

Chapter 75

An Invalid is Transported to the Seaside
Painting the Eyes of the Dragon

They left Mr Mo to look after the baby and rode a cab to midtown. Mr Ng pulled the cab over between Third and Lexington, outside a Korean restaurant. The restaurant was in an old building four stories high, one of those dwindling few from the nineteenth century that can still be seen in midtown squeezed in between the offices and luxury co-op blocks. Steps went down to the restaurant entrance. At the right was a stoop leading up to an unmarked door. Mr Ng spoke into the door phone in English.

“It’s me, Charlie,” he said in English.

They were buzzed in and Mr Ng led the way up two flights of stairs. A European woman was holding a door open for them. Beyond the door was a tiny apartment: living room just big enough for the four of them, minuscule kitchen, a corridor to an even tinier bathroom, two doors leading off, presumably to bedrooms. At the far side of the living room was a window looking out over flat roofs to the back of Forty-Fifth Street, the lights on in windows now, for it was after eight o’clock. Set into the wall above the window was a small air conditioner, which was humming and rattling not very effectually. The apartment smelt faintly of cigarette smoke and body functions. There was another sound beyond that of the air conditioner, a subdued whirring and clanking from beyond the windows.

The European woman was plump and looked to be in her late thir-

ties, perhaps forty. Her hair was an improbable strawberry blonde, permed into tight little curls all over. She wore swept-up glasses, a loose blouse and slacks.

“I’m so glad you could come,” said the woman. She had a British accent that made Margaret think of Mrs Trott. “He’s just woken up not long ago. But it takes his head a while to clear after he’s been sleeping. You’d best wait a few minutes. Want a cup of tea? I can do English or Chinese. Coffee, too, if you like, but only instant, I’m afraid.”

“Thanks, no. It’s all right.” Margaret shook the woman’s hand. “I guess you must be the nurse.”

“Not really. Ooh, I’m sorry. Should’ve introduced myself. I’m Valerie. I knew William when he was a boy, back in Hong Kong. Did a stint as a teacher there, you see. When I was younger. One of those British Council things. William was my favorite pupil. Wait a sec, I’ll go and check on him.”

She went into the further bedroom. *How are you feeling, love?* they heard her say, but no reply was audible. Then: *Some visitors come to see you. . . . What? . . . All right.*

“Valerie can’t speak Chinese,” said Mr Ng in his thick Mandarin. “We should speak English with her, to show good manners. Oh, and she always calls me ‘Charlie’. Says she can’t cope with Chinese names.”

Valerie came out. “He’s awake, but give him a few more minutes. He’s not quite up to it yet. He’s all right when he’s been awake a little while.”

“I guess you and Mr Ng knew each other back in Hong Kong,” said Mrs Mo.

Valerie glanced at Mr Ng, and Margaret thought something passed between them. “Actually, no,” said Valerie. “I never met Charlie until last month. I read in the papers in England that William was ill, and I wanted to help. So I hopped on a plane and came over. My kids are old enough, they can take care of themselves for a few weeks. And my hubby’s there with them, so they don’t wreck the place.” She giggled. “When I got here, Charlie was already in charge. But men don’t make good nurses, I don’t care what you say. It’s a woman’s job.”

“When Valerie knew Weilin in Hong Kong, that was before he came

to live with us," said Mr Ng. Again the exchanged glance, something secret shared.

"Sure you won't have a cup of tea? It's really no trouble."

They agreed to a pot of China tea, and Valerie went into the kitchen. Margaret and Mrs Mo sat on the sofa against the wall.

"The air conditioner's not very good," said Mrs Mo. "Isn't it possible to open a window?"

"Possible? Sure!" Mr Ng went over to the windows, unlatched and opened one. The noise from outside poured in, a mechanical din drowning out all thought and speech. With it, a rich smell of cooked food. Mr Ng held the window open a moment, then shut it again.

"It's all restaurants down there," he explained. "And the kitchens all have these big extractor fans. When they're busy like this in the evening, the noise is terrible. So we have to keep the windows closed."

"It's a pity," said Margaret. "He should have some fresh air."

Mr Ng shrugged. "I open the windows in the morning, to air the room out. But it really doesn't do much good. The buildings round here . . ." he gestured at the outside ". . . too high. It's like being at the bottom of a valley."

Valerie came in with the tea on a neat little tray, which she set on the coffee table in front of the sofa. "I wish I could take him out somewhere. The park, he used to love to go to the park. But these last few days he hasn't been able to get up at all. Charlie bought a wheelchair, but he can't seem to hold himself upright in it."

