

## Chapter 40

Secretary Ma Loses His Temper

The Demographics of Our Western Regions Explained

Now Margaret became aware of some change in herself.

The first thing was a loss of concentration. Life at the station was boring in the extreme. For most of the day, most days, there was nothing to do at all. She had filled this time with preparation for her lessons, constructing elaborate conversations in English for the students to practice, and even making up little playlets for them to act out. Now it seemed that her mind would not fix itself on these things. After dinner in the evenings she would take out her notebook, pick up a pencil, and . . . and come to with a start, ten minutes later, with a blank page in front of her. As to the content of her thoughts during those ten minutes, it seemed that she could recall very little. Certainly her mental state had not been that treadmill of obsession one walks when burdened with fierce hope or incurable grievance. It had been something dreamlike, something pleasant but passive. Something of refuge, of warmth, of being embraced by strength and certitude. But was there really warmth to be found in this bitter, hostile place? Perhaps there was. Perhaps this boy, with his smile, his big hands . . .

Some lines from one of Verdi's operas would keep coming to her: Ah, fors'è lui che l'anima . . . "Perhaps it's he that my soul, alone in the tumult of pleasure, has so often pictured." The pleasures available at Nakri Agricultural Research Station fell somewhat short of tumultuous, and Marga-

ret had never before been afflicted by romantic reveries; yet these lines, and their lovely music, had lodged in her brain anyway, chiming away relentlessly until there was nothing for it but to get up and go for a walk.

The weather was positively balmy now. Out of doors she need only wear light slacks, a blouse and undershirt, and a broad-brimmed straw hat against the fierce Tibetan sun. She felt no need to protect her throat at all. There was one blouse she thought suited her particularly well. It was a rather bright coral pink, with a wide collar and a shaped waist. She had bought it on one of her shopping trips in Beijing that Spring Festival. Now she wore it again, on a warm Thursday afternoon four days after the walk in the mountains. Norbu had not shown himself this four days. Margaret had looked for him in the refectory at meal-times, but he had not been there. She had walked in the compound each evening in the general direction of the arboriculture unit, but had not sighted him. Though she would have died under torture before admitting it, she was worried that she might have driven him away. In her mind was a vague plan—she had not thought out what words to use, that would be admitting too much to herself—of apologizing to him for her rather harsh parting words, or at any rate of being particularly agreeable to him in the hope of canceling the recollection of those words.

On this fourth day Margaret had free time in the afternoon, and determined to resume her voice practice, which had lapsed for a week. She left the women's dormitory and was crossing the open space behind the administrative building, making for the front gate of the station compound, when she heard someone call her. Turning, she saw the woman who kept the desk at the entrance to the middle school.

“Teacher Han! Branch Secretary Zhang wants to see you.”

The woman came over to her. She was an unpleasant type, with a sly, vicious face and a terrific reputation for gossip. The look she gave Margaret was almost a sneer.

“He wants to see you right now. Secretary Ma's in his office. Come on!” She turned away and waddled off, looking back once to make sure Margaret was following.

Secretary Ma had taken the single spare chair in Branch Secretary Zhang's office, leaving Margaret no place to sit, except the bed. Of course,

she couldn't sit on the bed. She stood just inside the door. Secretary Ma stared at her blouse. His odd, doll-like features were set in an expression of unblinking disdain.

"Ah, Little Han! Come on in, come on in! You can sit on the bed if you like." Branch Secretary Zhang half-stood from his chair to greet her. He gestured vaguely at the bed.

Secretary Ma went *Tsss!* under his breath, and turned away to stare at the shelves behind Branch Secretary Zhang's desk. Margaret took a couple of steps toward the desk.

"The concierge said you wanted to see me."

"Yes, yes." Branch Secretary Zhang seemed ill at ease. He took some time lighting a cigarette. "Yes. Well. Ah, you've been with us some time now."

"Nine months."

"Yes, yes. Well. Are you getting accustomed to the conditions here?"

"Oh, yes. I think so. Of course, it's different . . ."

"Yes, yes. Different. Different food, different air . . ."

Secretary Ma interrupted. "People have seen you going out with that Tibetan boy in Arboriculture."

Margaret was taken completely off guard. Quite unable to speak, she stared at Secretary Ma.

He stared back. "Well?"

"Yes. We. . . I have. Yes."

