

THE QUARRY

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Excerpt, From *Xenoglossia*

It was 1960, the height of the Cultural Revolution, a time when people had to recite something from The Quotation of Chairman Mao before they opened their mouth. Ju woke up from an accident and found himself speaking English, a language that could only be learned by outstanding Communist party members or cunning national traitors. He was neither, but would others believe him?

Zhang Ju woke to a world of silent snow. Patches of white clashed against each other, cotton and plaster and enamel. His first thought was, is it the Lunar New Year already? Have we entered the next decade? —But no, that couldn't be right. He blinked slowly and saw a pale tube leading to his left hand, nailed to his wrist by two strips of white tape.

Ju turned his head slightly to the left. Among white wood and more white cotton was a single drop of red, a little shiny book, and he relaxed without realising he'd been tense. It was not only a copy of the *Quotations from the Chairman*, but also his very own, and he'd made the protective cover himself. It was cut out of some plastic remnants from his factory, and he was proud of the delicate handwork, a symbol of both his senior craftsmanship and his faith.

It was better to put the book back into his pocket, close to the heart. Ju extended his right hand, only to find he couldn't extend it far enough. There was no pain, just a general numbness. Some memories came back, but more were still in a haze. The first person that jumped into his mind was Comrade Yi Mei, his fiancée. Thinking of her plump cheeks, Ju lowered his eyes in shame. As the Chairman dictated, *one should fight selfishness and repudiate revisionism*. Thinking about a woman before his widowed mother and his younger brother, who was one of the top Red Guards in school, was not right. He could see the Chairman's look of disapproval in his mind. No wonder he was still not admitted into the Party, despite a solid working class background.

But how did he end up in hospital? What happened?

Before he wondered long enough to give himself a headache, a girl walked into the room without knocking. She was well groomed in a neat grass-green uniform, and the same coloured belt was one button too tight. She put a tray of white bottles and syringes down on the side table, glanced at Ju, and jumped back in surprise, two short braids dangling over her shoulders.

'You're awake!' She shrieked. After a moment, she regained her composure and quickly amended, '*We shall support whatever our enemies oppose and oppose whatever our enemies support.*'

'*Let a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thoughts contend,*' Ju replied in kind. His voice was rougher than he imagined.

The girl — probably a nurse — gave him a warm smile, and served him several mouthfuls of water from the enamel mug. Replacing the mug on the table, she asked politely, 'I'm sorry, what did you say?'

'*Let a hu...*' Ju repeated, but choked on the water remaining in his throat. He did not have the strength to sit up, which made the coughing even worse. When he could finally breathe again, the numbness was replaced by an inner ache that defined the boundaries of his body.

The girl stared at him, clearly concerned. 'Do you want me to call the doctor?'

'I'm all right,' Ju decided to recite something shorter, '*All reactionaries are paper tigers.*'

The girl frowned and was silent for a long moment. When Ju started to feel uneasy by the silence, she said, 'I'm afraid I can't understand you. Can you speak the Peking tongue?'

'What are you talking about?' Ju was confused. 'I'm speaking the purest Peking dialect.'

'Or could you tell me where your hometown is? Maybe I could get someone from the same place.' She then continued with equal confusion and perfect seriousness, '*Political power comes out of the barrel of a gun.*'

Ju did not know what to think. He glanced at his copy of the *Quotations* rather helplessly, and the girl turned her heels as if on cue, saying she'd go find the doctor. Ju watched her go and replayed their conversation in his head. In fact, it was she who had an accent, a kind of nasal sound that indicated far north. 'Well, *conflicts and struggles are common and absolute*,' he mused, and raised his eyes to see the next person walk into the room.

It was Yi Mei. She was in the exact same uniform as the nurse, her belt tied just right. Ju felt a familiar warmth blossom in his heart.

'*Everything is for serving the people*,' Mei said with her low, calm voice, and walked to stand at his bedside. 'It's good to see you awake. How are you feeling?'

