Chapter 19

The Stage Trembles As a Great Man Departs
The White-Haired Girl Takes a Victim

Yuezhu woke in the middle of one stifling hot night to the sound of voices shouting, glass breaking. Along with the noises she noticed the smell: an odd smell, something like chalk dust. There was nothing to see, though. All was pitch black. “What is it?” she heard a sleepy voice say nearby. “Is it thunder?”

Yuezhu shared a dormitory room with seven other girls. They slept in four bunk beds, two against each wall. Three of the girls had gone home for the summer vacation, or were away for some other reason. The other four were all awake, to judge from the sounds of movement in the darkness around her.

“What is it? What is it?” voices were saying all around. Nobody knew what was happening. Yuezhu sensed the girl in the upper bunk above her sliding down to stand on the floor. But she lost her balance somehow and lurched over to fall on top of Yuezhu where she lay. As she fell she screamed.

“Earthquake!”

Instantly the word was in the air all around them. Running feet in the corridor outside, and the word—shouted everywhere now: “Earthquake! Earthquake!”

Yuezhu struggled out from under the other girl and tried to stand. As she did so, the floor yawed sideways beneath her, and the window blew
out as if hit by a truck. Someone crashed into her in the darkness, one of the other girls. “We must get out,” gasped the girl, trying to push past. “Outside, we must get outside.”

They were on the third floor of a six-floor block. The whole building was swaying and they could hear the concrete cracking. Hear, and also smell—that was the brick-dust smell, everywhere in the air around them now, as they ran along the corridor to the stairwell.

The stairwell was already crowded with students from the three upper floors, which were all male dormitories. One or two of the more enterprising students had flashlights—one above Yuezhu, one below her—and the occasional flickering light showed a heaving sea of faces pushing down the stairs, white faces, each illuminated for only an instant, every one a study in cold terror. The air was full of dust from the strained concrete, and the flashlights made white shafts through the dust.

It was difficult to keep one’s footing on the stairs, in the darkness, with people pushing in panic all around. Yuezhu got down the first flight; then, on the landing, with students streaming in from the second-floor rooms, there was another sideways jolt from the earth, and several fell. Yuezhu kept her balance at first, but was pulled down by someone grabbing at her. Someone else fell across her; heavy bare feet stepped on her, hard on her kidneys, and she screamed. Straining to rise, she felt a sharp pain in her back, then was knocked down again. People were screaming. “Let us get up! Wait, please wait, people have fallen!” But no-one was inclined to wait, the crowd pressed forward to the last flight of stairs, all naked bodies it seemed, glistening silver in the random play of the flashlight beams, the stink of their sweat filling the narrow stairwell. Yuezhu was carried with them, half-standing half-crawling. Reaching wildly for something to hold, her fingers met the damp concrete wall, and by sheer friction of her palms on the wall managed to right herself. She was down the steps and outside, sobbing, sobbing.

Near the building the ground was covered with broken glass. It seemed all the windows had blown out. Further away there were the vague forms of people standing around in the darkness, groups sitting on the ground or standing in little clumps, picked out by occasional flashlight beams. It
was a hot night and people were wearing just what they had gone to sleep in: the girls, thin cotton pajamas, the boys only shorts.

Yuezhu tried to pick out someone she knew, but could not. She sat on the ground, which was bare hard earth. Now she was aware of having injured her back somehow in the scramble down the stairwell. She twisted and turned her body, flexing to find the source of the pain, and at one point sent a sharp spasm down her right leg all the way to the ankle. Nothing serious, she thought, nothing a few days of light warm-ups wouldn’t fix; and remembered Madame Blaitsky, in one of her rare lighter moments, telling them that if they wanted to strike up a conversation with a professional ballet dancer, one infallible technique was to inquire about the dancer’s latest injury.