"Of course you have. Do you think we don't know? Do you think it can go unnoticed in a place like this?" Secretary Ma evacuated his nasopharyngeal tract and stood up to expel the fruit of this exercise into Branch Secretary Zhang's cuspidor.

"I. . . But there's nothing secret about it!" Margaret felt herself getting hot. "We're friends, that's all!"

"Ha!" Secretary Ma smiled for an instant. His teeth had numerous small black holes in them. "Friends! You seem to have an eccentric taste in friends, Teacher Han."

"I don't understand. Is it wrong, then?"

"Of course it's wrong. You know very well it's wrong. For one thing, you're not allowed to go out of the compound alone. For your own safety.

Branch Secretary Zhang told you that when you arrived. Those are the rules. You must obey the rules, like everybody else.”

“I didn’t go out alone.” (Thinking only of the last walk, with Norbu.)

“Yes you did. Many times. Three or four times a week, for the past several weeks. You’ve been going up the hill, alone.”

“Oh. . . Yes, I did. But to practice . . .”

“To meet your boyfriend.”

“No! That’s not true. I’ve just been going for exercise. And to practice my singing, away from the station.”

“Oh, you didn’t meet him, then?”

“I . . . Yes. But . . .”

“And last Sunday you went up there again with him.”

“That’s not alone. We went together. He invited me.”

“I’ll bet he did.” Secretary Ma laughed harshly, and looked to Branch Secretary Zhang for support. Branch Secretary Zhang made a half-hearted snicker. “‘Alone’ means with no other Chinese people, you understand that perfectly well. If you want to go out, you should go with your Chinese colleagues.”

“But. . . We’re friends, that’s all. We didn’t. . . There’s no. . . special relationship.”

Secretary Ma leered at her. “Teacher Han, you should examine yourself carefully. Criticize yourself. Try to cultivate self-respect.”

Burning inside as well as out by now, Margaret determined to speak out.

“And does ‘cultivate self-respect’ mean that I’m to have no friendships?”

Secretary Ma’s eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth to say something, then stopped. Branch Secretary Zhang cut in.

“That boy, Norbu. He’s a bad person. You shouldn’t associate with him.”

“Why is he a bad person?”

“IT’S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS!” shouted Secretary Ma, terribly loud. At full throat his voice was, like his features, immature, and rose to a falsetto squeal. He was furious. “It’s not for you to ask questions! You do as you’re told! If you want to find a boy friend, there are plenty of young

Chinese men here. No foreigners, I'm afraid! No foreigners for you to cuddle here! But plenty of honest Chinese boys!"

Margaret wanted to cry, but was determined not to. "What about policy?"

"What?" Puzzled, Secretary Ma fell back to his normal tone of voice. "What policy?"

"You told us at the meeting. We should be willing to marry Tibetans."

Secretary Ma stared at her. Then he laughed. "You stupid cunt. We want Chinese men to marry Tibetan women, that's the policy. We don't want *their* men fooling around with *our* women! We know how to deal with that!"

"Well, if that's the policy you should have said so clearly."

Secretary Ma had never heard anything like this. He stared at her, his face changing color. For the first time in the interview, Margaret felt afraid. Secretary Ma stood up and took a step toward her. He was an inch or two shorter than herself. When he found his voice, it was low and hoarse.

"Listen to me, Teacher Hot Pussy. *You* don't tell *me* about policy. *I* tell *you* about policy. *You* don't tell *me* who you can marry. *I* tell *you* who you can marry. You're a member of this unit now, and you'll follow the rules of this unit, like everybody else. Now get back to your dormitory and examine yourself."

Margaret could not control herself any longer. She began to cry. In shame and anger she put her hands over her face. "Oh! Oh! Oh!" was all she could say. Half-blind with tears she ran from the room, along the corridor, back to her dormitory bed. Alone there in the bright afternoon stillness, she sobbed herself to exhaustion and fell asleep. When she woke, in early evening, her pretty blouse was stained at the front from her tears. Around the stained part there was even a faint rim of white salt, like the frost on the tree branches in Jade Abyss Park.

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The very next morning, at breakfast, he came to her. These last few days Margaret had taken to sitting facing the door of the refectory, so she saw him as soon as he came in.