'I think I'm all right, but I may need your help,' Ju said, trying hard to control his smile, and consciously stiffened his hands that longed for her touch, if only a quick handshake. He wanted to ask how she was and what exactly happened, but the expression on Mei's face shut him up.

She looked into his eyes as if examining whether the stitches on a bed quilt were tidy, and then asked softly, 'Why are you speaking English?'

Ju looked at her blankly. English? He didn't know a word of English.

He had no idea what he'd say if the silence remained longer. But the northern girl came back, followed by a middle-aged man with round-rimmed glasses and a rumpled uniform. He nodded to both Mei and Ju, saluted and bellowed in a baritone, '*We have the Marxist-Leninist weapon of criticism and self-criticism.* How are you, our selfless hero, Comrade Zhang? Comrade Wu said you had some problem speaking...?'

Ju opened his mouth. 'I don't...'

He froze mid-sentence, not only because Mei was staring at him, her face expressionless and her eyes sharp as burning needles.

This time, he actually *heard* himself.

And it sank in. He had been speaking English ever since he woke up on this hospital bed. A language that he could not speak, and certainly had never studied in his entire life.

The doctor saved everyone by saying, '*Ai-dong?* Are you freezing? Hmm, it was summer last time I checked.' He grinned at his own joke, and came closer to check on Ju with professional efficiency. Mei's face disappeared. 'Where does Comrade Zhang come from?' Ju heard the nurse ask. There was no reply.

'You're sweating a lot. Probably due to a fever caused by an infection,' the doctor said. 'The accident was very bad indeed. Don't worry, I'll fix you in no time. As the Chairman said, *health is the capital of revolution.*' He nodded, did a bad job of straightening the quilt over Ju, and went out of the room. The nurse followed suit.

Ju looked at Mei, who looked straight back. She was standing with her back against the opposite wall, as if a snake was coming out from under the bed. 'I...I don't know,' Ju croaked, struggling to find the right words to say. 'I don't know.' He could not find anything other than *I don't know*. 'What accident? Were you, were they speaking...? Am I still...?'

Mei stared at him for another moment, and recited, '*Down with all ox-gods and snake-ghosts,*' almost under her breath before turning to leave. Her voice was quivering.

'But I'm not an ox-god nor snake-ghost!' Ju burst out. He was shaking, and he could feel it. 'I'm not...I'm not a landlord or bourgeoisie or insurrectionist or rich peasant or rebel or traitor!' What else was included in ox-gods and snake-ghosts? But the doctor came back with the nurse, asking why and what he was shouting about. Ju shut his mouth out of instinct, afraid that the doctor might know some English, or know that it was English he was speaking. In a swirling fog of panic, he lost focus amongst the surrounding whiteness, oblivious to the thermometer and the

wet towel and more water down his throat, praying for Mei to come back — although there was no one he could pray to, as gods did not exist.

It was only after the doctor and the nurse left again, and did not return for some time, that Ju calmed down enough to think. While busying over him, the doctor and the nurse had talked about him in a serious tone, worrying that he might be suffering some after-effects from the accident, and thus was not in his right mind. He had just woken up from a week-long coma, after all. The poor comrade! What a brave man, a true hero, sacrificing himself to save public property! *All comrades are servants for the people*, just as the Chairman observed.

It was all right, Ju told himself. He was a worker, a proletariat (where did that word even come from? He'd never heard of it for sure) and a hero, although he remembered nothing of his heroic act. Just let them think he was still dizzy and unwell. He'd switch back to Chinese before anyone else noticed, and laugh off Mei's mistake in thinking his gibbering was a foreign language — she had the honour to receive night classes as an Excellent Party Member, but surely her English could not be *that* good. He extended his right hand and gripped his Little Red Book, ignoring the pain in his arm and his shaking fingers. Yes, he said to himself, everything would be all right.