Someone near by, a girl student, was wailing about her family. “Mama! Baba! Didi! Where are you? Are you all right? Oh Heaven, please be all right!” Yuezhu supposed the girl must have her family in Beijing. Her own were safely in Guangzhou, thank Heaven for that, and Half Brother too. She wondered about Baoyu, who lived with his family, off campus—had he survived?

As the night wore on the campus area filled up with residents of the buildings all around—it was the largest open space in the area. People brought oil lanterns and candles. A group of four classmates from the Dance Academy located Yuezhu. Together, they wandered among the crowd looking for other classmates. Three or four times the earth trembled; people fell silent and clung to each other until it stopped.

“Everyone’s saying it’s a sign,” said one of the classmates, a pretty willowy girl from Jiangxi Province. “It means Chairman Mao is about to die.”

For “die” she used the antique word beng, which was applied to the Emperors in olden times, or to collapsing mountains. It sounded odd to hear the word spoken, though it turned up occasionally in historical movies. They all had to stop and think what it meant.

“I think that’s absurd,” said another girl after this pause for thought. “It’s feudal thinking. I don’t think we should allow such beliefs in New China. Long live Chairman Mao!” But her voice cracked on the penultimate syllable, and the others knew she did not believe what she
was saying. She knew, like everyone else, that such an event cannot be without meaning.

As everyone said that terrible night, so it was proven: six weeks later, Chairman Mao left the world.

By that time the capital had got itself into some sort of order, as if the earth intended its omen to have sufficient time to properly impress itself on people’s minds. Teams of engineers were going round inspecting the large buildings, to see if they were safe for habitation. They had not yet reached the Conservatory, but the army had come and put up tents on the campus, and the students were all living in these tents. The beginning of school was postponed until the state of the buildings could be determined; but the staff, and those students who had not lived on campus in the summer, had all come back.

The second-year dance students heard the news soon after Madame Blaitsky came back from the northeast at the beginning of September. The few days she had been back Madame Blaitsky spent in setting up a dance practice tent, using the biggest tent the army would give her and enlisting all her students to work fitting it out with barre and mirrors.

“Couldn’t we just wait till the engineers have certified the main buildings?” asked one of the bolder spirits.

Madame Blaitsky impaled her with a Siberian glance. “You are here to dance,” she replied. “There’s no reason why an earthquake should interfere with your dancing.” She made the earthquake sound like something trivial—a sore throat, a bruised shin.

The practice tent was just complete when Chairman Mao died. The second year, Yuezhu’s year, practiced in it for the first time the day before. The tent was made of heavy army canvas. It was stuffy and hot inside, and smelt of dust and canvas. Teacher Li, their ballet instructor for the morning sessions, taught them soutenu. Then they had a class in choreology from Teacher Zhang, an eccentric old pedant who had been a professional pianist until the Red Guards broke all his fingers. After lunch there was an hour’s siesta, then an English class, then practice at the barre.
Blaitsky had supervised the army men setting up the barre inside the practice tent, making sure they drove the uprights deep into the earth of the campus to make the barre rigid. After barre came center work, then music reading, then the evening meal. After evening meal the students did their small chores—laundry, mending, letter-writing. The period between small chores and bedtime was usually given over to free practice, and the keener students went back to the tent. Yuezhu did not. The weather was still very hot, water supplies were problematical, the tent was stuffy, and Yuezhu did not like going to bed covered in sweat. She filled the time with some isometric exercises on her bunk, going over her English lesson, and gossiping with roommates before lights out. She went to bed wishing they could have their proper facilities back soon. When she woke the loudspeakers were playing death music.