While they sipped at their tea, Valerie went in to the bedroom again. There was an unintelligible exchange; but now Margaret could catch the timbre of William's voice: thin, breathless. Valerie came out right away.

"Go on in," she said, nodding encouragement at Margaret. "He wants to see you."

Margaret had imagined with her mind's eye what William might look like, and thought she had no illusions about it, but still she was shocked. He looked so old, his skin so fragile, like waxed paper stretched taut over the bones of his face. He smiled at her, and lines sprang out everywhere on his face—lines around the eyes, the mouth, the nose, and

all his teeth showed, and his gums, which were a grayish color. It was William in caricature—a cruel caricature of smooth, handsome William.

“Yuezhu. You’ve come.”

“Yes. Mr Wu brought us.”

“Mr Wu. And Valerie, did you meet Valerie?”

“Yes.”

“They look after me. They’re very kind.”

“Yes. There are many kind people in the world.”

There was no chair in the room. Indeed, there was hardly room for one. William’s bed—it was a single—occupied most of the space. The rest was a wardrobe, a chest of drawers with a TV perched on top, and a tiny bedside stand. On the stand was a lamp, a water-glass, and, odd and incongruous, a red plastic hair clip that stirred an odd, ancient echo from Margaret’s childhood—perhaps her mother had owned something similar. The single small window looked out over the roofs of the restaurants, and was closed like the other windows. The room was stuffy, the effect of the air conditioner in the living room hardly felt. Margaret stepped forward and stood by the bed, uncertain.

William made a hoarse, breathless chuckle. “Did you like my butterflies?”

“You knew how to touch my heart,” said Margaret.

“Those were happy times we had, weren’t they? In the hollow by the bamboo thicket. Every human being is allowed a little happiness in this poor world.”

“Weren’t you happy when you were tormenting me?” Margaret regretted this at once. It had come out without her willing it. William, however, did not seem to mind.

“In a way, actually, yes. There was satisfaction in it. The satisfaction of power, of course. I understand politics very well now! The satisfaction old Mao must have felt, when he sent tens of thousands to their deaths. The satisfaction you felt, perhaps, when you helped them beat my father to death.”

He looked at her steadily with his rheumy old-man eyes. Margaret, though she felt wronged, could not meet his look.

“I was a child. Eight years old. I can’t be held responsible. What I

did was terrible; but I was a child. What you did was terrible, too; but you were an adult, acting deliberately.”

“What I did was, first, make you live like an ordinary person, like an ordinary Chinese, stuck in a place you couldn’t leave, bossed around by moronic Party Secretaries all obsessed with their own importance. And second, spoil your career, spoil the fame and adulation that flattered your vanity so much. In short, Yuezhu, what I did was give you some lessons in humility. What you did was murder and betrayal.”

“I shouldn’t have left you like that. I’m sorry.”

“No, you shouldn’t. I hated you bitterly for that. But I’ve thought it out, and it’s all right. I’m sorry for how I reacted. Those claques, upsetting your performances. That was childish. I’m truly sorry.” William made the hoarse chuckle again. “Do you remember, Yuezhu, when you came to my suite at the Pierre, and I said the national vice of us Chinese is self-pity? Here you see it. Look at the two of us! Your comfortable, privileged life was disrupted for a while by those things I did, and you think all the miseries of hell descended on you. I could see the depths of your self-pity, watching you singing in the park. That song, the last one you sang. Beautiful, and beautifully done—but oh! what a bitter complaint against Heaven!”

“It wasn’t my earlier misfortunes I was thinking of,” said Margaret.

“No? Then you must tell me about your more recent calamities. But me, I’m no better. I got a venereal disease, unfortunately a fatal one, as a result of my own foolish behavior; and I was ready to blame everybody but myself. Now the government has taken away all my money, and I am going to die. But after all, most people have no money; and even when I had it, I did nothing good with it. As for death—it’s the common fate of all human beings. So what’s the big deal?”

Margaret could not help but smile. “It seems you’ve attained true philosophical detachment.”

William smiled back at her. “Not really. But I *am* determined not to whine.”

He watched her for a moment, then made the smile again. “Yuezhu. Oh, Yuezhu.” He patted the bed at his side. “Come, sit down.”

Cautiously she sat on the edge of the bed. William put his hand on

her thigh. After a moment's hesitation, she took the hand in her own. It was warm, rather to her surprise.

"Yuezhu, let's forget all that's past now. I beg your forgiveness for the evil things I did to you. With all my heart, I beg it. Can I have it?"