Instead of going to the counter, Norbu strode directly across to her table and sat opposite her. Margaret found herself unable to speak. He looked at her, right into her eyes—his expression serious, even a little grim. Flustered, Margaret looked down into her gruel and made to take a spoonful of it, but her fingers had trouble working the spoon.

“I heard you had a fight with Secretary Ma.”

“Oh! How could you know that?”

Norbu ignored the question. “Because you’ve been going out with me, right?”

She nodded, having finally got a mouthful of gruel in place.

“Did he forbid you to see me?”

“Yes.”

“His mother’s! What did you say?”

“I said we were just friends, that’s all.”

She looked at him again. His eyes were still on her eyes. He looked angry now.

“That motherfucking son of a bitch. He can’t stop us seeing each other. It’s not against the law.”

“Oh, Norbu . . .” The previous evening, Margaret had worked out what she would say to him. She would say that she had had too much trouble already; that she only wanted to live quietly without distress; that she could never consider a close relationship with someone from the minorities. . . . But all these things were now quite unsayable. All such thoughts were lost in his presence, and in the absolute imperative of keeping him near her for as long as she possibly could. But of course he was wrong. Secretary Ma *could* stop them seeing each other if he wanted to. He could simply transfer one, or both, of them to some other unit.

“Oh, Norbu. What are we going to do? What can we do?” She set down her spoon and, elbows on the table, lowered her face into her hands. Almost at once she felt him grip her bare wrist, his hand circling it completely with an inch to spare.

“Yuezhu, don’t worry. Please don’t worry. It’ll be all right. Look at me. Come on, look at me.” He pulled her hand down onto the table, and held it there. Margaret looked up. Two Chinese men at the next table had stopped eating to stare at them. She tried to pull her hand away, but Norbu

held it firmly. He was smiling at her now; a tender smile, full of concern, yet still with that wild edge of insolence to it. “Everything’s all right. Don’t worry.”

“How can you say that? You know things aren’t all right. In fact, they’re hopeless.”

“No! Listen to me, Yuezhu. I can fix everything. Listen. This morning I have to go to Lanzhou for some seedlings. Lanzhou and some other places. I’ll be gone a few days. Wait till I come back. All right?”

*Gone a few days* was the main thing that registered. “How long? How long will you be away?”

“A week, maybe a day or two more. Listen. Today is Friday, right? A week on Sunday I’ll be back, for sure. A week on Sunday. Sneak away that afternoon, when everybody’s having siesta. Go up to the monastery. I’ll meet you up there. All right?”

“A week on Sunday.”

“Yes. Go up to the monastery after lunch. I’ll meet you there. We’ll discuss everything. All right?”

“Yes. Oh!”

The *oh* was because he had suddenly stood up, releasing her hand. It was involuntary, and was followed by panic. He was going! For a week or more! Suddenly this seemed unbearable. “Norbu . . .”

“What?”

“Please don’t go. Don’t go.”

He laughed down at her, showing his teeth. “It’s all right. Just wait for me.”

Norbu turned, and walked straight out—his loose, loping walk that said to the other diners *Fuck all you losers and fuck your mothers too, I don’t care what you think.*

Suddenly Margaret was filled with despair. All around, at the other tables, people were staring at her. With the little spirit she had left, she gathered up her dignity and walked out, leaving her bowl on the table. Outside she looked for him, but he had disappeared.

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From lunch time that Friday, Margaret counted off the days. Nine days. Saturday, and then only eight, of which one could more or less be slept through. Sunday, then seven days, an even week. Monday, six days; a third of the time had gone. Tuesday, five days; almost half gone. Wednesday, four days; actually more than half. Thursday, three days; two-thirds gone. In her free time on Friday afternoon she washed her favorite blouse and slacks, and trimmed her hair. Saturday, one day. Sunday.

After lunch she went back to her dormitory with the other girls, and feigned sleep for half an hour until everything was quiet. Then she left the building and walked across the compound to the gate. Not a soul was about. Margaret's main worry was the guard at the gate, who was supposed to keep an eye on all comings and goings, to prevent local peasants from slipping in to steal things. However, he was nowhere in sight, and the gate was open. Margaret followed the wall of the compound round, then struck off up the hillside.

The dead stones of the monastery were white in the sunlight. Norbu was nowhere to be seen. Margaret debated with herself whether to watch for him, or to lie down and wait. Lying down would be more fun: he could surprise her. On the other hand, it might spoil her clean blouse and slacks. She decided to take a walk round the ruins while she waited.