She realized at once that one of the leaders must have died. They had played the same music when the Prime Minister died. It was a peculiar piece of music: basically a dirge in the traditional Chinese style, played on traditional instruments, but with a lot of foreign influence. Oddly, Chairman Mao did not come to mind right away. She had never thought of Chairman Mao dying. Such thoughts seemed improper, disrespectful. Hearing the death music, Yuezhu supposed it must be one of the other leaders, several of whom were very old. But as soon as she got out of bed the other students in her tent told her. Then the loudspeakers interrupted their dirge to give the news. “Great Leader Chairman Mao Zedong has departed from this world . . .” It chilled her to hear the words. As soon as they had started she wished they would stop. She wished for it not to be true. Chairman Mao dead! It was too big a thing, her mind could not encompass it. Many students were weeping, but Yuezhu could not weep. Her grief was of the sort that is beyond weeping. She was overwhelmed with hopelessness and despair. What was the use of being alive, if Chairman Mao was dead? That day Yuezhu was actually ill, a terrible heavy lethargy settling on her; and it was several days more before she could bring herself to dance with any enthusiasm.
The pain in her back was a serious nuisance. The days of confusion following the earthquake gave Yuezhu the opportunity to rest up, and the pain was no longer continuous. Still it came back to torment her every dance practice, each time she bowed, or landed from a jump. She should go to Madame Blaitsky with it, she knew, but was afraid to do so. She had felt sufficiently insecure about her dance skills before Father’s chief’s disgrace. Now she did not know what the consequences might be if she confessed any weakness or disability. She spoke of the problem only to Baoyu, who showed her some light stretching exercises the male dancers used when they got strained muscles from their weight-lifting.

Half Brother’s theory that Comrade Deng Xiaoping, and consequently Father’s chief and Father himself, would return to power after the Chairman died, seemed to have been wishful thinking. A new Chairman was announced, a man called Hua Guofeng. Baoyu said the leaders didn’t take him seriously.

“He’s just a nonentity from Shanxi Province,” said Baoyu. “He happened to be in the room when Chairman Mao died, and he got the Mandate of Heaven.”

“Well, that was a great stroke of luck,” said Yuezhu.

“Yes. But he can’t last. Your half brother was right. My father says the same thing: Comrade Deng Xiaoping will come back.”

But Comrade Deng Xiaoping did not come back. The new man, Hua, had the leaders of the previous faction arrested and put caps on them, calling them the Gang of Four and blaming them for the Cultural Revolution. There were meetings to denounce these people, and resolutions to support Chairman Hua. Comrade Deng Xiaoping, and Father’s chief, and Father, remained in their exile in Guangzhou. Yuezhu got a brief, uninformative letter from Mother once a month.

It seemed that Father’s faction would never be rehabilitated. The insecurity of her situation preyed on Yuezhu’s mind, as the back problem plagued her body. Other than Baoyu, there was no-one she could speak to about either.
In November they moved back into the buildings, now passed as safe by the engineers. At once Madame Blaitsky announced that the Dance Academy would put on a public performance of *The White-Haired Girl* the following spring. This was one of the revolutionary pieces promoted by the late Chairman’s wife, who had been one of those arrested by the new Chairman. Apparently the fact of her having been arrested did not reflect upon the ballet.

**The White-Haired Girl**

Xi’er was a peasant girl who lived before Liberation. Her father could not pay his debts, so he was beaten to death by a cruel landlord called Huang Shiren. Then the landlord took Xi’er in lieu of the debt, and made her work as a servant in his house. Xi’er’s fiancé ran away from the village to join the Eighth Route Army. Xi’er’s sufferings became so great her hair turned white. She ran away from the landlord and went to live in a cave. The fiancé’s unit liberated the village and rescued Xi’er from the cave. The landlord was led away to receive the People’s Justice. Xi’er joined the army and went off with them to make revolution.

The rumor soon spread among the students that the new Chairman himself would attend the first performance, but Madame Blaitsky would not confirm this. The students began rehearsals in late November, as the people of Beijing were disappearing into cotton-padded jackets and winter hats. Actual roles would not be announced until the spring, though everyone assumed Baoyu was to dance the part of the fiancé. Yuezhu had no real chance of dancing Xi’er, but still hoped for a good role.

