Yes. All my husband's houses have pianos. The one in California

has two, he told me. I wonder what he's done with that house? Perhaps I should have asked for it."

"Then we shall see you on the stage next season?" Vinnie beamed up at her from his huge bowl of prawns and noodles. (Mr Mo had been forewarned about the Cinelli appetite.)

"Too soon! Too soon!" laughed Margaret, putting up her hands.

"But your exercises, will do, will vocalize, *dui ma?*" Old Shi was positively glowering at her. They were all watching her: Vinnie from one side, Mrs Mo from the other, Old Shi in the center.

"*Dui,*" said Margaret resignedly. "Yes, I will."

"Prometti?" Vinnie had his head low over the bowl to suck up noodles, but still with his eyes on her.

"Prometto," laughed Margaret. "I have agreed in three languages. What more do you want?"

The visitors left while it was still light. "Three calls at the thatched hut," murmured Mr Mo, watching them pull out of the driveway into Ocean Drive and disappear behind the high box hedges.

His allusion, which any educated Chinese person would recognize, was to a story from the ancient novel *Three Kingdoms*.

Three Calls at the Thatched Hut

Liu Bei, striving to repair the failing Han dynasty, was hard pressed by his enemies. He had two great generals in command of his armies, but no wise strategist to direct them. When he heard of Zhuge Liang's great talents, he went in person to seek him, taking the two generals along.

Zhugé Liang lived as a hermit in a thatched hut on a remote mountain ridge said to be the spine of a dormant dragon. For this reason he had the nickname "Sleeping Dragon". The first time Liu Bei and his comrades knocked on his door it was opened by a boy who asked what they wanted. Said Liu Bei: "I am Liu Bei, General of the Han Dynasty, Marquis of Yizhengting, Magistrate of Youzhou and uncle of the Emperor. I have come to pay my respects to the master."

The boy told them the master had left early that morning and might be gone several days. Liu Bei and his companions returned disappointed to their capital Xinye.

Some days after this Liu Bei got word that Sleeping Dragon had returned to his hut. He prepared for another visit. His generals, who were military men with little respect for philosophers, grumbled about all this excess of courtesy, and suggested they just send a messenger and order Sleeping Dragon to come to them. Replied Liu Bei: "He is the greatest sage of our time. How dare I summon him?"

The three journeyed again to the thatched hut, this time through driving snow and a bitter wind. But by the time they arrived Sleeping Dragon had left the hut again, and no-one knew when he would return.

One winter's day through snow and wind
 A prince rode forth the sage to find.
 Alas! his journey was in vain,
 And sadly he turned home again.

Liu Bei's two comrades were even more disapproving of a third visit, and Liu Bei had to argue with them for a long time, raising many instances from history of the elusive and retiring character of great sages. At last they mounted the far ridge once again, and this time found Sleeping Dragon at home. He made many apologies for having missed them before. Liu Bei spoke of the condition of the Empire, and of the many difficulties facing those who wished to preserve it. Smiling, and without effort, Sleeping Dragon laid out an analysis so brilliant and prophetic Liu Bei knew that this was, indeed, the strategist of genius he had been seeking.

When Liu Bei asked Sleeping Dragon to come with him to Xinye, to be his counselor and help preserve the Empire, Sleeping Dragon declined. "I have long been happy here on my farm," he said, "and I am fond of my leisure. I fear I cannot

obey your command.” Liu Bei wept, saying: “If the Empire falls, what will become of the people?”

Liu Bei’s tears proved his sincerity to Sleeping Dragon. The sage agreed to serve, and rode with them that very day back to Xinye.

A visit thrice repeated brought
 Sleeping Dragon to the hero’s court.
 He left his books, his peaceful dreams,
 And turned to warlike plots and schemes.
 The dragon pranced, the tiger glared,
 The Empire’s peace was now repaired.

“I don’t think you should compare me to the sages of antiquity,” said Margaret. “And this house is not exactly a thatched hut. But I must admit that like Sleeping Dragon, I am very well content here in this secluded life. I have my child here, who needs me”—she laughed, patting her bosom—“several times a day. I have you and Mrs Mo to keep me company. I have books and movies, some friends to visit me, and of course the sea. I can understand Sleeping Dragon very well. He wanted silence and peace. Well, so do I.”

“Silence and peace!” scoffed Mrs Mo. “You sound like an old woman! You should be working. You should be singing.”

“I’m not sure I can,” said Margaret. “It’s been too long.”

As is often the case with our spoken thoughts, these words were ceasing to be true even as Margaret uttered them. As the stunned torpor of convalescence had given way to the chronometric disciplines of pregnancy and nursing, so now a restlessness and dissatisfaction was beginning to stir. It was still soothing to Margaret’s soul to wander along the beach at night under the stars, listening to the sea; and she could still absorb herself for hours with little Chunxiao—splashing with him in the pool, rolling with his plump naked little form on the mattress-soft lawn, standing guard over his dogged attempts at grasping, holding, crawling, tasting. Still, in the long bright hours of daylight and the cool of the evening, when Chunxiao was asleep, when Mrs Mo was out shopping

and her husband busy with his tones and rhymes, or the two of them watching a video indoors while she sat out on the patio reading, Margaret felt time heavy on her hands. At such moments she recalled her career and her few triumphs: *Straniera* at Wexford with Vinnie and Dame Barbara, the *Cenerentola* in Boston which that city's principal newspaper had described as "a revelation", her show-saving *Capuleti* at the Met in '85, the Sydney *Traviata* where the ecstatic audience had first made her encore "Fors' è lui" then yelled and stamped for the cabaletta, *Pirata* interrupted for the fireworks, *Sonnambula* with Vinnie at the Met in '87, Leo Fischel himself applauding "Ah! non credea mirarti", the audience all on their feet shouting "Brava! Brava!" What a lot of Bellini she had sung! He really had been her *guiren*. How she had loved those long, flowing melodies of his! And—the miracle of art—made others love them, too.

Whether or not Margaret, musing there by the pool in the still Southampton evening, thought she had done with Bellini once and for all, we do not know. But certain it was that Bellini had not yet finished with Margaret Han.