A complete circumambulation of the ruins took only ten minutes. Still no Norbu. She did the circuit again, but still he did not appear. Nearby was the wall from behind which he had jumped up to surprise her that first time. Was he waiting there to make another surprise? She tiptoed over to the wall, then called out his name loud. Nothing. She walked round the wall: he wasn't there.

It was four thirty when she came back to the compound. Reckless with despair, she headed directly for the Arboriculture building. Halfway there, behind the station's little power house, a truck was parked. Old Bolmo, the driver, was sitting on the step of the cab, smoking a cigarette. He waved to her. Margaret turned from her path and went over. The driver stood up as she approached.

"Old Bolmo. I'm looking for Norbu. My friend Norbu, you know? The one who grows trees."

Old Bolmo stared at her. He looked a little scared, she thought. This seemed very odd. Why should Old Bolmo be scared of her?

“Missy, you don’t heard about the trouble?”

Margaret’s flesh went cold. “Trouble?”

“One big cadre, Kesang Duoji, that one come here last month. Yesterday got killed.”

“*Killed?* Oh, that’s terrible! What happened?”

Old Bolmo was very uncomfortable. He shifted his feet, looked over her left shoulder, looked over her right shoulder, looked at the ground.

“One guy killed him,” he mumbled. “Use knife, run to him, cut he throat.”

“Heaven! Why would anyone do such a thing?”

“Missy I don’t know. Some Tibet people. . . they sometimes act crazy. Do bad thing.”

“But my friend, Norbu. Oh! he wasn’t. . . he didn’t. . . Oh! Old Bolmo, tell me. He didn’t . . .”

“No, no, Missy. He didn’t do nothing. But Kesang Duoji that time got killed, he was in Laptok. You friend in Laptok too that time.”

Old Bolmo stopped, clearly feeling he had provided sufficient information. His cigarette had burned down. He pinched it out with his bare fingers, and put the stub in one of the breast pockets of his jacket. Then he smiled at Margaret, nodding.

“But if Norbu wasn’t involved, where is he?”

“They ’rrest him, Missy. ’Rrest all Tibet boys in Laptok that day. Such a thing happen, go’ment consider very serious. They ’rrest everybody in that town, all Tibet people, they all got ’rrest.”

“Arrested? Ai, that’s terrible! But what will happen to them?”

“Hard to say, Missy. Kesang Duoji big cadre. Go’ment they like him a lot. He got killed, they very angry. Make big ’vestigation. Depends they think you friend against go’ment. They think he against go’ment, give him five years.”

“Five years?”

The driver nodded, looking at her warily, then looking around to make sure no-one else was in earshot.

“Five years the usual. Nakri got one guy. He Tibet people. He work

go'ment office, with the Chinese people. One day got angry for some small thing. He say: 'You Chinese people should go back China, leave us Tibet people alone.' After, they 'rrest him. He got five years. Last year that happen. We don't see him since that time." Old Bolmo looked down at his feet, nervously. "He say that, not me. I only tell you he say that. Not me say it, he say it. I only *tell* you he say it."

"You think Norbu will get five years?"

The driver shrugged. "I don't know. Depends they think he against the go'ment. I only say, five years the usual. In such a case. I don't know."

Five years? Margaret's throat was dry. Five years? "Old Bolmo, will you come and tell me if you hear anything? Any news about Norbu, I mean? Will you let me know right away?"

Old Bolmo looked at her. He seemed not altogether sure of himself. "Okay, Missy. I tell you."

"Tell me right away. Please, please. I'm in the single women's dormitory. You can ask the concierge for me."

"Okay."

Entirely at a loss, Margaret could think of nothing but to go back to the dormitory. As she was passing the administration building, however, she saw Branch Secretary Zhang just going in. He saw her too, and beckoned her over.

"Little Han. Come into my office. There's a situation."

Margaret followed him in and down the corridor, and waited while he unlocked his door.

"Bad situation. Very bad," said Branch Secretary Zhang, settling behind his desk. "Sit down, sit down. There's going to be a meeting, but I'm glad I got the chance to talk to you first."

Branch Secretary Zhang lit a cigarette. Margaret took the free chair, wanting to ask about Norbu while Branch Secretary Zhang was fussing with his matches. . . was on the point of asking, then reflected that it might make trouble for Old Bolmo. Branch Secretary Zhang's remark about a situation had barely penetrated her stunned despair.

