

Chapter 14

Moon Pearl Makes the Acquaintance of Yellow Tiger
A Situation in the Affairs of Our Country

The middle school had no dance group. Yuezhu did not mind this as much as she would have expected to. The fiasco of the graduation performance had dulled her interest. Besides, beginning that fall, some change had come over her. She felt a lassitude, a distance from her surroundings. There was no reason for it that she could understand. The only real physical symptoms were sudden, brief spells of heat and an occasional fierce pain in her lower belly that seemed to exist only by and for itself, never resolving into vomiting or diarrhea, just coming and going without warning.

In the winter months, when the little town was folded in dull clammy mists, she sometimes practiced her dances alone in the apartment after school. Her heart was not in it, however, and she soon stopped, stopped dancing altogether. Her heart was not in anything. She wanted to sleep all the time, and had trouble rousing herself from her customary afternoon nap. In the spring, when Youth League activities started, she excused herself time and time again, to go home and sleep. Normally this would have been frowned upon. Youth League activities in the spring were mostly concerned with trooping out into the countryside to help the peasants, and this was all supposed to be a key part of one's political education. But Teacher Zou Liuye, the leader of Yuezhu's section, seemed to be very understanding about Yuezhu's pains and flushings.

“It’s part of growing up,” she said each time Yuezhu asked to be excused. “Go home and rest.”

Comrade Zou was a popular teacher, one of the few who did her work with any enthusiasm. A single woman in her twenties, she always had an air of energy and purpose about her. She loved all kinds of sports, and during the winter months had tried without success to interest Yuezhu in volleyball.

“Chairman Mao says we young people are the luckiest people in the world,” she had said to Yuezhu on one of these occasions. “Working together, with all our youth and health, we can build communism very quickly. Sport is one way we can practice working together, don’t you see?”

“Yes,” said Yuezhu. “It’s just that I am so sleepy. And my skin feels hot, as if I have a fever.”

“It’s part of growing up,” said Comrade Zou. “Better go home and rest.”

Yuezhu thought it very odd to hear Teacher Zou say “we young people”. Up to that point she had thought of adults in general, and teachers in particular, as a separate species. Now she saw—it was obvious once seen—that Teacher Zou, and by extension other teachers, other adults, were merely larger versions of herself.

Yuezhu thought the real reason she got off so lightly was that her father was a military man. It was dawning on her that other people looked up to the military, and to everyone associated with it, and were keen to show consideration to her on this account.

A great many things were dawning on her all at once. It seemed now, in spite of the languor oppressing her spirit, that every month brought some little revelation of this sort, some awakening. Father himself seemed to be changing in front of her eyes, though she was vaguely aware that the change was mostly in herself.

Her dimmest memories of Father were happy ones. When she was very small he had loved to cuddle and kiss her, calling her his Precious Pearl (the second character of her name meant “pearl”). She had used to sit on his knee while he listened to the radio, sometimes falling asleep there, her cheek against the rough green serge of his uniform. Later, per-

haps as a consequence of his advancing in rank and taking on more responsibilities, he had retreated to become a gruff, remote presence, not often home and disapproving of most of what Yuezhu liked to do. He had not liked her being a Little Red Guard, for example, though he had made no move to stop it.

Now she detected in him a new attitude, something of tenderness and concern. It was pretty well hidden by his habitual outward manner—she perceived now how much he liked to see himself as a plain, no-nonsense man of action, his finer feelings all set aside the better to make revolution. Now, just visible beneath that carapace, were these new aspects. Perhaps not really new, perhaps they had always been there, and she was only just noticing.

Certainly there was more opportunity to notice: she was at home more, and so was he. Father's chief—the commander of the military region which included Seven Kill Stele—had fallen out of favor with the leadership in Beijing, was being given no responsibilities and seemed to be keeping quiet, hoping for a change of policy. The chief's uncertainty and passivity had transmitted itself to his subordinates, as will always happen in an army; and with all the Red Guard factions now thoroughly suppressed, there was little for Father's unit to do.

At Yuezhu's thirteenth birthday party in April he had made no complaint, referring to it frankly as a birthday party, letting Mother make a full table of food, and bringing down the Five Grain Liquor again. He even poured a tiny cup for Yuezhu, and bade her drink it.

"You're old enough now," Father said. "Not a child much longer."

From the words, and the look he gave her across the table, it seemed that he was offering a valediction. As if she were going away on a journey, never to return. Yuezhu felt sad, terribly sad, though she really did not know why. Seeing her sadness, Father smiled to reassure her.

"Still, you will always be my Precious Pearl," he added, as Yuezhu's eyes watered and her throat burned from the liquor.

Mother clicked her tongue. "So sentimental!" she said, perhaps misreading Yuezhu's tears. "How long since you said such things to your wife?"