"Of course. And I, am I forgiven? For your poor father? For leaving you, when . . . I guess when you needed me?"

"All forgiven. When I meet my father in the next world, I shall explain everything to him. He will understand, I know."

"I hope so."

"Then we are at peace at last. As we were before, in the hollow by the bamboo grove."

"Oh, Weilin, I'm afraid we can never find that kind of peace again."

He was silent for some time. She sat with him, his thin warm hand in hers. She thought he had drifted to sleep again; then he opened his eyes.

"Which of us has wronged the other more, do you think?" asked William.

"Hard to say." Margaret smiled at him, happy to see him still awake. "I think it's about even. It really doesn't matter now."

"Still, we should declare mutual forgiveness."

She laughed. "We have done that, Weilin. Your mind is confused."

"Yes, yes. I am sorry. So difficult to concentrate sometimes. I have wanted so much to make everything up with you. I haven't been able to get it out of my mind. Are you sure you have forgiven me?"

"Yes, sure."

"With all your heart?"

"Of course. With all my heart. Anyway, if you had not wronged me that first time, I shouldn't have my little Chunxiao."

She told him about Norbu, about Tiananmen Square and Old Soldier and Little Chunxiao.

"So you see, out of misfortune came new life."

William smiled. "'Sai Weng lost his horse. Who can tell good fortune from bad?'"

"Yes, 'Sai Weng lost his horse'. Though I shan't count myself fortunate until I have got Norbu out. But, ai! there is so little I can do. I depend on others to make it happen."

“From what you have told me, if he’s in this world, his heart belongs to you.”

“Yes. That I’m sure of.”

“I hope you two will be together at last.”

“From your mouth to God’s ear.” (This she said in English.)

“What?” William laughed. “Where did you get that?”

“It’s a thing Jewish people say.”

“Really? All those years on Wall Street, all those Jewish lawyers, I never heard that. It’s very good. Well, from my mouth to God’s ear.” William had translated it into Chinese. For God he used *Shangdi*, the supreme deity of their race in ancient times.

Clear-headed now: but his voice sounds very weak, thought Margaret.

“When I reach the next world,” he went on, “I will tell my mother and father everything that happened. They will forgive you, too. I know they will, when I tell them our story.”

“I hope so. I hope so.”

They talked more than an hour. Valerie came in halfway through with a bowl of soup, which she fed to William, sitting on the other side of the bed and mopping his chin with a kitchen cloth. When she had gone, William asked Margaret about her career. She told him about the concert in the park.

“Yes. I saw it on TV. And there was a piece about you on one of the news programs. That was when I asked Old Wu to see if he could bring you.”

Yuezhu told him about the Norma role, and got into detail about the story of the opera, and the way she was planning to interpret the character. Because this had been at the front of her mind for weeks now, she talked almost without thought, the words flowing in a torrent—until she noticed suddenly, looking up, that William was fast asleep. Rising carefully from the bed, she tiptoed out.

“Is he asleep?” asked Valerie.

“Yes. I’m afraid I talked him to sleep.”

“Good for him,” said Valerie. “He sounded better than he has for ages.”

“What would really be good for him would be fresh air, and light, and

quiet.” Margaret made the decision almost without thinking. “We’ll take him to Southampton.”

Mrs Mo put a hand over her mouth. “Can we really? But your rehearsals . . .”

“I’ll manage. It’ll be a long commute, that’s all.”

“How will you get him out there?” asked Mr Ng. “He can’t walk any more.”

“We’ll hire an ambulance. There must be private ambulances.”

“Are there?” wondered Valerie.

“Must be. We’ll ask Johnny Liu, he knows things like that.”

* * *

And so they took William to Southampton. Johnny Liu arranged an ambulance, and they all went out in a convoy the next day. Johnny took his own car, with Mr Ng as passenger. Valerie elected to ride in the ambulance with William. Mr Mo drove Margaret and his wife in Margaret’s car, with Little Chunxiao in the baby seat. The infant, sixteen months old now, chattered appreciatively in his own private language all the way to the Nassau County border, then fell asleep.

It was late afternoon when they reached the house in Ocean Drive. Little Chunxiao woke up as he was lifted from the car seat, and at once toddled off to the pool area at the back, Mrs Mo in clucking pursuit. The ambulance men carried William to the master bedroom, which Margaret thought the lightest and airiest. She moved her own things to the guest bedroom. Valerie and Mr Ng she put in the self-contained apartment at one side which Jake’s kids had used, apologizing for the rock star posters pasted to the walls. But the house had already won Valerie’s heart.