"I think you left the station this afternoon, didn't you?" Branch Secretary Zhang had his elbows on the desk, was looking at her over his hands, through the thread of cigarette smoke.

“Yes, I did.”

“Alone, I believe.”

“Yes.”

Branch Secretary Zhang sighed, shaking his head. “It’s not smart,” he said. “Just as Secretary Ma told you. And because of this situation, we must enforce the rule strictly now. You won’t be allowed to go out alone.”

“Situation? What situation?”

“There was an incident in Laptok yesterday. Just as I told you when you arrived, the Imperialists have some agents here in Qinghai. Stirring up trouble amongst the minorities. Well, they committed an atrocity in Laptok. Assassinated one of our senior cadres. The one that was here last month, do you remember him? With those strange glasses stuck on his nose. The agent ran right up to him as he was coming from a meeting, right up to him and stabbed him to death.”

“Terrible,” said Margaret mechanically. “A shocking thing.”

“Yes. They got the bastard, of course. Public Security will make short work of him, don’t worry. But where there’s one of these vermin, you can be sure there are others. And all the black elements in the local minorities will get stirred up by a thing like this. Province has issued a directive that none of us is to go out of the station until the situation has stabilized. There’ll be a meeting tomorrow to announce it. But because you’ve already come to Secretary Ma’s attention, I thought I should tell you sooner.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Don’t take this lightly. It’s a serious matter. National security. The army is involved. If you’re seen out alone they might pull you in. Then we shall all be in trouble. It’s bad enough that your friend got arrested.”

“My friend?”

“The Tibetan boy. The one Secretary Ma warned you about.”

“Ah.”

“He was in Laptok when the atrocity happened, so of course he got arrested.” Branch Secretary Zhang shook his head. “He’s a bad egg, that one. Just as Secretary Ma told you.”

“No, he’s not.”

“What?” Branch Secretary Zhang seemed more amused than offended.

“He’s not a bad egg. I know him well. He’s a good boy. Patriotic and well educated. He wouldn’t be involved in an atrocity.”

Branch Secretary Zhang blew smoke through his nose in silence. Then he shook his head slowly.

“Eeee. Little Han. You’re very young. There are many things you don’t understand.”

Margaret stood up, feeling hot. “But Norbu’s not a bad guy. I know.”

“He’s a very bad guy,” said Branch Secretary Zhang quietly.

“Why? How? How can you know that?”

Branch Secretary Zhang regarded her coolly. “He has a bad file. He’s been heard saying things against the country, against the Party. He’s a splittist, Little Han, a splittist, trying to split the motherland, parroting the so-called ‘Independent Tibet’ line the Imperialists cooked up to weaken our country. It’s all in his file. You say he’s well educated? Yes, the country educated him in a special boarding school. In Xining, the provincial capital—better conditions than he ever saw in his life before. Then four years in an agricultural college, also in the capital. At state expense!—fed by our peasants, protected by our army. And how does he repay the—country? With filthy words and counter-revolutionary thoughts. We know all about this character. Let me tell you, he’s a very bad person. One of the worst. I hope they put him away for a long time. Teach him a lesson.”

“No. He told me he loved the country. He told me sincerely.”

“He lied. What do you expect of a counter-revolutionary element? How do you think these ghosts and demons make an impression on people’s minds? They tell lies, they make black propaganda. That’s why we must always be on the alert. Show revolutionary vigilance. Our enemies are everywhere, Little Han. You’ve heard that many times, I’m sure. Now you know it. You should remember this experience. It will make you a better citizen in the future. More careful, more vigilant!”

He smiled at her, pleased with himself and with his little speech.

Margaret just stared. She could think of nothing to say. At last she retreated, taking a step to the door.

“All right. Vigilant. All right.” She took another step. Then: “Branch Secretary Zhang, can you answer a question for me?”

“What question?”

Margaret didn't know how it had come into her head, but she asked anyway. “Why are there so few Tibetan men here in their forties and fifties? What's the reason for that?”

Branch Secretary Zhang nodded in approval. “You are very observant, Little Han. That's good. Be more observant, and you will be more vigilant.”

“But what's the reason for it?”