"I'm celebrating youth here," replied Father, smiling at Yuezhu again. "We are husband and wife, but we are no longer young."

Mother's attitude was curious too. As Father seemed to be moving closer to Yuezhu, Mother was retreating to a distance. Several times when Yuezhu was alone with her she thought Mother was on the point of saying something, but at the last moment would turn away and lapse into irritability.

As Father's disapprovals melted away, Mother seemed to acquire a few of her own. She thought Yuezhu's clothes were too tight. She let out what could be let out, and took in two of her own blouses for Yuezhu to wear. Yuezhu thought them much too baggy, but had no energy to protest.

Mother also disapproved of Mustache. This was Yuezhu's best friend at the middle school. Mustache was a boy, of course: a town boy, whose father worked as a foreman in the textile factory. The same age as Yuezhu, and in the same class, he was big-boned and dark-skinned and sported a line of dark hairs on his upper lip, from which of course the classmates had awarded his nickname. Altogether he looked rather a rough type. At first Yuezhu had thought he really was a rough type, and avoided him on that account. Once, in the schoolyard, she had overheard him say "dogfuck", the local dialect's all-purpose expletive. This had put her off, and she had rebuffed his first attempts at friendship. Mustache took this in a good humor, and waited for his chances to walk to class with her, to sit next to her at meetings, to help her with mathematics (which Yuezhu could not cope with at all), and quickly showed her that he was in fact a sensitive and sympathetic companion. He liked her a lot, she knew. He took obvious, unconditional pleasure in her company, was a good listener, and had a fund of jokes and stories that made her laugh.

Some of Mustache's opinions were very shocking, though. He declared perfect lack of interest in politics, which he said was just a kind of game played by the leaders in Beijing.

"But don't you love Chairman Mao?" asked Yuezhu in bafflement when Mustache first shared his heresy with her.

"Old Mao? Oh, he's all right."

Yuezhu thought this outrageous. "All right? *All right?* He's the Great Helmsman of our country! Of all the workers and peasants all over the

world! The greatest Marxist-Leninist that ever lived! How can you be so disrespectful, calling him Old Mao?"

Mustache laughed. "Do you think Old Mao cares about you?"

"Of course he does! He cares about all the people!"

"What, all eight hundred million of us? He really must have his time cut out then, mustn't he?"

"Don't *you* think he cares about us? About you?"

Mustache shrugged. "Heaven is high, the Emperor is far away," he said, quoting an old proverb.

Shocked as she was by Mustache's careless skepticism, Yuezhu now found herself thinking critically about matters she had never questioned before. China was so vast, with thousands of counties, towns and villages—not to mention the big cities like Chengdu and Beijing. Could Chairman Mao really watch over all of it all the time? Probably not. The very thought scandalized her; yet it kept coming back. Beijing was, as Mustache said, very far away.

She dared not share any of Mustache's opinions with Mother, much less with Father, but Mother disapproved of Mustache anyway. The grounds of her disapproval were, apparently, just that Mustache was a boy. Yuezhu couldn't see why this made a difference. She had been friends with boys before, and nobody had seemed to mind. Now Mother minded.

"You should be careful with boys. Don't let them take any liberties with you."

Yuezhu didn't understand what this meant. What liberties might Mustache take? She prompted Mother to explain, but Mother only replied: "Be careful. Men are like porcupines, you mustn't get too close."

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In the summer there was a work camp for all the middle-school students. It was out in the countryside, attached to one of the larger production brigades. It was too far for them all to walk, so a truck came from the production brigade to fetch them. The students thought this very exciting. Most of them had never ridden in any motor vehicle before, other than a bus. To stand in the open back of the truck, bowling along at thirty

miles an hour with the air—so still and humid at this season—rushing over your skin like a mountain breeze, was thrilling to them. They stood there waving and calling to people they passed on the road.

The truck left town on the road that turned past the college. Here there was the bamboo grove where Yuezhu had played with Liang Weilin, back when they were children together. She had hardly thought of him since that time. His father had turned out to be a counter-revolutionary, so Weilin must have been a counter-revolutionary too. Unless he had denounced his father, of course. There had been a struggle meeting—she remembered now—and Weilin's father had been beaten black and blue, which of course was no more than he deserved, and when the righteous anger of the masses had boiled over she had been trampled, and the skin had been scraped from her leg. It had got infected and taken ages to heal. However, she couldn't remember whether or not Weilin had denounced his father. It didn't matter, anyway. It was a shameful thing, to have been so friendly with a counter-revolutionary, or even with the son of a counter-revolutionary, whether he had denounced or not. She hoped nobody else remembered it. Watching the bamboo grove dwindle through the cloud of dust in the truck's wake, she recalled hearing someone say that the Liang family had left the town, gone to live somewhere else. So that was all right, probably nobody would ever know she had been friends with a counter-revolutionary.