Except the cover of the Red Book, with the Chairman's portrait and five Chinese characters, now only had the Chairman's portrait and five strange squares with golden lines going everywhere.

Ju closed his eyes. And opened them. The five golden drawings, quivering in his hand, remained the same. *Quotations of the Chairman*. It was as simple as that. Yet he could not tell how each of the five words were pronounced, even though they must've been the most well-known characters in their young country. Everyone knew them, even babies and the illiterate.

Ju swallowed hard. He used both hands to hold the Red Book, and raised it up until the Chairman smiled fondly at his eyebrows. The first golden drawing, the one that looked like an amputated centipede, was the Chairman's family name. Slowly, it began to swim.

'Why are you crying?' The voice was cold, distant, but also unmistakably Mei's.

Ju lowered his aching arms, but still held onto the Red Book. Mei was standing at the opposite wall as before, and it seemed she'd been there for a while. The door was thoughtfully closed.

While Ju kept blinking away his tears, unable and afraid to speak, Mei stepped closer, watching him with caution.

‘Are you a foreign spy?’ she asked.

Ju shook his head, before he had time to decide whether to feign ignorance at her allegation.

‘Do you have illicit relations with the West? Do you have foreign relatives? Have you been learning English in private?’ Mei raised her eyebrows with each question. ‘Then tell me, how do you know English? And how come I've never known that you knew English?’

Silence would not help, so Ju answered, ‘I don't know.’ He inhaled deeply, and added, ‘I don't know English, and I don't know why I'm speaking it.’

‘Right, you just acquired it?’ Mei gave him a contemptuous look. ‘I didn't want to believe it, so I came back, and the way you held *the Quotations*...I thought maybe it was a misunderstanding... but now you're just lying to my face.’ She straightened up and recited loudly, ‘*Who are our friends, and who are our enemies? This is a question of first importance for the revolution.*’

‘Yi Mei, I'm not—’

But she was already gone.

The only way out of this insanity, his only salvation, was to exorcise the demon called English and resume his normal self. Until then, Ju decided not to open his mouth, except for eating, drinking and brushing his teeth. His mother and brother came to visit, but he did not respond to their relief at his recovery, nor their concern at his silence. His workmates came as a group and brought him a small juicy watermelon, which would have cost them a fortune, but he pretended to be sleeping. And he did sleep; he slept as many times as he could, in the hope of finding the world making sense again the next time he woke up.

But it didn't. The characters in the Red Book remained undecipherable, no matter how familiar they looked or how well he knew the content by heart. The nurse brought him newspapers every day, but he had no idea how the revolution was advancing in the vast republic. Mei's words played and replayed in his head, but he could not recall what she really said, not the actual words. In his mind, she was speaking in fluent and perfect English in her clear, serious voice, although in real life the only English he had ever heard her say was, 'Long live the Chairman,' when she wanted to show him what was taught in the evening classes she'd been attending. On that same date, she had called him his full name for the first time. Zhang Ju, not just Comrade Zhang. Her lips pouted into a flower for the sound of Ju, and stayed in that shape for a short, sweet moment.

Immersed in the memory, Ju slowly pursed his own lips, trying to mimic her perfect curve. But he could not make the Ju sound anymore. It was not *drew*, or *shoo*, or *jole*; the U was not pronounced as a U. He did not know how it was pronounced.

Mei did not visit him again. Ju's mother did not approve of this self-conduct in her future daughter-in-law. 'She should have come every day to visit you,' his mother said. 'If not out of love as a fiancée, then at least out of compassion as an intimate comrade. Even if you might be like this for the rest of your life...' his mother stopped, and abruptly turned her back to him.

Ju glanced at his mother and understood how worried she was, for her hero son appeared to be in some sort of inexplicable stupor. He wanted to tell her the truth, to tell her that he was in perfect health, including a fully functioning and clear mind, or so he thought. But she would not understand a word, not in the only language he was capable of using now.