“Oooh, Margaret, it’s *lovely!* You’re so *lucky!* How do they keep the grass so perfect?”

Margaret confessed she did not know. “It’s a service. We have a contract. Every so often they come and . . .” she laughed “. . . I don’t know. *Do* things. They explained to me once but I couldn’t follow at all. Nitrogen, pH balance, all that stuff.”

“Well, I think it’s the loveliest house I’ve ever seen.”

Leaving Johnny Liu with the Mos at the house, Margaret walked Valerie and Mr Ng down to the beach. Even now, well into the season, the beach was almost empty, only a solitary umbrella in evidence behind a dune to the left.

“Well, if this doesn’t do him good, I don’t know what will,” observed Valerie, completely overcome by the place now.

* * *

In fact, far from doing him good, the move had some negative effect on William. The next day he was running a fever. It was not a high fever; but that was probably only because he had not the strength to sustain a high one. His waking spells were no longer lucid, filled only with incoherent moans and fits of feeble coughing. His mouth and nose filled up with a grayish fungus growth, and they had to call a doctor for prescription medicine to suppress it.

“Not long now,” said the doctor, who was a straightforward type. “Keep him clean and comfortable, and turn him every couple of hours to prevent bedsores. There’s really nothing else you can do.”

The fever lasted three days, then William’s temperature fell to normal. He slept a great deal, but was lucid when not sleeping. He asked Margaret for books, especially knight-errant adventure stories, so she went to the bookstore in Pell Street and bought a yard of them for him.

She sat with him when she could, which was mostly in the evening. Her days now were filled with *Norma*, and with *Norma*: study, voice exercises, practice, rehearsal. By now she felt she had sufficient command of the music to be able to listen to recorded productions of the opera without picking up any untoward influences, so she sat in the car on the long ride into town, chauffeured by Mr Mo, with Callas, Caballé, Gruberova and Dame Barbara on the sound system; appraising them, arguing with them, sometimes yielding to them, more often resisting them. Leo Fischel spent time working over the full score with her, showing her—Margaret still had trouble reading a full orchestra score—the parts to be played by the various sections, those passages where she might have difficulty, those where she could be free with ornamentation,

those where she would need all her power, those that required the most strict attention to tempo. The répétiteur—a fiftyish Italian gentleman with the only waxed mustache Margaret had ever seen—showed her where joy, sorrow, vacillation and wrath belonged and how they could be conveyed by the libretto. At Margaret's insistence, he also honed her pronunciation of Italian to an accuracy she had never before attained, for all the efforts of old Lubetsky in London.

"You're getting in close on this one, dear girl," remarked Colman over lunch at the Plaza one day. "I don't know when I've seen a singer working so hard."

"Well, Callas worked hard," said Margaret. "She was a perfectionist."

"Devil the good it did her. I'm just worried you're going to overwork yourself. You need to be as strong as an ox when you walk out on stage that first night, remember."

Margaret reached over and put her hand on his. "I'll remember, Colman. Don't worry."

After weeks of voice, production and stage rehearsals, they had a full orchestra rehearsal. The stage was bare, there were no costumes yet, and Vinnie Cinelli, the lead tenor, was absent, his place taken by a house tenor; but the other singers were all there, and the chorus, and the full orchestra. Leo took them through the whole opera, overture to finale, stopping at every point he thought needed correction, or being stopped by his Artistic Director for arguments about position and gesture. They began at ten in the morning, finished at eleven p.m. There was a problem with the air conditioning, and everyone ended hot and exhausted. As the orchestra was packing, Leo called Margaret down into the auditorium, where he was sitting with his sheet music spread across adjacent seats. He indicated the row in front of him, and she sat, turning and leaning on the seat back to give him her attention.

"Margaret," he said, "you were wonderful."

"Thank you."

"But not . . ." he wagged a finger at her in mock admonition ". . . not *perfect!*"

"Oh, dear. Do I have to be perfect?"

"If you can be, you should be. And you can be."

He leaned forward, brows furrowed in concern.

“Margaret, may I ask you something personal? Is there something in your life . . . I don’t know. *Unresolved?* Some kind of unfinished business?”

Margaret flushed, though she did not know why. “I don’t think so. No, not really. Why do you ask?”

Leo shook his head. “Not sure. It’s just an intuition. Oh, your voice is in marvelous form, and I know how hard you’ve been working on this role. But there’s something . . . you’re holding something back. Not much—just that last one per cent. And that, I know from experience, when an artist is holding back that last one per cent, that’s always something personal.”

“No. My life is quite . . . quite bare.”