Further along the road was the place where the actual Seven Kill Stele had stood, the one the town was named for. Unofficially, at any rate. The town appeared on maps, and was always referred to by the leaders, as Hibiscus Slope. It had been awarded this name—rather arbitrarily, as the town itself was quite flat and was not adorned with any very striking quantity of hibiscus—after Liberation, the authorities perhaps feeling that Seven Kill Stele was too gruesome a name for a pleasant country town. The local people, however, like country people everywhere, were very conservative. They considered that, as inauspicious as the old name might be, the town had prospered pretty well under it, and they would be inviting bad luck by discarding it.

Like everyone else, Yuezhu always referred to the town informally as Seven Kill Stele, but she had never thought about the name, or inquired

its origin. She had not known that the stele was a real stele until Mustache pointed the place out to her. The stele itself was not there any more, having been pulled down after Liberation; but its great square plinth was still just visible in the long grass at the roadside, thick with lichen and moss. Mustache told her the story of the Seven Kill Stele.

The Seven Kill Stele

First you must know the story of Zhang Xianzhong, the Yellow Tiger of Sichuan.

During the disorders at the end of the Ming Dynasty the warlord Zhang Xianzhong seized control of the western provinces. There he ruled as King of the West for several years. Zhang was a fierce and cruel man, known as Yellow Tiger, from his yellow eyes and his cruelty.

At first Yellow Tiger was a routine end-of-dynasty warlord: liberating the peasants, rewarding his followers, and suppressing landlords. Then his mind turned some dark corner and he began killing people wholesale. First he killed all the scholars of the western regions, inviting them to a 'special examination' in his capital, then massacring them. After that he killed all the Buddhist and Taoist priests. Then he just started killing everybody. He killed everybody his men could find. Only people who escaped into the high mountains survived. He even developed a hatred of the inanimate world, burning forests and destroying buildings.

When the Manchus had conquered north China and declared their dynasty, they turned their attention to the west. Hearing that their advance parties had been seen at the borders of his kingdom, Yellow Tiger called his men together at a mass assembly. "We shall soon fight our greatest battle," he told them. "In order that you may fight as soldiers should fight, without hesitation, without looking back, without any regard for yourselves or those who depend on you, I command you now to kill all your womenfolk and children." Yellow Tiger

the folk saying, dogs barked at the sun, being so unused to seeing it through skies turbid with humidity. In the evenings the leaders would organize community singing, or bring in some of the older peasants to tell colorful stories about their lives before Liberation.

The brigade did not actually let them do any important work, as it would only have had to be done all over again when the students had left. They sent them into the hills to get firewood, had them dam a stream to make a fish-pool, let them help with a tree-planting project. None of this was very arduous, though Mustache and another boy were nearly drowned when their first attempt at a dam broke. In the stifling heat of August the pace of life in the production brigade was in any case very slow. The peasants rose early, worked until the heat of the day became oppressive, then disappeared for three or four hours. Yuezhu was of course used to taking a one-hour nap after lunch; but here the long still afternoons, with not a soul to be seen, seemed to drag out to infinity. She lay on her mat in the girls' house, looking out through the window at the hot brassy sky, sleeping fitfully.

Strange daytime dreams troubled her. Time and again she was in the bamboo grove with Liang Weilin, the counter-revolutionary boy. Once he had a great halberd, like the one Duke Guan, the God of War, is always portrayed with. Weilin was holding the shaft of the halberd, and its blade was buried in Yuezhu's belly. Oddly, it drew no blood; but the pain it gave her was terrible. She twisted and turned, trying to free herself from the halberd, but the more she twisted the worse the pain got, and she woke with the pain, and it was with her all the afternoon and evening. In another dream Weilin had no halberd, but was floating a foot or so off the ground, equipped with huge iridescent butterfly wings. The colors of the wings shimmered and danced in a way that was horrifying yet hypnotic, but which did not altogether distract Yuezhu from noticing that Weilin was entirely naked. His skin was very smooth and golden; and the whole dream was delicious and thrilling, and shameful and terrifying, all at once.

There was a classmate, one of the girls, whose father was a worker at the college in Seven Kill Stele, the college at which Weilin's father had been a Professor. Not understanding why she was having these strange

bright dreams about Weilin, Yuezhu wanted to ask the girl what had happened to him. She did not like the dreams, did not want to have them. She wanted to know that Weilin really had left the town, preferably for somewhere far away. Several times she was on the point of asking the girl, but each time the fear of it being generally known that she had been friends with a counter-revolutionary family deterred her. When the time came to go back to town for the fall semester, she still had not asked. Driving back in the truck, Yuezhu deliberately turned her head away when they passed the bamboo grove, calling out to Mustache to distract herself: “Elder Brother! Look at the birds!” and pointing up to where a flight of geese were passing high, high overhead.