“The reason is simple. It's the Tibetans' personal habits. You've been here long enough, you've seen it yourself, I'm sure. I don't need to tell you. They are just a filthy people. Well, every so often they have an epidemic. Caused by their filthy habits. A big epidemic. There was one twenty years ago. Killed off most of the young people. They haven't got resistance, you see? Killed them off, thousands of them. I remember it well. Because of their filthy habits.”

“Oh.” This explanation had never occurred to Margaret. It seemed very reasonable. “Oh. Yes. I see. Well. . . thank you, Branch Secretary Zhang.” She turned and left.

\* \* \*

Norbu really was a splittist, though. Margaret learned this some weeks later from her roommate, Wang Yong.

Margaret had become aware, over the few months of their acquaintance, that Yong was developing a peculiar interest in the Tibetans and their absurd religion. She seemed to have acquired a few words of Tibetan from the workers at the station; and from somewhere—probably from one of those same workers—had got a decorated wooden prayer wheel, a hand-held thing like a children's rattle, whose precise usage and function she had explained to Margaret in detail during a snowstorm the previous December.

“It's just an aid to prayer,” she had explained, somewhat defensively in response to Margaret's frank scorn. “It's the prayer itself that's important, not the gadget.”

In the spring, at the time she herself was resuming her voice exer-

cises, Margaret had even seen Yong attempting to write the letters of the Tibetan alphabet in an exercise book, murmuring the sound values to herself: *ka, kha, ga, nga*. . . She understood vaguely, and with silent disapproval, that Yong was, in point of fact—and to use the terminology of a different imperialism, in another time—in process of going native. Certainly she knew things about the Tibetans that Margaret had never heard before. This became apparent when they visited Dong Lo Temple, after the restrictions on movement were lifted.

The restrictions on movement lasted a month. For all that time nobody, Chinese or Tibetan, was allowed to leave the station. For every day of that month Margaret allowed herself to hope a little. She went to the arboriculture greenhouses, openly and shamelessly, looking for Norbu. Each time she went there, or to the boiler house, or to the refectory, she braced herself to see him, raised in herself a premonitory surge of joy; but he was not there, and the joy turned to a bitter taste on her tongue. She harassed Old Bolmo for information, but he had none to give. Every day she hoped, but every day a little less; and by the end of the month the demon Hope had tired of his sport altogether, leaving Margaret only cold fatalism.

In early July, when the restrictions were lifted, Yong suggested a trip to the provincial capital. Margaret had said nothing to her about Norbu, but perhaps Yong had noticed her roommate's unhappiness, or heard the common gossip of the station.

"I'm going stir crazy in this damn place," Yong said that particular evening. "I don't think I shall last out the semester if I don't get away. Let's take a long weekend and go to Xining. There's an ancient temple I want to see."

They bribed Old Bolmo to take them to the road one Friday morning. From there they took the bus Margaret had ridden nine months earlier, though this time in the opposite direction, back to the provincial capital. It was late when they arrived, though still light, and they checked in right away to a Chinese hotel.

Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province, was a squalid river settlement festering quietly in the summer heat. There were soldiers everywhere—more soldiers than citizens, it seemed at times, as the two women

strolled the dusty streets next day. The soldiers were all in twos, threes and fours, and had a watchful look. Many were armed, carrying their rifles at the port.

“It’s because of the assassination,” said Yong. “It’s always like this for a while after an assassination.”

“You mean that Tibetan cadre, Kesang Whats-his-name? Is that what it was, an assassination? I thought it was just the act of a lunatic.”

“Oh, yes. Every couple of years there’s some disturbance like that. A riot, an assassination. When I first came here in ’68 it was worse. There were guerrillas in the mountains with guns and explosives. They blew up an army truck full of soldiers and burned down a police station. It’s quieter now. But still the Tibetans take revenge once in a while.”

“Revenge? For what? Didn’t we liberate them from feudalism?”

Yong peered out at her through lenses so thick you could see the greenish color of the glass.

“You’re very naive, Yuezhu. The Tibetans all hate us. We took their country from them, drove out their priests and destroyed their temples. Tibetans like Kesang Duoji, who work for our Chinese government, are considered traitors by the locals. They look on them the way we look on people who collaborated with the Japanese forty years ago. If they see a chance, they kill them, and consider they’ve done a patriotic act.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Hasn’t this always been a part of China?”