The old Hungarian grinned. “Odd turn of expression. How about your marriage? Forgive me for asking.”

“Finished. All finished. Everything settled.”

He nodded. “Hmm. Any . . . connection? Anyone new in your life? It’s just that I have this impression of . . . I don’t know. Something . . . unconsummated.”

At first Margaret did not know this word *unconsummated*. Then, even as she was beginning to speak, she figured it out, and flushed again.

“No. Nothing. Don’t you think I can carry the role?”

Leo laughed. “In the form you’re in, you can carry it in one hand. Don’t worry. They’ll love you. You’ve won over Nicola already,” he said, naming the mezzo.

“Miss Buonassisi? Really? I thought she might be jealous. With such a strong role herself but me in the lead.”

“She thinks you’re sensational. She told me so. And in the friendship duet she was letting you set the pace. We could all see it. Normally she’ll try to take charge in a situation like that. I know, I’ve directed her before. Now she’s saying ‘let’s do it Margaret’s way’, and giving in on every little point. Makes her a pleasure to work with, for once.” Fischel chuckled. “Perhaps it takes a diva to tame a diva.”

Leo nodded toward the stage, where Miss Nicola Buonassisi was sprawled on a sofa they had had brought on earlier in the day, shoes off,

head resting back. Because of the air conditioning problem she had hitched up her dress to air her legs, and her large white thighs were flattened grotesquely against the edge of the sofa.

“She’s very kind,” said Margaret. “I must thank her.”

“Our Pollione’s swept off his feet, too.”

This was the house tenor, standing in for Vinnie. He was an older singer, over sixty in fact, with a fine rich voice of which only the very topmost register was beginning to fray. He had smiled encouragingly at Margaret every time he caught her eye, and shown her some tricks of stance and timing—the kinds of things these old operatic warriors knew by instinct. At this moment he was still on the stage, arguing something with the Artistic Director.

“I wish Vinnie could have been here,” Fischel was saying. “First orchestra rehearsal is where we see all the weak points, he knows that. It’s key. Well . . . Vinnie is Vinnie, there is no arguing with him. To return to the issue, Margaret—that last one per cent.”

“I’m not aware of it.”

“Of course you’re not. It’s something buried deep. Something you need to release.” The conductor leaned forward, the bony, aristocratic face set now in an expression of determination. “Root it out, Margaret!” He made small uppercuts with his bunched right fist. “Root it out! Give us a hundred per cent! Give us everything! Then, we shall have a performance we shall never forget.” He sat back, nodding agreement with himself.

“I’ll do my best.”

“Yes. Just remember, this gift you have—it’s not for you. It’s for others. It’s for the world. There’s no place for selfishness in art. Absolutely none! Whatever part of yourself you are withholding, let it go. Give it, give it to us, give it to the house. It’s not yours, it’s *ours*, it’s *theirs*. Let it go, let it go. If you can do that . . .” He paused, and looked down at the sheet music in his lap, as if embarrassed. “. . . If you can do that, you will be great. Do you understand? Not good, not first-rate, but *great*. You have it in you. I know you do. Let it out. Don’t keep it to yourself.”

Margaret played this back to Old Shi at her next coaching session.

“Yes,” said Old Shi. “Precisely so. You are painting the dragon without his eyes.”

Painting the Dragon Without his Eyes

One thousand five hundred years ago in the Liang Dynasty there lived a painter called Zhang Sengyou. He was commissioned to paint a mural for the Anle Temple in the city of Nanjing.

His mural contained four dragons. The dragons were wonderfully lifelike, covered all over with bright scales, teeth flashing and claws glittering. However, none of the four dragons had any eyes. Someone asked Zhang Sengyou why he had not painted eyes on the dragons. Said the artist: “If I had painted eyes, the dragons would be so realistic they would have flown away.”

Those who heard this didn’t believe it. They asked Zhang Sengyou to try painting in the dragons’ eyes. Zhang Sengyou lifted his brush and carefully began to paint in the eyes of the dragons.

He had just painted in the eyes of the second dragon when suddenly there was a mighty flash of lightning and a great clap of thunder. Everybody scattered in fear. When they came back they saw that the wall had cracked open, and the two dragons whose eyes had been painted in had disappeared. But the two dragons whose eyes had not been painted were still there on the wall.

“I don’t know what more I can do beyond what I’m doing,” groused Margaret. “I’ve thought of nothing but Norma for months. Nearly a year. I almost feel I *am* Norma. I wouldn’t be surprised to wake up one morning and find myself with two children and a Roman lover.”