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When school restarted everything seemed different. It was as if she had grown physically during the vacation. The classrooms were all smaller than she remembered, the teachers more abject and dull. Dullest of all were the political study meetings. Yuezhu could never have said she found political study interesting, but she had always done her best with it, sure it must be important, determined to try to understand Chairman Mao’s Thoughts and exhortations. Now she found herself dozing as the Branch Secretary droned away, unable to make any sense of his words at all, and not really wanting to.

Then, late in September, there was a political study meeting that was not dull at all, that she remembered for the rest of her life.

Something had been in the air for several days, though no-one could say what it was. Father was summoned to meetings which lasted all day and far into the night—Yuezhu heard him coming home at two, three o’clock in the morning. The handful of teachers who were Party members—including sporty Teacher Zou—were summoned to a big meeting at county headquarters, along with all the Party people from the administrative staff. Then the other teachers, the non-Party members, had an all-day meeting, from which they emerged looking even more cowed than usual. Everyone knew something was going on. Mustache gave it as his opinion that it was a movement, a new movement.

“Oh,” said Yuezhu. “And shall we be Red Guards again?”

“Perhaps,” said Mustache. “Or perhaps we shall all be counter-revolutionaries this time.”

Yuezhu chided him for his cynicism, at the same time reflecting that she really did not want to be a Red Guard again.

When at last the political study meeting was called, it was a big one, for the whole school, held in the auditorium. Instead of a teacher or a branch secretary of the Party, the students were addressed by Secretary Bu, the Party Secretary for the whole town. He looked very grand up there on the stage, flanked by the school’s own secretary and branch secretaries, and some cadres from the town office, and two men in military uniforms.

The school secretary mumbled an introduction. “Classmates! Comrades! There has been a situation in the great affairs of our country. These cadres have come to tell us about it.”

Some of the students frowned and exchanged glances, but no-one said anything. Yuezhu felt dizzy from the heat of the auditorium. She had suffered badly from the cramps in her belly that morning. Now the cramps had gone, but had left her weak. They had been bothering her occasionally for months now, and she thought perhaps she would go to the clinic with them, or at least tell Mother. Here, in the heavy, still auditorium, she wanted to lean back and rest; but the bench she and Mustache were sitting on had no back.

The school secretary stepped to one side and Secretary Bu went into his address at once.

“Comrades! There has been a plot against our country! Against our Party! Against our great leader Chairman Mao!”

Someone cried out at the far side of the hall. Near Yuezhu, several students gasped. A murmur rose up, rippling back and forth across the auditorium, until Teacher Zou clapped her hands to restore silence.

“Fortunately the security forces of our country discovered this plot,” Secretary Bu continued. “The ringleaders have been arrested. Chairman Mao is safe! Our revolution is safe!”

“Long Live Chairman Mao!” called out one of the students. Some others echoed him.

“The leader of this plot, in collusion with foreign hegemonists and imperialists, was Marshal Lin Biao.”

What? What? Now the buzz of talk started up again. “Lin Biao? Lin Biao?” people were saying. Nobody could believe it. Teacher Zou had to clap her hands several times before Secretary Bu could go on.

“Masquerading as a protector of the revolution and comrade-in-arms of Chairman Mao, the treacherous Lin attempted to overthrow the Party and establish personal dictatorship. But he and his clique have been destroyed. The danger is past. Long Live the Communist Party of the Chinese People’s Republic! Long Live Chairman Mao!”

He stepped back abruptly, nodded to the town cadres, and they all turned and left the stage. Yuezhu, like most of her classmates, was stunned. When the school secretary had mumbled his way through a long speech about safeguarding the People’s Democratic Dictatorship and upholding the General Line, Yuezhu turned to Mustache.

“Marshal Lin Biao!” she whispered. “Can you believe it?”

“Of course,” whispered back Mustache, affecting nonchalance. “As I’ve often told you, it’s just a game.” But Yuezhu could see that even he had been shaken by the news.

It seemed that she herself had been more affected than she knew. When the meeting was over and she stood to go, she almost fell. Her head spun, her ears rang, and she felt she was losing her balance. Somehow she stayed upright, and turned to file out between the benches. Behind her, she heard Mustache gasp.

“Little Sister!” he croaked, in a voice she could hardly recognize.

“What? What is it?”

He was looking down at the bench, a very strange expression on his face, something she had not seen before.

“Little Sister . . . your seat . . .”

“My seat?” But even before she looked down at the bench where she had been sitting, Yuezhu became aware of the sticky wetness. Involuntarily she put a hand behind her, feeling at her pants. The tips of her fingers came away crimson; and now she was looking at the bench, at the oval pool of blood beginning to drip onto the floor.