Yong laughed. “Ask the man who killed Kesang Duoji.”

The Dong Lo Temple, which was the particular object of Yong’s interest, was a forty-minute bus ride from the town. It was actually a monastery, one of the few left intact in Qinghai Province, kept up by the government as a tourist attraction. Margaret thought it a filthy, sinister place. The inner parts, which Yong seemed particularly keen to explore, were windowless. They were lit, dimly, by candles of yak butter. On the walls were paintings, hideous demons leering and capering through the flickering yellow gloom. The few surviving monks looked as ancient as the stones themselves, and were hardly more coherent. Motionless they growled their monotone chant, the death-song of their race. In the inner-

most room of all was a party of kneeling pilgrims, nomads from the south. They paid no heed to the intruders, except for one girl who looked up briefly at Margaret. Her eyes glittered from a face covered with black dirt. She turned to glance at Yong, then went back to her devotions, alternately rocking and prostrating herself according to some formula learned—how? Margaret could not imagine.

The odor in this room was well-nigh visible. Margaret felt herself suffocating, and motioned to Yong to leave. Yong seemed not to see her. The monks droned, the candles flickered, the demons leered, the pilgrims stank. Suddenly, astonishingly, there was a shrill, high-pitched voice just beyond the entrance passage—speaking English!

“ . . . BASED ON NOTHING BUT SUPERSTITION. BEFORE LIBERATION THIS ROOM WAS FILLED ALL OVER WITH GOLDEN STATUES, THEIR EXPENSES TORN FROM THE FLESH AND BLOOD OF THE COMMON PEOPLE BY MANY VERY TERRIBLE TORTURES AND OPPRESSIONS. OVER HERE . . . ”

It was a China Travel Service guide with a group of western tourists. The tourists were mostly old people. They wore pastel-colored slacks and tops and carried cameras and shoulder bags. One by one they tiptoed respectfully into the room where the pilgrims were offering their devotions.

“Strewth,” whispered the nearest tourist. “Godawful stink in here.”

When she had them lined up against the wall the guide started up again at the top of her voice.

“HERE CAN SEE SOME PEOPLE FROM THE REMOTE MOUNTAIN DISTRICT DOING THEIR RELIGIOUS. THEY PEOPLE VERY BACKWARD, STILL FOLLOW THESE OLD THINGS. YOU SEE THEY ARE VERY DIRTY, SMELL VERY BAD. THEY NEVER WASH AT ALL, THEY DO THE BOWEL MOVEMENT WHERE THEY ARE, NEVER MIND WHERE, EVEN IN THE TEMPLE.”

One or two of the tourists looked apprehensively down at their feet. The celebrants paid scant attention to the guide and her charges. They went on rocking and prostrating themselves while the monks droned. Yong’s mood, however, had been broken by the arrival of the tourists, and she led the way out.

“Were they Americans?” she asked Margaret when they reached a little open courtyard. Yong could neither speak nor understand English.

“Australians,” said Margaret, pleased with herself at having divined this from the labels on the shoulder bags. “Probably paid a lot of money. They pay money to come to Qinghai Province; you and I would pay any amount of money to get out of it.”

“We should all get out,” said Yong quite unexpectedly, with even some anger in her voice. “All us Chinese should get out. This is not China, it’s Tibet. It’s not our country, it’s theirs. We should apologize for what we’ve done to them, and then leave.”

“You sound like one of the splittist demons,” said Margaret, laughing to make light of it.

“Pei! How can you speak of splitting something that’s only held together by force?” Yong gestured back at the inner temple. “You see what they’re like. Devoted to their own ways, their language and religion. Do you know that every one of these Tibetans. . . she nodded at an aged monk squatting by a wall muttering into his prayer-wheel. . . “has a picture of the Dalai Lama on him? Hidden in a pocket somewhere, or stitched into the lining of his clothes? They all have one. If you get friendly with them, they’ll show you. The workers at the station, they all have them. They consider it their most sacred possession.”

Margaret reflected on this with sudden understanding, thinking of Norbu. But she did not want to think of Norbu.

“Old Bolmo, does he have one?”

“He has two. One in the lining of his jacket, one under the dashboard of his truck.”

Stunned and confused, Margaret could not speak. Then she could speak only at random.

“I myself would like to see Australia,” she said. “Heaven! I would love to. I don’t suppose I ever shall, though.”