Now there were not enough hours in the day. Yuezhu made an arrangement with the night-watchman at the dormitory. She tied a piece of string to her ankle and let it out over the top of the door of the room she shared with five other girls. At four thirty the watchman would come up to the door and yank on the string. In this way Yuezhu found she could get another half-hour’s practice in with the keenest of her classmates.
Every morning, every dark winter’s morning, the building heat not yet on, she worked at the barre. At first she worked without music, for the gramophone records were locked in a cabinet at night. She tried to hear the music in her mind, or sometimes read through it—at least in the first weeks, until she knew it by heart—waiting for Baoyu to come in at six to keep her company and help with the supported movements. Then Madame Blaitsky, perhaps moved by Yuezhu’s intensity, relaxed the rules and the early-bird students could dance to music at all hours.

All through the winter Yuezhu danced on doggedly, up at four thirty, never missing a class, coming back to the practice room after evening meal. She danced through both New Years, solar and lunar, wearing out one, two pairs of dance shoes, stubbornly ignoring the pain that shot down her side and right leg when she landed in certain positions, or angled her body a certain way. Baoyu marveled at her dedication.

“I really think you may be chosen for Xi’er,” he said. “Your technique has improved so much!”

One evening in late February she was alone in the practice room with Baoyu. It was after nine, and the other dancers had all left to go to bed. But the roles for The White-Haired Girl were to be announced the following week, and Yuezhu grudged every moment not spent in practice. Baoyu began to chide her, as he often did, for taking things too far.

“You’re not moving very well. Losing the tempo. Perhaps you should call it a day.”

“Just half an hour. Some light exercises to unwind. Watch my pas de chat, tell me if I have the right positions now.”

She waited for Baoyu to find the right place on the record, then began with the music. Dancing out on the floor, away from the barre, Yuezhu felt her weariness. Perhaps Baoyu was right, perhaps she was overdoing it. Demi-plié, arms to seconde, jump left. After the roles were announced, whatever the result, she would take it easy for a while. “Pull back and regroup”, as Father liked to say. Demi-plié, arms en bas, second, demi seconde, jump.


“Watch! Watch my pas de chat!”
*Pas de chat* is not a difficult movement. Madame Blaitsky had taught it to them in the first year. You travel sideways by a series of two-footed jumps, landing in the position called *demi-plié*, knees slightly bent for shock absorption. Yuezhu thought she could do *pas de chats* in her sleep. Indeed, this was very nearly the situation. But coming down from one jump, her feet got tangled. She fell, awkwardly, putting out an arm to save herself, but failing to do so, and landing rather hard on her hip.

Baoyu was at her side immediately. “Elder Sister, I warned you. You’re really overdoing it.”

He offered her his arm. Yuezhu marveled, as she always did when she noticed him now, at how muscular he had become. She got up on one knee; but when she went to straighten her body, a shocking pain went all the way down one side, from waist to foot. The pain was so sharp it brought tears to her eyes. “Ai!” she yelped; and tried again to straighten, and again couldn’t.

“Elder Sister!” Baoyu’s face showed alarm. “What is it?” He took her arms with his and tried to lift her, but the pain made her cry out again. She was stuck, bent over down there on one knee, on the floor.

“Elder Sister! Elder Sister!”

“It’s all right. I’ve just pulled something give me a minute. It’ll be all right.”

But it wasn’t all right. At last Baoyu had to carry her in his arms, still doubled over, wrapped in a coarse school blanket, across the courtyards of the Conservatory, through the gritty cold air, back to her dormitory, and set her carefully on her bed—against all regulations, as boys were not allowed in the girl’s dormitories. Three other girls were already in the room, sitting on their beds talking. They gathered round Yuezhu, murmuring sympathy.

“I’ll go and get Comrade Shao,” said Baoyu, referring to the dance physician who tended to their injuries.

“No,” gasped Yuezhu, struggling to straighten while lying sideways on the bed. “No, it’ll be all right. Don’t make a fuss, it’ll be all right.”

But it wasn’t all right at all.